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RED BONES AND EARTH MOTHERS: A CONTEMPORARY EXPLORATION OF COLORISM AND ITS PERCEPTION AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE ADOLESCENTS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to all people of African ancestry. I will forever be in awe of our cultures, strength, and variant beauty.

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Abstract

RED BONES AND EARTH MOTHERS: A CONTEMPORARY EXPLORATION OF COLORISM AND ITS PERCEPTION AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE ADOLESCENTS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013.

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Research on colorism continues to gain momentum across several disciplines. However, while varied studies have explored the social phenomenon among adult populations, especially those of African ancestry, few have systematically investigated the extent to which African American youth are exposed to or endorse hierarchical perceptions of skin color. The current study addresses this void in colorism literature. Employing a grounded theory approach, the present investigation examines African American female adolescents' perceptions of skin color, aiming specifically to understand the sociocultural factors that underpin and contribute to colorist socializations as well as sources of skin color messages. Five focus groups and nine interviews were conducted with 30 African American girls ranging in age from 12-16. Participants were recruited from local Boys and Girls clubs, neighborhood centers, and nonprofit organizations. Participants were asked such *a priori* based questions as: 1) What do people think about light

skin Black girls? 2) What do people think about dark skin Black girls? 3) What messages about skin color do you hear from Rap music? and 4) Do Black men and boys prefer girls of certain skin colors. Constant comparison data analysis and coding revealed African Americans girls are, in fact, exposed to and endorse hierarchical perceptions of skin color, the central phenomenon Three core categories related to the central phenomenon emerged: 1) sources of skin color messages, e.g. family and rap music 2) skin color messages, e.g. skin color governs social standing, physical attributes, and personality/behavioral traits and 3) effects of skin color messages, e.g. mate preferences, desires to change one's appearance, and within-race division. From these three core categories emerged seven subcategories and themes that offer additional information and insight into the central phenomenon. Findings from this study indicate African American young females are significantly influenced by skin color preferences, and thus may stand to gain from the development of curricula or programs designed to counter colorist stereotypes, reduce the effects of skin color biases, and promote a greater sense of self-satisfaction and wellbeing.

Red Bones and Earth Mothers: A Contemporary Exploration of Colorism and its Perception Among African American Female Adolescents

In 2012, producer, writer, and actor, Bill Duke presented his documentary, *Dark Girls*, to select U.S. cities (Haque, 2012). Poignant and revealing, *Dark Girls* narrates the stories of dark skin African American women and the psychological torment and ostracism they endured as result of their skin tone. Reviews of the documentary have been mixed. While some praise Duke for shedding light onto the hardships experienced by darker skin women, others are dissatisfied with the choice to expose what they consider to be African American's "dirty laundry" (Haque, 2012). Through painfully emotional interviews, *Dark Girls* speaks to one of the least discussed social phenomena: colorism.

Colorism is defined within a scholarly context as both an inter- and intra-racial system of inequality based on skin color, hair texture, and facial features (Wilder, 2010). Throughout this paper, colorism and skin tone bias as well as skin color and complexion will be used interchangeably. Colorism exists among multiple ethnic and cultural groups; however, within the African American community specifically, colorism fosters an environment in which Eurocentric physical attributes (i.e. light skin, narrower noses, and thinner lips) are preferred to Afrocentric physical attributes (i.e. dark skin, wider noses, and thicker lips) (Maddox & Gray, 2002). The social and psychological implications of this hierarchy can be severe. In *Dark Girls*, colorism manifested in African Americans displaying overt preferential treatment for light skin women and marginalizing disdain for dark skin women, with the stark contrast engendering both childhood and present day insecurities and psychological trauma. The effects of colorism is often magnified in the lives of African American females, and as evidenced by the documentary, young adolescents appear to be especially affected (Wilder, 2010; Hunter, 2005). The purpose of

the current study is to explore the gendered effects of colorism further by examining and understanding whether or not young African American female adolescents are aware of or endorse hierarchical perceptions of skin color. This line of inquiry is of particular importance, for as *Dark Girls* illustrates, the ramifications of confronting or internalizing skin tone biases can be psychologically and socially damaging.

When viewing Bill Duke's documentary, these women's testimonies of ridicule, negative self-evaluations, and blatant exclusion are shocking on several fronts. One, it is difficult to conceive that such intragroup discrimination is due to differences in skin tone, and two, it is extremely disconcerting that such experiences are happening in the 21st century (Clark, 2004). Colorism within the African American community continues to persist as a socially bifurcating phenomenon. Between the 1920's and the 1980's, countless anecdotes, especially found within popularized media, detailed the existence of skin tone stratification and the consequential tensions it generated among African Americans (Freeman, Armor, Ross, & Pettigrew, 1966; Holtzman, 1973; Kennedy, 1969; Vontress, 1971; X & Haley, 1965). Plays, fictional novels, and select academic works challenged traditionally perceived prejudices and unmasked a second tier of discrimination categorized by race and skin color (Edwards, 1973; Hurston, 1929; Naylor; 1985). Through such provocative publications, more individuals began to take notice of the ways in which African Americans had internalized white supremacist ideology, deconstructed its key components, and re-appropriated them to build an entirely new system of intraracial prejudices (Hall, 2008).

While research on colorism was somewhat scarce in the 1990's, the emergence of contemporary research on colorism has provided existential evidence that colorist practices and ideologies are as viable today as they were in the past (Hooks, 1996; Hunter, 2005; Golden,

2003; Okwu, 1999; Wilder, 2010; Wilder & Cain, 2011). For example, consistent with the narratives in *Dark Girls,* one line of research has indicated colorism generates differential negative psychological outcomes across gender. That is, darker skin African American females may be subject to greater skin color discriminatory practices and ideologies than darker skin African American males (Hunter, 2005; Thompson & Keith, 2001; Wade, 2005; Wilder & Cain, 2011). However, within this literature, few studies have systematically investigated the gendered effects of skin tone biases on African American girls. The current study continues to build upon colorism research by examining whether African American female adolescents are aware of or subscribe to skin tone biases. The study will also ascertain from where African American girls learn to adopt skin color preferences and develop colorist ideologies.

African American Female Adolescents

Exploring skin color biases among African American female adolescents is important for several reasons. One, adolescence is a critical and impressionable stage of development. Through observations, life experiences, and social teachings, African American female adolescents define what they deem important, who they are, and what they will become (Leadbeater & Way, 1996). During this period, identity is formed and girls begin to learn more about themselves, especially those physical and mental characteristics that define them (Belgrave, 2009).

Among these traits is skin color, which is an aspect of identity for African American adolescent girls that carries significant implications for her well-being, self-worth, and cognitive appraisals of the world (Wilder and Cain, 2011). If an African American girl experiences discrimination and unfair social evaluations as a result of her skin tone, there could be profound social, cognitive, and behavioral consequences, as evidenced by *Dark Girls* and other anecdotal accounts (Golden, 2004). In developing her self, an African American girl is significantly

influenced by the media and her family (Belgrave, 2009). Such modes of socialization shape how African American girls evaluate themselves and others. Research on family and media indicate that the self-worth and self-esteem of African American girls is often hinged on these variables (Belgrave, 2009; Littlefield, 2008;). As such, in exploring how and if African American female adolescents internalize or are exposed to skin color messages, the media they consume and influence of their family merits serious consideration.

The second reason for exploring skin color biases among African American girls relates to the transgenerational nature of skin color related messages. As previously mentioned, the colorism phenomenon is historical rooted in the African American community. However, questions remain as to whether or not colorist ideologies and subsequent discriminatory behaviors have abated or moreover, will continue in the future. As such, gauging the current younger generation through a systematic qualitative inquiry could assist in providing answers to these questions. Lastly, by identifying where African American girls are receiving skin color related messages, subsequent studies may focus on designing strategies to allay the influence of these sources and prevent the internalization of colorist beliefs in the future. To this effect, the current study offers a contribution to colorism research, in that it examines the phenomenon from a novel perspective, opens a new avenue for future studies, and more importantly, continues to shed light on a taboo, but extremely relevant topic.

The Relevance of Colorism Research

Discussions of colorism have historically remained "in house" (especially within the African American community). However, academic discourse pertaining to skin tone biases has continued to gain momentum (Thompson & Keith, 2004). Of considerable note has been the transition of colorism research from exploration to empirical. Once recognized as a by-product of

racism, colorism is now regarded as a related but separate phenomenon (Herring, 2004). For the past 50 years, a multitude of scholarly studies have explored the ways in which skin tone preferences shape social interactions, influence socioeconomic trajectories, and or contribute to the development of a positive or negative self-concept (Hall, 1995; Goldsmith, & Darity Jr., 2006; Neal & Wilson; 1989; Myrdal, 1965; Swami, Furnham, & Joshi, 2008). For example, Hall (1992) explored skin tone biases by analyzing the means through which African Americans attempt to strip themselves of "blackness" and assimilate into the dominant culture. Coining the term "bleaching syndrome", Hall theorized individuals that internalize whiteness or lightness as the reference point for beauty and marriage are suffering from the fundamental symptom of the syndrome—a subconscious desire to be void of ethnicity. To test this theory, Hall (1992) designed and developed the 45-item Cutaneo-Chromo-Correlate (CCC) scale, which assessed potential skin biases, ideals pertaining to skin color, and self-ratings of skin color. Hall (1992) administered the CCC to African American college students and found light skin and dark skin African American female and male participants not only internalized skin color ideals, but imposed these biases onto members of their own racial group as well. Such findings elucidated the social relevance of skin color and raised important questions about the extent to which African Americans are evaluated by their complexion.

Earlier research on colorism indicates that African Americans utilize skin color to perceive and evaluate fellow in-group members along several criteria, including but not limited to, levels of attractiveness, social standing, and personality and behavioral traits (Herring, Keith, & Horton, 2004; Hall 2005; Russell, Hall, & Wilson, 1992; Russell, Sinha, Biederman, & Nederhouser, 2006; Wade, 2005). Yet despite documentation of intra-racial practices of skin color discrimination, conversations pertaining to skin color biases within African American

families and communities have remained relatively suppressed. For historical and social reasons, the topic has proven to be a sensitive one, and in many cases, taboo (Russell et al, 1992). Colorism is inherently polemical. Notwithstanding, an increasing number of studies are beginning to turn their focus towards African Americans' internalization of colorist ideologies, subsequent perceptions of in-group members, and associated social and psychological outcomes (Hall, 2008; Hunter, 2005; Wilder, 2010). The growth in colorism scholarship has significantly informed our current understanding of its operation within variant sociohistorical contexts; however, the complexity of the phenomenon has rendered many findings inconclusive. In the following sections, factors contributing to the complexity of colorism are discussed, beginning with a discussion of the origin of colorist practices within African American communities.

Literature Review

Skin Tone and its Historical Background

To fully understand the impact of colorism requires a comprehension of its historical roots. The hierarchical perceptions of skin color within the African American community were conceived during the era and sociohistorical context of North American slavery. Within this environment Africans and Europeans first began to intermix—spawning generations of people reflecting a myriad of skin tones and facial features. Racial miscegenation gave rise to a multicolored society. Without it, the varied skin tones we see stereotyped and stratified today would not exist.

One of the most violent mechanisms of physiological and mental control exercised by White slave traders and owner was rape. Despite the portrayal of Africans as innately inhumane, "evil", and inferior, White men unobtrusively sexually abused and raped Black women (Reiss,

1997). Over time, the commonplace sexual interactions between White men and Black women gave rise to a new generation of lighter skin African Americans (Frazier, 1957). Although offspring of White slave owners, as a result of the “one drop” rule and their maternal lineage, mixed race children were still considered to be enslaved people. However, the treatment and privileges they received differed significantly from that of enslaved individuals with darker skin.

Children of White slave owners and Black women were allowed, in relative terms, to ascend beyond their station (Frazier, 1957). In direct contrast to other enslaved persons, those of mixed heritage were privy to less strenuous housework, separate living quarters, more autonomy, and in particular cases, freedom (Drake & Cayton, 1945). Interestingly the mixed race elite was also responsible, in some respect, for the within-race division. In an effort to preserve their “purity” and status, they insisted on marrying other mixed race individuals and distancing themselves from darker skin African Americans. Such separation, in conjunction with the preferential treatment received from Whites, reinforced a hierarchical system in which light skin was superior to dark skin, and more important, laid the foundation for intragroup conflict and mistrust among the Black population.

Colorism in Present Society. According to Herring (2004), variations in sociohistorical contexts have led to shifting perceptions of skin tone. For example, while the 1940’s indicated a significant preference for lighter skin individuals (Drake & Cayton, 1945), the 1960’s ushered in a movement and era in which “blackness” no longer carried a negative connotation but was instead a symbol of pride and strength (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Hunter, 2005). Moreover, the Civil Rights movement and the need for basic African American civil liberties trivialized the issue of color and focused attention, instead, on the pertinence of race (Young, 1996). However, in the 1990’s, examinations of skin tone and mate selection indicated that cultural preferences

had again returned towards lighter and Eurocentric characteristics (Russell et al., 1992). The inconsistencies in the perceptions of skin tone across time as well as a dearth of intraracial analyses have driven the continuation of colorism studies. And over the past five decades, such examinations have revealed skin tone biases, albeit less conspicuous, still have important psychosocial implications within the African American community.

The Social and Interpersonal Implications of Colorism

Across multiple disciplines, researchers have explored the ways in which skin tone preferences influence the social interactions and processes of African Americans. Anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology have all produced examinations of skin color biases and associated behavioral and cognitive outcomes that have facilitated a better understanding of the phenomenon and its operation (Goodman, 1946; Goldsmith, & Darity Jr., 2006; Simon, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973). While several notable observations and postulations have emerged, the most concrete evidence of colorism and unequal skin tone appraisals has been documented in educational and occupational attainment.

Educational and Socioeconomic Attainment. Studies of skin color and economic attainment have been largely derived from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA). Until recently, the NSBA was the only large and nationally representative study of African Americans that included an assessment of skin tone (As cited by Keith, 2009). Fielded between 1979-1980, the NSBA has been the primary source for multiple studies examining the relationship between skin tone preferences, income, occupational status, and education (Hunter, 2005). For example, Keith and Herring (1991) used the NSBA to show that very-light respondents attain, on average, more than two additional years of education than dark respondents. Moreover, very-light respondents were more likely to be employed as professional

and technical workers than people with darker complexions.

Examinations of the influence of colorism on economic attainment have also revealed gendered effects. For example, Hunter (2002) examined the NSBA and found that specifically among African American women, skin tone remained as a significant predictor of education. For every additional gradation of lightness (where 1 = darkest and 5 = lightest) educational attainment increased by one-third of a year, indicating that the lightest woman had an entire additional year of education than a darker skin woman of a similar background. In the same study, Hunter found skin tone to be a predictor of African American women's annual income, to the degree in which an increment of lightness on the color scale equated to $673 more dollars annually. Hunter also revealed lighter skin women to be more likely to marry men with higher education levels than darker skin women. Relatedly, Edward, Carter-Tellison and Herring (2004) found "a modest relationship between spousal earnings and skin tone".

Employing multiple national databases (NSBA, MCSUI), as well as the Detroit Area Study (DAS), Hersch (2007) also found a gender effect. Controlling for parental education and residential characteristics, Hersch found darker skin men and women to have significantly lower employment rates than their lighter counterparts. However, in terms of wages, Hersch found limited evidence to suggest that darker skinner women garnered lower wages. In fact, Hersch's findings revealed medium brown women to be more likely to receive lower wages. There is culminating evidence to suggest the interaction of skin tone and gender produces differential experiences of colorism. However, the exact nature of gendered colorism remains unclear due to limited work. In addition to examining gendered effects, limited studies have also explored the potential moderating effect of age.

Gullickson (2005) reanalyzed the NSBA and confirmed skin tone as a significant

predictor of education and income among African American men and women. However, in disaggregating the data, Gullickson offered evidence that among younger cohorts, those post-the Civil Rights Movement, the influence of skin color declined, while the skin color effects remained significant among the older cohorts. Yet, as other studies have failed to corroborate these conclusions (Goldsmith, Hamilton, & Darity Jr., 2006), more systematically investigations are needed to examine the potential moderating effects of age.

Taken together, skin tone plays a significant role in the income and educational attainment of African American men and women, young and old. In multiple studies, skin color significantly predicted the personal incomes and education levels of African Americans above and beyond such control variables as age and parental education. Sociological, anthropological, and economic examinations of skin tone, income, and educational attainment have strengthened arguments for the salience of skin color within the African American community and the existence of skin tone biases. Additional evidence of skin tone biases has been found in examinations of skin color and criminal sentencing.

Skin Tone and Criminal Sentencing. One of the more ostensible effects of skin color on social interactions has been seen in studies of skin color, litigation, and criminal punishments. For example, Blair, Judd, and Chapleu (2004) showed dark skin tone, along with other physical features associated with African ancestry, such as wider nose, thicker lips, and coarse hair (i.e., Afrocentric features) predicted longer prison sentences above and beyond such factors as number of prior offenses, seriousness of the crime, and race. Relatedly, Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, and Johnson (2006) revealed in their study of capital punishment and skin color, that when a victim was White, inmates with more pronounced Afrocentric features received the death penalty significantly more than inmates with less pronounced Afrocentric features. This occurred

even when such factors as number of previous offenses, socioeconomic status, severity of murder, and age were held constant. Interestingly, such biases were not revealed when the victims were Black—suggesting skin color to be more salient within the context of interracial conflict. Such conclusions are perhaps the reason why, in several recent colorism studies, researchers have paid particularly close attention to interracial perceptions: that is how Whites perceive and distinguish the skin tone of African Americans (Blair, 2006; Blair, Chapleau, & Judd, 2005; Hagiwara, Kashy, & Cesario, 2012; Michel, Caldara, & Rossion, 2006). An increasing number of studies are exploring interracial perceptions of skin color (Blair, Judd, & Fallman, 2004; Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004; Livingston & Brewer, 2002; Stephanova & Strube, 2009; 2012); however, the scope of this study will be limited to intra-racial evaluations of complexion among African American girls—especially given empirical evidence that suggests gender may moderate experiences with skin tone biases.

Gendered Colorism Experiences

As mentioned previously, colorism impacts African American women and men differently. For many researchers, the differences in colorism experiences are in large part due to gender and its ability to moderate skin tone evaluations (Hunter, 2005; Hill, 2002; Collins, 2005). The way in which dark skin and light skin is perceived is primarily contingent upon whether the perceived target is male or female. And according to much of the literature, skin color appears to be more central to the lives of women (Collins, 2005; Keith, 2009; Russell et al, 1992; Wade, 2005). While several explanatory factors exist, gendered experiences with colorism are often attributed to the strong correlation between skin tone and perceptions of attractiveness (Keith, 2009). Because standards of beauty apply more rigidly to women, men may not experience the same emotional distress associated with falling short of the favorable complexion (Keith, 2009).

However, this does not imply that African American men are immune to colorist ideologies. Historically speaking, African American men have endured their share of ill treatment and stigmatization based on the color of their skin (Hall, 2008). In this study, while the perceptions of Black boys were not assessed, young female participants were asked questions to determine whether they had been exposed to skin color messages related to the stigmatization of males and females. The following sections review prior research on stigmas surrounding skin color across gender.

Male Skin Tone Stigmatization. Since the era of slavery, Black men, especially those of darker complexions, have been depicted as dangerous sexual predators—capable of defiling the purity and sanctity of "White" womanhood (Hodes, 1997). This ideology, which permeated many White households, placed Black men at great risk, to the point that if a Black man was even suspected of looking at a White female, he could be whipped, castrated, or murdered (Whitetaker, 2008). Today, Black men continue to report experiences of racial discrimination, indicating that preconceived notions about their virility and behavior remain just as prevalent. Evidence of this phenomenon can be found in the accounts of darker skin Black men having significantly more stressful encounters with racial discrimination than their lighter skin contemporaries (Edwards, 1973; Klonoff & Landrine, 2000). In identifying the source of such differences, researchers have theorized darker skin to be perceived as more threatening (Maddox & Gray, 2002). To test this hypothesis, empirical studies have explored the cognitive representation of African American men more thoroughly.

In an experimental study by Dixon and Maddox (2005), White and Black participants were exposed to a fictional crime story in which the male perpetrator was either White, light skinned Black, medium-skinned Black, or dark-skinned Black. Results of the experiment indicated that

dark-skinned perpetrators elicited greater emotional distress (participants reported being more worried) than light-skinned or White perpetrators. In interpreting theses findings, the authors call upon the argument of Gray (2002) who theorized darker skin is a more typical cultural representation of African Americans than lighter skin, and as such, darker skin males are more likely to activate Black cultural stereotypes (Maddox & Gray, 2002). To this point, it would appear that darker skin African American men, as a result of their complexions, are at a distinct disadvantage. However, it is important to recognize that subscriptions to colorist stereotypes can negatively affect light skin African American men as well.

If dark skin African American men are the epitome of “Black”, then under what category do light skin men fall? Are they inferior as a consequence of their skin tone? Are they “whiter”? Are they not as dangerous and therefore weaker? Such questions generate great dissonance among light skin African American men (Hill, 2002; Russell, Hall, & Wilson, 2013). Sometimes referred to as “pretty” boys, lighter skin African American men, because of their close approximation to whiteness, may endure doubts of authenticity and masculinity (Lester & Googin, 2007). Unfortunately, in an effort to “prove” their blackness, some learn to compensate by exaggerating their virility and acting tough (Russell et al, 1992). Studies have also presented the idealized male to be darker than the average, and as such, light-skinned African American males have suffered from being at odds with this cultural stereotype (Hill, 2002; Swami, 2008; Wade, 2008). The perception that women, in this case Black women, find darker skin men more desirable is largely derived from the notion that dark skin denotes “reproductive fitness” and “physical dominance” (Wade, 2008, p. 138). As a result, lighter skin Black men may be evaluated less favorably as mates (Ross, 1997; Wade, 2008). Yet in other ways, light skin has served some Black men advantageously. For example, Hughes and Hertel (1990) found that

lighter skin men not only occupy more prestigious jobs, but their wages are significantly greater than darker men as well.

African American men's experiences with colorism are quite diverse. Depending upon the skin tone, there can be both advantages and disadvantages. While darker skin men can more easily elicit racial stigmatization and discrimination, the masculinity associated with their skin color is considered a more attractive characteristic (Wade, 2003, 2008). And although lighter skin men may face ridicule for being weaker and "less black", they can also benefit from better employment and higher incomes (Hill, 2002). The psychosocial implications of skin tone among African American men have garnered significant empirical support; however, as the literature indicates, the influence of skin tone on the lives of African American women is more central.

Female Skin Tone Stigmatization. Research on skin color stratification reveals African American women, in comparison to African American men, to be most affected by skin tone biases (Keith, 2009; Russell et al, 1992). As women are often objectified and subject to rigid and idealized standards of beauty, the degree to which skin tone is positively evaluated bears significance on how African American women perceive and appraise their bodies (Hunter, 2005). To this end, the universal preference for lighter skin African American woman has had a considerable impact on body maintenance, self-esteem, self-concept, and mate selection (Hill, 2002; Keith, 2009; Thompson & Keith, 2009). Studies of female beauty reveal light skin and Eurocentric features, such as long straight hair and smaller noses, to be more appealing than darker skin and Afrocentric features, such as kinky hair, broader noses, and larger lips (Hill, 2002; Swami, Furnham, & Joshi, 2008). These preferences, to which young African American girls are exposed, have been empirically and anecdotally demonstrated to influence the self-perceptions of African American women (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Moreover, the preference for

lighter skin women has been reinforced by the mate selection patterns of African American men.

Mate Selection and Skin Color

The effect of skin tone biases on mating preferences has been one of the most explored areas of colorism research. Among African American men, multiple studies have indicated a universal preference for lighter skin women (Hamilton, Goldsmith, & Darity, 2009; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Marbley, 2003; Ross, 1997; Russell et al, 1992). For example, in 2010 an experimental study was conducted to evaluate African American's attitudes and perceptions of light skin and dark skin female African American models (Watson, Thorton, & Engelland, 2010). In the study, 299 African American male students, from three universities, were presented a photograph of a medium skinned model whose appearance had been digitally manipulated as either light skin or dark skin (Watson et al, 2010). The men were randomly assigned to one of the manipulated photos and asked to rate the model's attractiveness, attitude towards the advertisement, and attitude towards the brand. Results revealed that African American men rated the model, the brand, and the advertisement significantly higher in the photo with the light skin manipulation than the photo with the dark skin manipulation (Watson et al, 2010). Such findings support prior conclusions posited by Wade (2005) and Hill (2002) that indicated African American men favor lighter skin women over darker skin women. Earlier research has also suggested that lighter skin women are the preference of *successful* African American men (Russell et al, 1992). Recalling Hunter's (2002) findings, lighter skin women were more likely to marry men with higher education levels than darker skin women.

Explaining African American men's partner choices has been somewhat complex. While some researchers have attributed the positive appraisal of lighter skin women to the European perception of fairer skin as more feminine, others interject that people simply gravitate towards

those who approximate their own complexion (Belletti &Wade, 2008; Hill, 2002). In spite of opposing explanations, there is convincing evidence to suggest that African American men's selections of female partners is highly influenced by their perception of skin tone. In that same vein, research has also suggested that the degree to which men appraise or denounce certain female physical features weighs heavily upon the way in which women view and evaluate themselves (Molloy & Herzberger, 1998). More plainly, what men think matters, and in terms of skin tone evaluations, their opinions seem to reinforce the hierarchical system of colorism.

In sum, literature on skin tone biases suggests that the intersection of gender and skin tone magnifies the intensity of colorism experiences for females. As women are often objectified and measured against standards of beauty established by the dominant culture, the universal preference for lighter skin has significant implications for how African American men select potential mating partners as well as how African American women positively or negatively evaluate their bodies (Collins, 2005). Male preferences for women with lighter complexions set the benchmark to which many women wish or attempt to achieve (Hunter, 2005). Apart from men, messages of light superiority are transgenerationally taught by family members.

Transgenerational Teachings of Colorism

"Don't play in the sun. You're going to have to get a light-skinned husband for the sake of your children as it is" (Golden, 2004, p. 9). Referencing her childhood, Marita Golden (2004) uses her book, "Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey Through the Color Complex", to articulate the color-conscious messages she received from her mother about skin tone monitoring. In accordance with societal appraisals, Golden's mother believed dark skin to be a social liability and as such, encouraged behavior modification to avoid further darkening. Although these "lessons" only proved to exacerbate preexisting insecurities, this type of colorism

propagation is an unfortunate commonality among some African American households (Golden, 2004). In a growing body of literature, there are accounts of African American women speaking about familial exclusion or ridicule endured as a result of too fair or too dark skin (Coard, Franklin, & Brevard, 2001; Body-Franklin, 2003; Hunter, 2005; Russell et al, 1992).

Wilder and Cain (2011) conducted a qualitative study and interviewed 26 African American women between the ages of 18-40 about the influence of family on subscriptions to colorist ideologies. Various themes emerged from their interviews. Of particular note was the identification of maternal figures, such as grandmothers, aunts, and mothers, as the primary disseminators of skin tone biases. From these individuals, women learned to associate blackness with negativity and lightness with ideal beauty (Wilder & Cain, 2011). Moreover, Wilder and Cain found familial figures to either confirm, negate, or counter colorist beliefs. For example, during one focus group session, a woman revealed that her mother was both verbally and physically upset with her choice to date a "black skinned" man. It was her desire to have grandchildren with "nice" hair and "nice" skin; therefore, her daughter's partner needed to facilitate this want, rather than undermine it. Contrastingly, another participant shared that her parents were accepting of everyone, regardless of skin color. As a result, she was encouraged to replicate this acceptance and bestow unbiased treatment upon everyone.

In their rather poignant analyses, Wilder and Cain (2011) found colorism to exist in varying degrees within Black families. Through modeling and overt methods of socialization, families served as the point of origin for colorist ideologies. Wilder and Cain's findings were important for two primary reasons: 1) they offered compelling evidence of the ability of the family to socialize African American females to skin color preferences and 2) they demonstrated the basic requirement of colorist ideologies: continuation.

In order to persist, the hierarchical system of skin tone biases has to be modeled and taught. Without proper mediums of dissemination, such ideologies would unlikely continue. To this point, the transgenerational teachings of light skin superiority and dark skin devaluation have been critical to the endurance of colorist practices and its current manifestations (Hunter, 2005).

How African Americans perceived and evaluated skin color in the past has, in multiple respects, carried over into the present. For example, in 1946 sociologist Charles Parrish examined color names and their recognition among African American college students. In his findings, Parrish revealed over 25 nicknames that were used to reference African Americans of varying skin tones. Such names included high yellow, tar baby, sexy chocolate, and light bright. Moreover, Parrish found certain names to be associated with personality traits as well. High yellow women were considered to have superiority complexes and very dark women were thought be ugly and quick tempered.

In 2010, Wilder reexamined Charles Parrish's novel work. Findings from focus group interviews with 48 African American women indicated the continued use of 9 of the nicknames found in Parish's early work. Interestingly, 41 additional nicknames were mentioned. In line with the seminal study, the nicknames also alluded to negative personality and physiological attributes, such as "darky", "midnight", "tar baby", "oreo", and "vanilla" (Wilder, 2010).

Despite the passage of over 60 years, names reflecting skin tone biases remain— indicating the persistence of transgenerational teachings of colorist ideas and beliefs. The modeling and reinforcement of skin color preferences within African American communities has significantly contributed to the endurance of colorist ideologies across generations. Be it through maternal figures or other familial members, African Americans continue to learn about and internalize varied messages related to the stigmatization or hierarchical status of certain skin tones. And as

more present day studies reveal the existence of colorist ideologies, an increasing number have turned to the influence of media on the dissemination of colorist messages and the perpetuation of skin color discriminatory practices.

Skin Color and the Media

Advertising. The idea that lighter skin is more aesthetically pleasing has been the driving force behind the advertisements of skin lightening products around the world (Glenn, 2008). In chronicling the evolution of American beauty culture, Peiss (1998) identifies cosmetics companies as the primary purveyors of colorist messages. Multiple advertisements between the 1920's and 1940's showcase lighter skin African American women as exemplars of beauty, and even more compelling, are the pictures of lighter skin women in the loving embrace of a handsome African American male (Glenn, 2008; Peiss, 1998).

There have been various accusations against the media for underrepresenting darker skin African Americans in editorials (Bristor, Lee, & Hunt, 1995; Keenan, 1996; Sengupta, 2000). Most recently, advancements in technology have presented magazines and advertisers with the ability to digitally lighten photos of celebrities and models with hopes of achieving greater appeal and selling power (Wilson, 2012). By displaying such images, cosmetic companies and media outlets reinforce colorist beliefs and perpetuate the ideology that light skin is the social capital needed to secure a suitable partner (Hunter, 2005). Most recently, scholars have examined the specific role of urban media in the perpetuation of skin color practices within the African American community (Kalof, 1999; Sullivan, 2003).

Urban Media. Urban media constitutes magazines, television, music, and blogging pertaining to African American urban culture. Currently, there is little, if any, research surrounding this outlet of communication, especially regarding blogging. Changes over time

have led to significant shifts in the ways in which individuals consume media (Biocca, 2000). Each year the Internet continues to grow as the primary distributor of information to the masses (Kaiser Foundation, 2010). With regard to hip-hop culture, such websites as Mediatakeout, Worldstarhiphop, and Bossip have become popular, accruing nearly 300,000 thousand hits daily (Angela, 2010). With their ability to reach the hip hop youth, the exploration of such sites could provide potential insight into the dissemination of color conscious messages—especially given the prevalence of colorist ideologies within hip-hop/rap music.

The Influence of Rap. Although there has been limited research that has examined the impact of urban blogging and magazines, rap music has received considerable academic attention (Fraley, 2009). In various psychological and sociological studies, rap music has been evaluated as a "cultural capital" utilized by urban youth to authenticate a Black identity (Clay, 2003). The value and influence of its messages have been scrutinized from multiple perspectives. Misogyny, Afrocentricity, and self-esteem have all been examined in relation to rap music (Dixon, Zhang, & Conrad, 2009; Gourdine & Lemmons, 2011). With respect to self-perception, Stephens and Few (2007) evaluated how images of African American women in hip-hop affect cognitive appraisals of women in general, as well as how Afrocentric attitudes encourage or discourage misogynic rap consumption. However, with regard to rap and messages related to skin color, this area of research has yet to be directly explored.

Stephens and Few (2003) indirectly assessed the effect of rap music on skin color. According to the symbolic interaction theory, people develop a sense of their sexual selves through the sexual messages that takes place within continually changing cultural and social contexts (Longmore, 1998). Stephens and Few (2003) recognize eight scripts with which African American female adolescents identify—the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch,

Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby mama. While these scripts are primarily defined by personality traits, such as piousness, identification with African heritage, and sexual promiscuity, the women who meet the criteria for these social categories are also assumed to possess a certain skin color (Stephens & Few, 2003).

For example, according to Stephens and Few's research African American women who are considered "Divas" are highly confident, and in many cases arrogant. Desiring to be worshipped and adored, she spends lavishly on self-maintenance. Physically speaking, she is pretty in the traditional sense—with long hair, a slender build, and most compelling, not too dark (Stephens & Few, 2007). Similar to the stereotypical depictions elucidated by previous literature, the light skin woman is again characterized as arrogant and self-entitled (Wilder, 2010). In rap videos, the Diva is most frequently displayed (Dixon, Zhang, & Conrad, 2009).

On the opposite end of the spectrum lies the Earth Mother. African American women who are categorized as the Earth Mother are consider as being more in tune with her sexuality as well as her ethnicity (Stephens & Few, 2007). She is politically and spiritually conscious. In terms of physical traits, she is diverse, able to take on varied skin tones; however, despite her ability to represent multiple women of color, the Earth Mother is largely absent in rap culture (Dixon et al, 2009; Stephens & Few, 2007). When asked to reveal their opinions of the sexualized scripts, young African American boys and girls' reported the Diva to be the preferred mate and the Earth Mother to be dark skin and unattractive.

Red Bones vs. Earth Mothers. Throughout music videos and the lyrical content of popular rap songs, certain scripts/images are more visible, and as a result, skin tone preferences are explicitly inferred (Emerson, 2002). While the light skin Diva is coveted and appraised, the Afrocentric Earth Mother, capable of representing all women of color, is largely ignored

(Emerson, 2002; Stephens & Few, 2007). In this respect, rap music serves as a purveyor of color conscious messages, and in turn, reinforces the system of skin tone hierarchy. This is further exemplified by lyrical content that expresses an overt desire for lighter women, or more specifically, “red bones”. The term red bone, which refers to the red undertones of mixed raced women, is hailed as a desirable trait and can be easily recognized throughout rap music (Wilder, 2010). In the song entitled “Right Above it”, Lil Wayne boldly states, “Beautiful black woman, I bet that bitch look better red” (Carter, Graham, Canton, & Johnson, 2010, track 7). He again references “red bones” in his song “Every Girl” rapping, “I like a long haired thick red bone” (Carter, Graham, Mills, Preyan & Lilly, 2009). In his blatant elevation of lighter skin women over “black women”, Lil Wayne continues the perpetuation of colorist ideologies.

Taken together, the stereotypical images of African American women in rap culture have not only offered visual representations, but they have also guided the perceptions of African American adolescents and the way in which they develop sexual and social identities. Defined as the “Hip Hop” generation, today’s youth continue to demonstrate the extent to which their identities, mentalities, and perceptions are intricately linked to rap culture (Kitwana, 2002). According to Womack (2010) “At its best,…Hip-hop embodies a verbal ray of hope that makes poetry breathe again. At its worst, hip-hop fans the flames of unyielding ignorance, misogyny, and racial stereotypes. (, p. 114).” Rap music can be a powerful agent of culture influence, and in terms of the characterizations of African American women, rap culture has facilitated the internalization of sexual and stigmatized scripts. In addition to reflecting personality types, these scripts are largely shaped by skin tone; and therefore, provide the framework for the development of colorist practices and the manifestation of skin tone preferences.

“Black and ugly as ever. However, I stay Gucci down to the socks”- Biggie Smalls

(DeBarge, DeBarge, Combs, Wallace, & Smith, 1995)

Examining rap music and its lyrical content is critical to fully understanding the contemporary manifestations of skin tone biases. As such, the proposed study attempted to continue the research of rap music, and in expanding its scope to include urban websites, it sought to capture the degree to which urban media facilitates the internalization of skin color preferences. Moreover, by focusing on the perceptions of African American female adolescents, the study builds upon preexisting gendered colorism research and presents a perspective reflective of the current generation. Examining African American adolescent females offers a glimpse of the present effects of skin tone preferences. And as the behavior and cognitive appraisals of girls largely carry on into adulthood, their thoughts and perceptions of skin color elucidate how and if colorist ideologies will continue in the future. In developing her "self", research indicates that an African American girl is highly influenced by two socializing agents: the media and her family (Belgrave, 2009; Littlefield, 2008;).

African American Girls and Socialization

Media Influence. African American adolescents are exposed to more media images and messages than any other racial/ethnic group (Hunter, 2011). When compared to their White counterparts, African American youth consume nearly 4.5 more hours of media daily (Kaiser Foundation, 2010). This disproportionate amount of media consumption is a major social concern. In multiple studies, high media exposure has been linked to increased aggression, lowered self worth, and negative body image (Clark & Tiggerman, 2006; Collins, 2004; Garb, Hyde, & Ward, 2008; Jung & Peterson, 2007). Among African American girls specifically, the portrayals of African American women in movies, music, and television have been shown to significantly affect how they feel about themselves and how they develop self-concepts (Gordon,

2008).

For example, in their examination of music and the gendered perceptions of Black youth, Ward, Hansbrough, and Walker (2005) found greater music and music video exposure to be associated with more stereotypical gender attitudes. In addition, they found those students most exposed to music and music videos to perceive superficial qualities as most important when describing the ideal man or woman. In a similar study, Gordon (2008) determined that African Americans girls that identified most strongly with their favorite television Black characters were more likely to attribute greater importance to being attractive in their self-worth judgments. With regard to skin color, as discussed earlier, Stephens and Few (2007) found the eight female sexualized scripts in hip-hop to affect how young boys and girls perceived light and dark skin women.

The media exerts a powerful influence on the development of African American girls. The television images and musical content to which they are exposed significantly shapes the way in which they evaluate themselves and other intragroup members. While research has paid close attention to the ability of the media to socialize the minds and behavior of African American girls, there is strong evidence to suggest that families have the greatest influence on their social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Familial Influence. Parents, fictive kin, and extended family are primary socializing agents for youth including African American girls. (Aquilino & Supple, 2001; Granberg, Simons, & Simons, 2009; Parke & Kellam, 1994). Given the amount of time they spend in their households, the way in which primary and extended family members behave and think bear significantly on how Black girls orient themselves to the world and those whom they encounter. For example, girls with positive relationships with their mothers have high levels of self-esteem

(Turnage, 2004), engage in less risky sexual behavior (Donenberg et al., 2011), and develop stronger racial identities (Thomas & King, 2007). In reference to colorism, as previously mentioned, Black women have identified family members as those from which they learned to associate negativity with darkness and positivity with lightness. (Wilder, 2010; Wilder & Cain, 2011).

Both family and media are highly influential agents of socialization. By way of modeling and the reinforcement of particular beliefs and behavior, parents, fictive kin, music, television, and movies teach African American girls how to negotiate their environments, define their identities, and in various respects, evaluate skin color. Skin color is central to the lives of Black females. The intersection of their gender and race creates a context in which colorist ideologies and beliefs emerge as more salient. In this respect, an examination of African American girls and their exposure to color conscious messages via family and media could aid in achieving the following: 1) shed light on the prevalence of skin tone biases, 2) provide increased evidence in support of transgenerational colorist teachings and their sources, and 3) demonstrate the potential for colorist ideologies to affect how African American girls feel about themselves and their skin color.

Proposed Study

Colorism research has brought into focus the psychosocial effects of skin tone stigmatizations and the internalization of colorist scripts. Yet, despite growing scholarship, many of the studies are either dated or centered on African American adults and college students. As the process of socialization is not circumscribed to a specific stage of development, it is critical to assess the operating ramifications of colorism on adolescents as well as adults. Exploring the potential impact of skin tone preferences on African American female adolescents adds to a

comprehensive understanding of how colorism functions within the African American community.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of colorism among African American female adolescents and more specifically to identify underlying factors that contribute to colorist socialization. The study focused on African American girls, rather than boys due to the literature that suggests that the intersection of skin tone and gender renders experiences with colorism most pronounced for African American females. By targeting adolescent girls, the study aimed to continue the exploration of gendered experiences with colorist ideologies and their potential to affect self-evaluations and the evaluations of others. Additionally, the proposed study took into consideration a contemporary approach to determining the extent to which urban media and families served as sources for color-conscious messages.

Research Design

Consistent with much of colorism research, this study was qualitative. Given the complexity of colorist ideologies and the various ways in which they may manifest, a qualitative study allowed for a holistic in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Qualitative studies seek to understand social phenomena through either a subjective or objective lens, more specifically, through paradigms (Padgett, 2008). Guided by unique assumptions, paradigms dictate how a researcher designs and conducts a qualitative study (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). From within the functionalist paradigm, the primary goal is to provide rational explanations of human behavior and social processes (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). In this approach, maximizing objectivity is essential to the exploration of social order and the status quo (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). It assumes that the social world and the relationships within it can be deconstructed, identified, studied, and measured (O'Connor, 2001).

Consistent with the assumptions of the functionalist paradigm, the aim of this study was to offer explanations for how African American female adolescents are socialized to subscribe to colorist ideologies and practices (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Functionalist qualitative research often serves as the foundation for theory development and testing. As such, this study was designed to better understand (or contribute to the knowledge about) sources through which African American female adolescents receive color-conscious messages (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). In identifying the primary purveyors of colorist ideas, the study hoped to inform the development of programs designed to counter the internalization of negative skin tone stigmatizations among African American youth. To achieve this goal, the study used grounded theory.

Grounded theory (GT) is an approach in qualitative research that involves interweaving aspects of theoretical concepts into data coding and analyses (Padgett, 2008). An iterative method, grounded theory requires that researchers subject their findings to continuous and rigorous testing. Such measures strengthen analyses and lend themselves to the construction of sound scientific theory (Charmaz, 2011). With regard to the functionalist paradigm, grounded theory is an appropriate fit. The product of the two is referred to as objectivist grounded theory (Padgett, 2008). Emphasizing empiricism and neutrality, objectivist grounded theory allows qualitative researchers to study data and identify theories embedded within (Charmaz, 2011). In examining colorism and the internalization of skin tone biases, objectivist grounded theory employs methodologies, such as focus groups, that render this approach ideal.

Current literature on colorist ideas posits that familial influence and the media are in large part responsible for the dissemination of color-conscious messages (Russell et al, 1992; Stephens & Few, 2007; Wilder & Cain, 2011). To either confirm or negate these theories, semi-structured

focus groups were conducted to determine if and from where African American female adolescents develop their skin tone biases and body monitoring behavior. In other words, the questions were based on *a priori* theories. This strategy, along with the use of neutral questions and a script, lent itself to the theory development process and the execution of a successful functionalist qualitative study (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Methods

Participants

Nine individual interviews and five focus groups were conducted with a total of 30 African American adolescent girls between the ages of 12-16. This age group was chosen because it is during this developmental period that identity becomes more salient and integrated (Belgrave, 2009). Thirty percent (9) of the participants were 12 years old, approximately 37% (11) of participants were 13 years old, 20 % (6) were 14 years old, approximately 7% (2) were 15 years old, and around 7% (2) were 16 years old. Table I. and Table II. provides a break down of the age and grade of participants in each focus group and interview.

Table I. *Focus Group Demographics*

Focus Groups		
Type	**Age**	**Grade**
Focus Group #1		
	12	7th
	12	7th
Focus Group #2		
	12	7th
	12	7th
	15	9th
Focus Group # 3		
	12	6th
	13	7th
	12	7th
	12	7th
	13	7th
	12	7th
Focus Group #4		
	14	8th
	13	8th
	13	8th
	13	8th
	14	8th
	13	8th
Focus Group #5		
	13	8th
	16	10th
	15	9th
	13	8th

Table II. *Interview Demographics*

Interviews		
Type	**Age**	**Grade**
Interviews		
#1	14	8th
#2	16	11th
#3	13	8th
#4	14	9th
#5	14	9th
#6	13	7th
#7	12	7th
#8	13	7th
#9	14	9th

Recruitment. Participants were recruited from local community based organizations in the greater Richmond area that serve or work with African American girls. These included "Camp Diva", a program designed to assist African American female teens in spiritual, emotional, physical, and cultural development; Boys and Girls Clubs; and a neighborhood teen center. Participants were also recruited from organizations that provided after school activities, including "Girls for Change". For each organization, liaisons and points of contact were identified and a network of collaborators was established. Communication was facilitated through email and in-person visits. Several visits were made to each site to distribute flyers about the study and consent forms (Appendix A) and to the staff members first and then the girls about the purpose and nature of the study. The flyer (Appendix B) included information about topics the girls would discuss, the compensation, and who to contact for participation. This process of community networking assisted the overall recruitment process.

If individuals were interested in participating in the study, they were given a flyer and a consent form to take home. They were told to have their parents/guardian sign the consent and to

return it to the organization contact person. Once more than three girls expressed interest and returned their consent forms, the organization point person, contacted me to schedule a time and date for a focus group. Interviews were scheduled when there were less than 3 girls. While the original intent was to separate the girls by age, to keep from older girls from overpowering the sessions, a majority of girls ranged in age from 12-13. Older girls were therefore included into these groups.

The girls received $10 and a small gift bag consisting of lip balms, small earrings, candy, and small travel size hair products for participating. Refreshments of chips, cookies, and drinks were also provided.

Procedure

After obtaining consent and assent, I worked with the director and organizational leaders to set up appropriate times to conduct focus groups or interviews. Interviews and focus group sessions were held at the facilities where the programs' activities were normally conducted. When the participants arrived at their session they were offered refreshments. The purpose of the study was explained again, and they were asked to complete a demographic data form (Appendix E). These forms were then collected, and the sessions began.

At the beginning of each session, prior to the questions being asked, the importance of confidentiality was stressed. The girls were informed that the information other participants shared in the group should not be repeated outside of the session. Additionally, to reference one another, focus group attendees were asked to choose a fake name. In cases where girls mentioned individuals by name that were not in the group or interview, they were reminded of confidentiality and to refrain from using people's names.

Ground rules were also established. These included rules, such as "respect everyone's opinion", "wait your turn to speak", and "do not make fun of other girls' responses". Participants were told that they did not have to answer any question if they did not feel comfortable doing so. To ensure privacy, efforts were made to conduct focus groups and interviews in a closed or private area free from distractions; however, in some of the facilities, rooms did not completely obstruct all ambient noises. The step-by-step process of the interview and focus group sessions follows.

Focus Groups/ Interviews. To begin the focus group or interview session, I read the script that explained the purpose of the study and what the session would consistent of. For the focus group sessions specifically, I reviewed the confidentiality protocol mentioned above. Next, as an ice-breaker and to spark discussions, I asked the participant/participants if they were familiar with Beyoncé Knowles and introduced two visual stimuli: two pictures of Beyoncé Knowles, one an unaltered picture of the singer, the other a picture in which the singer's skin tone has clearly been lightened (Appendix C). I, then, asked the participant/participants the following questions:

1) What do you think of these pictures?
2) Why do you think they altered her skin?
3) Which picture do you think looks better?

After the first introductory exercise was completed, the following functionally driven questions were posed. These questions were written to better understand where African American female adolescents learn about skin tone stigmatizations. Each question was neutral, which maximized the objectivity—an important assumption of a qualitative study in the functionalist paradigm (Charmaz, 2011). While the following questions were posed during every

focus group session and interview, points of clarification and prompts were used to better understand the overarching theme of skin tone perceptions.

1) What does the ideal Black girl look like?

2) What do people think about light skin Black girls?

3) What do people think about dark skin Black girls?

4) Do Black men and boys prefer girls with certain skin colors?

5) What messages have you received from family about skin color?

6) What messages about skin tone do you get from rap music?

7) Do you get message about skin tone through urban websites? If so, which ones?

Basic prompts from facilitators:

1) Thank you for sharing
2) Would anyone like to respond to what she said?
3) Does anyone else want to respond?
4) What were you thinking when __________ was sharing?

Clarification Prompts:

1) Does anyone say that they like one skin color better?
2) Do they say certain things about dark skin people and light skin people?
3) What do they say about their [dark skin and light skin girls'] personalities or how they act?"

To finish the session, I passed out the lyrics to "Shades", a rap song pertaining to skin color by Wale (Appendix D). This exercise was also utilized as a way to generate more skin color related discussions. The song was played and the participant/participants were asked to

follow along and mark anything they wanted to discuss. Upon the completion of the song, the questions below was asked:

1) What did you think about the song?
2) How does the song make you feel?
3) Can you identify with Wale's initial dislike for light skin girls?
4) Wale seems to think that light skin guys are preferred. Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why?

Closing questions:

1) Are there any more questions as we finish up?
2) What did you learn from our session today?
3) Was it helpful?
4) What do you think we should do with the information to help other people?

Rigor. To ensure that data collection process was rigorous, four primary steps were taken: 1) the interviewer used a script, 2) the questions and the interviewer were as objective and non-intrusive as possible, and 3) the interview questions were based on *a priori* theory.

According to Burrell and Morgan (1979), the pragmatic methods mentioned above strengthen a study's ability to identify explanatory variables for theory development. To maximize the rigor of the proposed study, the interviewer was an African American female. As noted by Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2011), focus group facilitators should ensure that the participants are comfortable and willing to be open. In this sense, by having a facilitator that shared the same ethnicity and gender with the participants assisted in creating an environment suited for full expression.

Consistency was also achieved through the use of a script. Scripts help to structure and bound interviews. In addition to limiting tangential discussions, scripts constrain the potential for interviewers to inject subjectivity. The following script was used in the focus groups:

Thank you so much for participating in the focus group today. As (insert the name of the organization's leader) told you, today we will be talking about skin color in the African American community. We will be meeting for an hour and a half. During this time, we are going to ask you some questions about skin color, music, and media. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. We simply want to know your thoughts and opinions about the questions and topics. We hope to hear from all of you; however, as your participation in the group is voluntary, please do not feel like you have to answer any of the questions. If you are uncomfortable with a question, please let us know. Also if you do not fully understand a question, let us know.

Again, everyone's opinion will be greatly appreciated. With that said, even if the person who spoke before you says what you wanted to say, it is okay to repeat it. In addition, please feel free to respond more than once. We want to make sure that everyone is comfortable to express themselves so it is important that what we say today stays in confidence. To make sure that happens, we are going to establish some ground rules. Please respect everyone's opinion. Let's not laugh at any one's responses because we want to give them respect and we wouldn't want anyone to laugh at us…right? Next we are going to use fake names. On the blank nametags in front of you, write a name that you would like to be referred to as. Please no silly names.

Are you ready to get started? Are there any questions you have for me before we begin?

(First Stimuli) Great, so how many of you know Beyoncé? I am going to show you two pictures and I am interested to see what you think?

(Interview Questions)

(Second Stimuli) Now we are going to listen to a song called "Shades" by Wale. I am going to pass out the lyrics so you all can follow along.

(Interview Questions)

Closing:
Thank you so much for participating in this focus group today. If you have any questions, I will stay behind to answer any concerns you may have. Please feel free to enjoy the refreshments we have provided. I also have your money and gift bags. Thank you again for sharing your thoughts and experiences

Through the use of the script, the study maximized its ability to facilitate consistent focus groups and interviews.

Transcription Analysis

Undergraduate research assistants on Dr. Belgrave's research team were trained to transcribe the focus groups and interviews. Training consisted of research assistants learning how to utilize audiotape play back to transcribe participants' responses verbatim and to distinguish between auditable and non-auditable utterances.

Focus groups and interviews were transcribed by trained research assistants. All transcriptions underwent a three-step review process. First, a research assistant transcribed the data. Second, another research assistant listened to the audio-recordings and verified the accuracy of what was written. Track changes were made if there were any discrepancies. Finally, I, the primary researcher, listened to and reviewed all transcriptions and determined whether the track changes from the second review were accepted or rejected. Once data was transcribed, it was uploaded into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program, to assist with coding.

Primary Data Analysis

Preliminary analyses and a systematic-review of the data occurred at the end of each data collection session. This included 1) reviewing tape recordings, 2) identifying and comparing emerging themes and 3) documenting potential changes to questions or the need for further exploration. This process allowed for comparisons across data throughout the data collection process. Moreover, it facilitated the development of additional questions for alternative lines of inquiry and indicated when the data had reached the point of "saturation". According to Charmaz (2006), "categories are 'saturated' when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights (p.113)." After the 9th interview, it became apparent that no additional information about skin color perceptions would emerge and that saturation had been reached. At this point, all data was transcribed.

Coding. Coding is the process of attaching labels to segments of raw data. These labels indicate what each segment is about and what it is in reference to. Coding is the cornerstone of data analysis in grounded theory, for it allows for the reduction of large quantities of raw data into manageable units for further analysis and theoretical development. For interview/focus group transcripts, codes represent a label for participants' comments. Coding paradigms seek to identify explicit connections and relationships between categories and subcategories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In this study, a coding paradigm was used to better understand hierarchical perceptions of skin color among African Americans and those related categories and subcategories that facilitate the manifestation of the phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This was achieved by validating previously identified relationships, integrating categories and sub-categories, and establishing an overarching theme or core category. Continual comparison and refinement was also used during the coding process as to more adequately identify those factors or categories contributing to hierarchical perceptions of skin color among African American girls and associated outcomes.

Once the transcribed data of this study was uploaded into ATLAS.ti, it was carefully coded using line-by-line coding. I, the primary investigator, conducted the first step of coding. In accordance with Charmaz (2006), initial coding involved "open coding", that is, an examination of the text for salient and supported categories of information. Open coding is also considered the process of selecting and naming categories from the analysis of the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). During this process it became apparent that particular categories related to hierarchical perceptions of skin color were identifiable within the data.

At the end of the "open coding" phase of data analysis, 196 codes were rendered. The next phase of coding, called "selective coding", involved classifying prior codes under broader

conceptual categories to facilitate theory development. During this step, the primary investigator worked along side a peer colleague, who assisted in the data collection process as a note taker, to determine which codes to collapse and which to exclude. Codes created during the initial coding process were grouped together or merged based on their close similarity, as recommended by Maijala et al (2003). To ensure that codes were not forced to fit into categories, initial codes were revisited to address context and to reflect as to whether or not they were appropriately labeled. During this process several new categories were introduced, others were eliminated, renamed, or merged. Overall, the process of focus coding generated 17 conceptual categories and subcategories. Finally, data entered the "theoretical coding" or "axial coding" phase, where it was determined not only how categories were related to one another but how they were related to the overarching theme or central phenomenon. An expert in qualitative analysis was consulted during the process of theoretical coding in order to identify core categories. This allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of hierarchical perceptions of skin color among African American girls and from where they received skin color messages. The three core categories generated were as follows: 1) sources of skin color related messages, 2) the content of skin color related messages, and 3) the effects of skin color related messages.

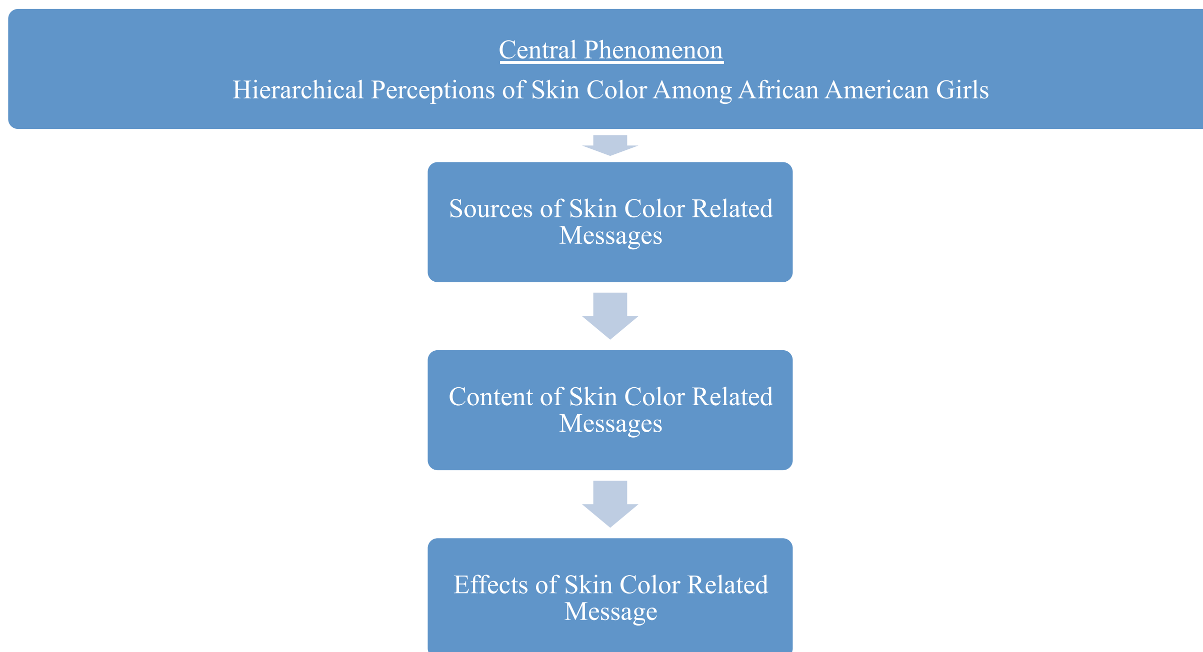

Figure 1. Three Core Categories related to the Central Phenomenon of Hierarchical Perceptions of Skin Color Among African American Girls

Throughout the entire process of coding, memo-writing was used to assist in defining categories, exploring relationships, and to identify where categories fit in the overall phenomenon (Birks, Chapman & Francis, 2008). Memo-writing was accomplished using traditional paper and pen, Microsoft word, and the memo-writing tool of ATLAS.ti. This process proved to be critical in making hypothesized linkages between the data, fleshing out concepts, and identifying ideas for future research.

Results

Five focus groups and nine interviews were conducted with 30 African American adolescents between the ages of 12-16. No individual interviews were conducted with girls that had previously participated in a focus group or vice versa. The following findings are the result

of an analysis across all groups; however, it will be specified as to whether or not participants were involved in a focus group or an interview. Unfortunately, due to the number of participants in some focus groups, individual participants could not be identified during the transcription. For this reason, some quotations do not include the ages of the participants. Data from both interviews and focus groups were collapsed and analyzed collectively, a technique that has been previously used (Lambert & Loiselle, 2007). Prevalent themes were based on how frequently a code was utilized across groups and within groups. The *central phenomenon* was identified as the Hierarchical Perceptions of Skin Color among African Americans. Several related categories were influential in African American girls perceiving skin color in a hierarchal fashion: 1) Sources of Skin Color Messages, 2) The Content of Skin Color Related Messages, and 3) Effects of Skin Color Related Messages. From the three core categories seven subcategories and themes emerged that offer additional information and insight into the central phenomenon.

Figure 2. below illustrates the entire theoretical model, which includes the three core categories and seven related contextual and causal themes.

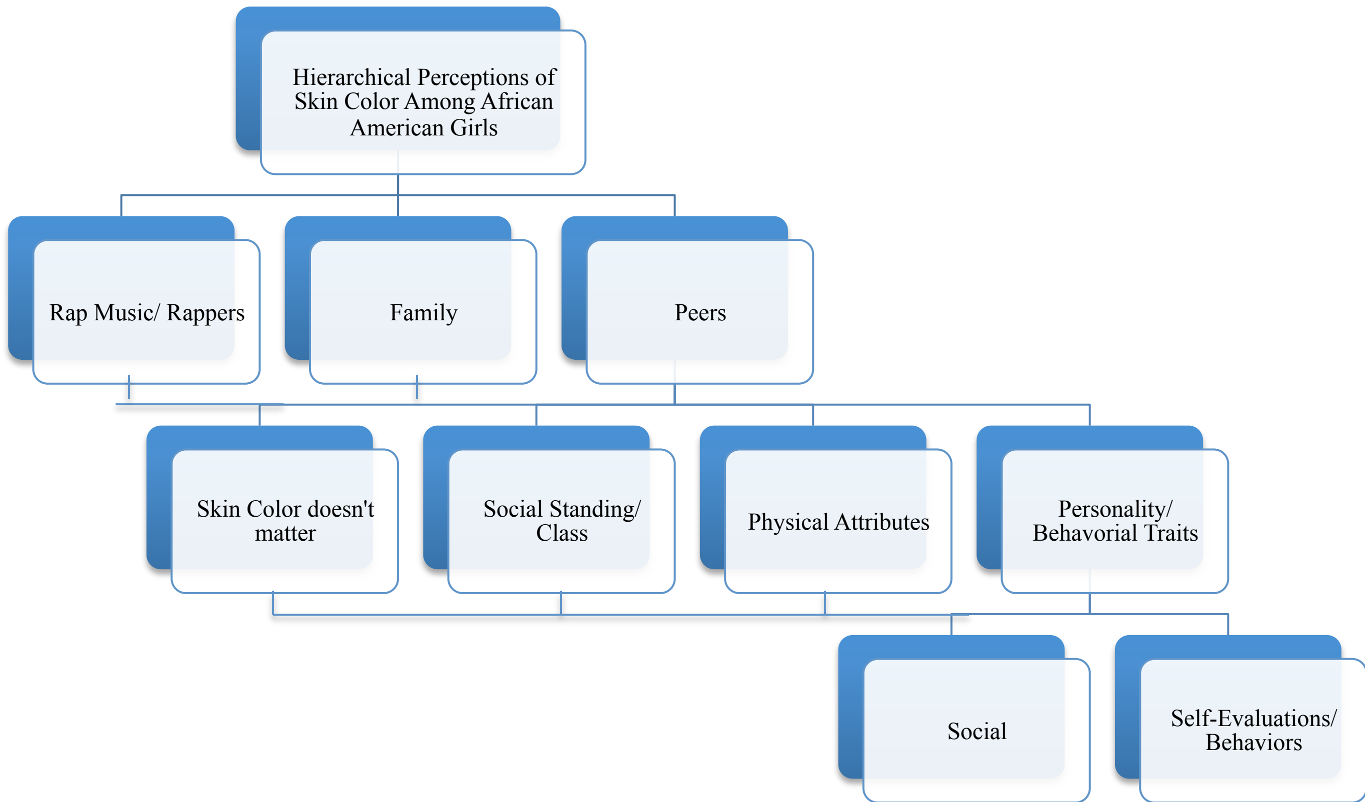

Figure 2. Theoretical Model for Hierarchical Perceptions of Skin Color Among African American Girls

Core Category: Sources of Skin Color Related Messages

Subcategory: family. In an attempt to gauge the potential for family members to serve as sources for skin color related messages, participants were directly asked: "What messages about skin color do you receive from your family?" However, throughout the study, this question generated minimal information. A majority simply stated, "No, none" or shook their heads to negate the notion. Even with such clarifying questions as "Does anyone say that they like one skin color better?" or "Do they say certain things about dark skin people and light skin people?", for the most part, the girls were confident that skin color related messages were not transmitted. On the other hand, several girls revealed that their families insisted that they treat everyone the same, that they "don't judge anyone by their complexion" (12-year-old, Focus group #1), and

that “no one is perfect” (Focus Group #4 attendee). A large percentage of these messages were said to be transmitted by mothers. In fact, several participants reported that their mothers teach them to engage in self-love, no matter what. “[My mother] says ‘you are who you are’. Just know that you can be White, you can be Asian, or you can be…ten races that are all that, and you still are the person who are you are ” (12-year-old, Focus Group #2). Having pride in one’s race and identity was also mentioned as a message conveyed by maternal figures. In one instance where skin color and family was referenced, a participant in Focus Group #4 spoke about her Grandmother’s reaction to a cousin’s desire to be light. “My grandma just broke it down with all this other stuff, like, do you know how many people done fought for you and all this other stuff” (Focus Group #4 attendee).

Notably a number of girls shared anecdotal accounts of their parents and family members addressing between-race differences, especially with regard to Black-White relations. However, in terms of within-race differences, skin color did not appear to be a salient topic of familial discussions.

Maternal figures were also identified as being influential in providing information about what type of boy one should date. And while these recommendations did not center around skin color, the fact that they were repeated, demonstrates that the girls are, in actuality, listening to what their mothers and grandmothers are telling them, in particularly, to what kinds of people they should be dating. “My grandma told me if your hair and feet look good then you look good (Focus Group #4 attendee).”

Although very few participants mentioned familial messages concerning skin color, one girl described her sister’s preference for a light skin baby. When asked why men preferred light skin women, a 15 year-old participant in Interview #5 shared, “They probably want…light skin

babies…they think woman probably want light skinned babies." When she asked from where she heard this message, she replied, "My sisters, friends… 'I want to marry someone light-skinned so I can have some light-skinned babies'." Another participant also recognized the power of family members to influence perceptions of skin color. A Focus Group #5 attendee believed that they way people are raised contributes to differential beliefs about light skin and dark skin girls, one 13-year-old answered, "Maybe because how they were raise."

Taken together, participants did not readily recognize family members as primary sources of messages related to hierarchical perceptions of skin color, but rather teachers of self-love, non-judgmental behavior, and between-race distinctions. There were instances in which sisters and cousins provided messages about skin color; however, with many of the girls, there was an asserted effort to express that, to their families, skin color doesn't matter. Reasons for the limited influence of family in the dissemination of skin color related messages will be discussed later.

Subcategory: peers and friends. The potential for peers to serve as a source of skin color related messages was not originally a part of the scope of this study and therefore was not directly assessed. However, throughout the focus group and interview sessions, participants offered indirect evidence that their friends and classmates uphold certain hierarchical perceptions of skin color. Peers and friends were acknowledged as contributing to the belief that darker skin is ugly and that lighter skin is prettier, and more specifically, pressuring others into also endorsing this perception. For example, when asked why some boys like lighter skin girls, one participant replied, "Maybe they are trying to fit in or something since everybody like light-skinned so they have to go like light-skinned girls." When the group was asked who these individuals were trying to fit in with, one participant replied "Their friends. The boys."

Peers and friends were also seen as perpetuators of skin color related teasing, which covertly supports biased evaluations of skin color. "Yea, like in my math class there's like these three boys and they are always picking on each other. I guess they're friends, but they always pick on each other. One calls the other one fat, dark, and all this stuff, just to like break them down and it's stupid" (13-year-old, Focus Group #5). Additionally, girls believed some of their peers desire to change their skin color, especially through pictures on either Facebook or Twitter, which, to them, suggests that these individuals believe one skin color is better than another. "Most people they like change their profile pictures…they like edit it a little so they can hide the face color…or they just change, you know, a different color so that they can have the picture that will look better for the public too see" (14-year-old, Interview #5).

Peers and friends was not an initial source of interest for this study. However, data emerged that revealed peers and friends are relatively influential sources of skin color related messages. Participants revealed these persons to offer messages about which skin color is most preferable, which warrants condemnation, and which needs to be edited. Despite the ability of this group to transfer ideas about skin color preferences, one may argue that peers and friends are also receiving messages from elsewhere, in particular, rap music, which emerged as the prominent source of skin color related messages.

Subcategory: rap music/musicians. To gauge the extent to which rap music disseminates and perpetuates skin color related messages participants were initially asked "What messages about skin color do you receive from rap music?" Initial interviews revealed this question to be too vague and to yield more information about Black/White race relations so an additional prompt of clarification was used: "What messages about skin color do you receive from rap music or What messages do you get from music that are about light skin and dark skin

Black people". After clarification, a substantial number of participants across the interviews and focus groups provided evidence that rap music and rappers are influential purveyors of skin color messages, especially with regard to skin tone preferences.

In four out of the five focus groups and four out of nine interviews, participants commented that rappers and rap music explicitly express an affinity for lighter skin women and ignore darker skin women. Although several girls admitted not hearing any skin color related messages from rap, this was largely due to the fact that they did not consume this type of music, preferring instead to listen to either R&B or gospel. However, in the event that girls did listen to rap music, there was consensus that rappers articulate or embed with their lyrical content, overt messages that lighter skin females are preferred to darker skin women. In rap music as a whole, girls revealed the spotlighting of light skin women and the marginal attention given to darker skin women as additional indicators of the message that "light skin is superior". For example, when asked what messages you receive about skin color from rap music, a participant in Interview #9 responded, " Ummm yea sometimes you hear [about] the light skinned girls. You hear light skinned or white more than you would hear Black" (14-year-old, Interview #9). When asked to clarify, she stated, "um...not as much as…I mean its like less than light skinned girls. You hear about them [dark skinned girls] less." In this sense, rappers appeared to offer audio messages that lighter skin women are preferred, while rap music as a whole (record executives, music video directors, etc.) offered visual messages of skin tone biases.

The role of rap music in the endorsement of hierarchical perceptions of skin color even emerged without the prompting question. For instance, when participants from Focus Group #5 were asked to explain why people have differential beliefs about light skin and dark skin girls, one 13-year-old answered, "…the music they listen to. Like in those Lil Wayne songs. I don't

listen to much of it, but when I do, all they talk about is redbones." When asked if a lot of people listen to that kind of music, a 15-year-old participant in the group replied, "Yea. Everybody does." Finally, when the group was asked whether or not these rappers said anything about dark skinned girls or their personalities, all participants replied, "No". The neglect of dark skinned girls in rap music became clearer after a 12-year-old from Interview #7 listened to the audio recording of Wale's song "Shades". When asked how the song made her feel, she replied, "It made me feel good because you don't hear many songs about dark skinned [girls]."

According to several participants, darker skin girls are hardly mentioned in rap music, while lighter skinned girls are exalted and preferred. Moreover, when dark skinned girls are mentioned they are negatively depicted. One rapper, in particular, was specifically identified as being guilty of this behavior. Lil Wayne and references to his music were mentioned in three of the five focus groups. As one 13-year-old participant of Focus Group #4 put it, "Lil Wayne act like he can't stand a dark skin girl". Another 14-year-old Focus Group #4 attendee echoed a similar sentiment, "Yes! All his music…saying something about dark skin girls and saying stuff that's bad about dark skin people." Participants across several of the focus groups were convinced that Lil Wayne is unabashed in sharing with the world that he is primarily, if not only, attracted to lighter skin women. "I know in a Lil Wayne song he be like I like a long haired thick redbone. Yea that song. That part right there" (13-year-old, Focus Group #5). Lil Wayne was not the only rapper or singer mentioned to endorse skin color preferences. Big Sean, 2 Chainz, Chief Keef and Chris Brown were also identified as men who preferred lighter skin women. "Yeah! You know in all Chris Brown songs he always says he like light skin girls and that's why he went out with Rihanna. That's like the only type of people he's used to" (12-year-old, Focus

Group #2). However, rapper Trinidad James was noted as liking all women, whether they are dark skinned, light skinned, Asian, or White.

As alluded by some of the quotations above, throughout the study, participants made references to “redbones” or “yellowbones”, and more specifically, identified these individuals as the ideal females most frequently seen and mentioned throughout rap music. For example, when a 13-year-old from Focus Group #5 was asked what messages she received from rap music, she replied, “Something with redbone in it”. Responding to the same question, a participant from Focus Group #4 commented, “Oh, um, do I have to rap some parts or something?... They usually be like ‘Fat red bone, thick in the waist slime in the face’.” Mention of redbones and yellowbones also occurred absent solicitation. “Ummm I’ll put in something about music…Well, a lot of music they always say they want the yellow bones… Yes, yellow bones and light skin and long hair and all of that” (13-year-old, Focus Group #2). Interestingly, when participants were asked to demarcate the differences between a yellowbone and redbone, they could not, which suggested several things: 1) the two terms are synonymous and 2) girls are adopting language that they are hearing without understanding its meaning.

Acknowledging the apparent preferences for lighter skin women and/or yellow and redbones in rap music elicited a certain level of frustration and resentment among the participants. “And like redbones are *always* getting the spotlight because they’re light skinned” (13-year-old, Focus Group #5). To the participants, the types of female models selected to appear in rap music videos also evidence the elevated perception of lighter skin females in rap music. As one participant in Focus Group #4 highlighted, “[In the music videos] You *always* see light skin girls, you don’t *eva* see dark skin girls…mmm they been out the videos since 2003” (13-year-old). When asked why dark skin girls are not in the videos, the same participant retorted,

"Cause they dark". At this point, one participant tried to assert evidence to the contrary, stating, "I seen some like…well this is old, but like Beyoncé old videos, her backup dancers were like darker." However, this statement only appeared to strengthen the earlier participants' statements, "That's what I'm saying, like back then." A 12-year-old participant in Interview #7 further supported the notion that darker skin females are absent from music videos. "Some songs… Always have Black girls. Always light skinned. Not dark or white". In explaining why this was the case, she answered, "…because they think they're cuter and draw more of a crowd because of their complexion and hair styles."

In sum, there was considerable evidence across the focus groups and interviews of the influence of rap music and rappers in the dissemination of messages that perpetuate the hierarchical perception of skin color. Some of the girls recognized this powerful influence.

> …Like when Chris Brown said that in one of his songs he likes yellow bones. I think that since he said that, people started to like the music video. Once he said that, it got everybody's attention…So if like Chris Brown says yellow bones and talking about how boys should gravel at yellow bones and light skin girls...it instantly catches their attention …[people say] 'Ok, if Chris Brown likes yellow bones, and light skin girls and doesn't prefer dark skin girls, then I should go out with the yellow bones and light skin girls' (12-year-old).

This was also made apparent when the girls suggested directions for future colorism research. At the end of each session, the girls were asked what they thought we should do with this information. Ironically, a few girls mentioned having rappers endorse less biased perceptions of

skin color, by including counter messages in their music that elevate darker skin girls. "Tell the biggest rapper ever to say all the stuff we just said but make it lyrical…I feel like if Chief Keef...said something about a light skin...I mean a dark skin girl, that's what they gone like…They'll be like 'oooooo'" (13-year-old, Focus Group #4). Overall, rap music and rappers emerged as the most influential source of skin color related messages. The exact nature of these messages also emerged from the analyzed data.

Core Category: Content of Skin Color Related Messages

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, a considerable amount of data was garnered that spoke to the types of skin color related messages participants receive. This information was originally solicited using the following questions: 1) What do people say about dark skin Black girls? and 2) What do people say about dark skin Black girls? However, after reviewing initial recordings and reflecting on the flow of the sessions and the information gathered, it became apparent that more clarifying questions were needed. In the first interviews, girls asked follow-up questions such as "You mean like their personalities? Or how they act?" which indicated that such inquiries were more clear and salient. As a result, these questions were incorporated in all subsequent interview and focus group sessions. Thus, in addition to asking "What do people say about dark skin Black girls and light skin Black girls?" participants were asked, "What do they say about their personalities or how they act?" During the course of the study, the inclusion of these questions proved to add substantially to the richness of the data collected. After coding and analyzing the data, three primary themes related to skin color related messages emerged: 1) social standing/class, 2) physical attributes, 3) personality and behavioral traits, 4) skin color doesn't matter.

Subcategory: social standing/class. One of the more prominent themes regarding skin color related messages was the idea that skin color denotes social standing and class. Messages regarding skin color and its relations to social standing and class were mentioned in comments across all focus groups and interviews 97 times. This section will begin with a discussion of those messages surrounding the social standing of darker skin African Americans which will be followed by a discussion of those surrounding lighter skin African Americans.

Social standing/class and darker skin African Americans. In a majority of the focus groups and interviews conducted, when asked what messages they hear about dark skin girls and boys, a large portion of participants revealed the belief that darker skin African Americans are primarily from the lower class or "ghetto". For example, during Focus group #3, participants immediately answered this question all at once. "They Ghetto!!" one yelled. "They think they from the hood", another chimed in promptly afterward. "They think that all dark skin girls are from like the hood neighborhood," added another. Of the six girls to participant in this group, three instantaneously referenced an association between dark skin and the "hood". This was echoed in separate interviews as well. "[Dark skin girls] are ghetto…they think they're bout that life…that they can handle anything and everything. [People] think all dark girls are from the hood" (12-year-old, Interview #7). "It just seem like people…think that more dark skin people, like Black people in particular, is more ghetto cause by the way they raised and stuff" (13-year-old, Interview #3). The belief that dark skin people belong to a lower class or the hood also surfaced in their descriptions of dark skin boys' and girls' behavior. This will be expounded upon later. However, with specific regard to young boys, one participant remarked "[Dark skin boys] grew up like around ghettos…seeing shootings and stuff like that" (13-year-old, Interview #7). Relatedly, when a 15-year-old in Interview #5 was asked to account for the differences

between dark skin and light skin boys, she answered “They probably grew up in the ghetto”. When it was misinterpreted that she was referring to light skin boys, she was alacritous with her correction, “No, dark skin boys”.

In varied respects, several participants believed dark skin to be synonymous with lower class or “ghetto” living. Participants also made comments about the economic status of darker skin girls. For example, one participant in Focus Group #3 made mention of darker skin girls buying their shoes from Beauty World and the Dollar store, which was a notion that garnered support from other focus group attendees. Apparently, such purchases are indicative of one’s economic status or more specifically, one’s inability to buy products that are of quality. Several participants also mentioned receiving messages that darker skin individuals are less educated. According to a 13-year-old in Focus Group #5, “[People] think Black people are more uneducated than light skinned [people]”. It is worth mentioning that this participant believed dark skin and Black to be interchangeable. In Focus Group #3, a 13-year-old also referenced darker skin people as “ignorant”. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants provided significant insight into how they perceive people socially and economically categorize darker skin African Americans. And while the quotations above offer direct and cogent information about their understanding of skin color related messages about social class, one can also make relatively strong inferences about their perceptions of darker skin African Americans by examining their perceptions of lighter skin African Americans. The stark contrast is a telling barometer.

Social standing/class and lighter skin African Americans. The belief that lighter skin African Americans belong to the upper class and achieve socioeconomic mobility was consistently seen across the focus group and interview sessions. As one participant stated, “Light

[skin people are] from the suburbs. [That] makes you wealthy, rich" (12-year-old, Interview #7). In explaining light skin and dark skin boys' and girls' differential experiences in school, a 16-year-old participant in Focus Group # 5 bolstered the previous assumption, stating, " [People] be like wealthy light skinned people…live in a white neighborhood and they go to the white school". In specific relation to light skin boys, when one participant was asked where she thought more light skin guys grew up, she replied, " around…you know…like typical places. Like neighborhoods where its like kids always play with each other and don't play with guns and stuff like that" (13-year-old, Interview 6). A 15-year-old participant in Interview #5 expressed a similar sentiment. Posed the same question, she answered, " Nice places…well at least [they] look nice".

In addition to representing the upper class, one participant believed lighter skin individuals to be more educated. When asked to elaborate on what society and Black people think about lighter skin people as a whole, one participant answered matter-of-factly, "They probably think they're more educated…I think everybody, well not everybody, but a majority of people always think that white people are smarter than Black people. So the lighter they are, the more intelligence they would have" (14-year-old, Interview #9). One participant also believed lighter skin people represented the majority. "I think there's a lot of light skin people in the world" (12-year-old, Focus Group #2). The same participant later added, "Like mainly 90% of the time it's all light skin people around you wherever you go."

Across varied focus groups and interviews, girls appeared to receive the message that lighter skin individuals situate their homes in nice neighborhoods and operate in the upper echelons of society. This message, in varied respects, can be viewed as either a subset or extension of the overall belief that light skin is a social asset, another frequently cited message.

For example, several participants mentioned lighter skin African Americans are treated differently, if not better, and more importantly, are cognizant of this social advantage. “You know they think they can get everyone because they are light skinned” (13-year-old, Interview #8). Another participant believed lighter skin girls are given more opportunities. When she was asked what she believed we should do with the information garnered from this study she replied, “tell [people] that every girl should get equal chances like light skinned girls”. Another interesting message perceived was the belief that light skin girls live lavish lives. “You see [light skin girl] like Beyoncé and Halle Berry and that stuff…They always like…They go on shopping sprees like they get to spend their money wasting it on nothing.”

In sum, participants in this study revealed that they receive significant messages about the social standing of light skin and dark skin African Americans. As evidenced by their comments, it is believed that one’s complexion can serve as a social asset and determine whether or not you belong to the upper or lower class. In some instances it can even speak to your intellect. The messages received regarding social standing were important; however, the most abundant messages received about light skin and dark people were in relation to their physical attributes.

Subcategory: physical attributes. The physical appearance of dark skin and light skin African American boys and girls shaped many of the discussions. Across the focus groups and interviews, there was the clear dichotomized perception that light skin equated prettiness and handsomeness, while dark skin paralleled ugliness and defectiveness. In fact, comments surrounding skin color related messages about physical attributes occurred across the focus groups and interviews 110 times.

The belief that lighter skin people are more beautiful was by far the most consistent theme witnessed across the focus groups and interviews. “They look at the skin color and say the

light skin girls are prettier than the dark skin girls" (Focus Group #3 attendee). Participants in other sessions repeated this statement nearly verbatim. One participant was extremely sarcastic and over the top in her response to the question of what people say about light skin girls. *Acting as if she is overwhelmed* "'Oh SHE'S SO PRETTY! Oh my Gosh! Oh my GOSH! She is soooo pretty! Why is she sooo pretty?? OHH my gosh!'" (12-year-old, Focus Group #2). Interestingly, another participant, in a separate focus group, utilized the same exaggerated rhetoric and affect to describe how she perceives people to evaluate light skin girls. *Pretending to be someone else* "'OMG, they are the prettiest people on EARTH!!'" (13-year-old, Focus Group #4). The excessive demonstrations on part of both participants potentially speak to the frequency with which they each encounter such messages of physical superiority.

The idea that light skin girls and boys are flawless or perfect was also a frequently held belief. "They're like 'Oh she has a beautiful skin color. She's so flawless" (15-year-old, Focus Group #2). When asked why people prefer light skin guys, one participant reasoned, "Cause they might be perfect" (14-year-old, Interview #1). When asked why lighter skin boys receive this admiration one girl proclaimed, "ummm…they're always cuter" (14-year-old, Interview 9). In every focus group and interview, it was recognized universally that lighter skin is perceived as more attractive. "Most people love light skinned people. It's like they love them, they're so fascinated" (13-year-old, Focus Group #5). Being light skin was perceived as inherently appealing and virtually a prerequisite to achieve a certain standard of beauty. "Yea some people say that light skin [girls] look better than dark skin girls, like you always gotta be light skin to be pretty" (13-year-old, Interview #3). For example, when a participant in Focus Group #5 was asked why she thought people think light skinned people are so pretty, she simply replied, "Maybe because they are lighter" (16-year-old). Another participant echoed the same. When

asked whether or not she thought the personalities of light skin people played a role in why they are considered attractive, she replied with, "I think it's the looks…just like…they're light skinned" (15-year-old, Interview #2).

The beauty of light skin individuals was also qualified by their hair texture and eye color. "Yass, light skin girls have pretty hair and light skin and all that" (Focus Group #4 attendee). In explaining why light skin girls are preferred one 12-year-old commented, "Maybe because their hair is longer and their skin is lighter" (Interview #7). Offering a related comment, one participant posited, "I guess [lighter skin people] look better because they're hair [is] curly" (16-year-old, Interview #3). In the African American community, loose curly hair is perceived as "good", and according to the some of the participants in this study, the notion that lighter skin individuals have "good" or "better" hair is factual rather than situational. "Nine times out of ten [light skin people] have good hair" (16-year-old, Interview # 3). After the physical traits of lighter skin girls were recapped, one participant added, "Oh their hair, it be longer and they have like different color eyes" (Focus Group #4 attendee), to which another participant replied, "And some have like colorful eyes" (Focus Group #4 attendee). Interestingly, nice hair and pretty eyes were perceived by one participant as being unique to light skin people alone, "ummm [dark skinned Black girls] don't have good hair" (14-year-old, Interview #9).

As inferred by the latter quote, the perception that dark skin is inferior and physically debilitating was expressed across all of the focus groups and interviews. Even if the girls did not subscribe to this belief themselves, they were very aware of the general evaluation of dark skin as unattractive. When participants were asked what people say about dark skinned African American girls, there were comparable responses across the board. "That they are ugly" (15-year-old, Focus Group #5). "Yea, that they're unattractive" (13-year-old, Focus Group #5).

Specifically referencing males' perceptions of dark skin, one participant mentioned, "Oh people, like some black girls…I mean boys, they be like 'UGGHHHH'" (13-year-old, Focus Group #3). Mirroring that response, another participant in the same focus group replied, "I think they find dark skin girls unattractive, yea". When she was asked to explicate why, she answered, "cause the way their skin color is".

The most compelling evidence of the message that dark is unappealing or flawed was seen in the fact that 10 out of 30 participants across the focus groups and interviews used the word "ugly" to describe dark complexions. When participants were asked what people say about dark skinned Black girls, there were comparable responses across the board. "That they are ugly" (15-year-old, Focus Group #5). "Yea, that they're unattractive" (13-year-old, Focus Group #5). As one 16-year-old put it, "I guess being dark you got a lot of flaws" (Interview #3). One participant voiced her understandable frustrations with the unfair assessments of dark skin by stating, "I just don't get it. How like light girls, everyone likes them. They adore them. When it come to dark skin girls, everybody is just like 'YUCK! EWW!" (12-year-old, Focus Group #2). Equally disheartening was one participant's account of someone claiming that her dark skin rendered her invisible at night, and as a result, unappealing. When asked if she heard anything else like that she replied, "ummm not that I can remember, that's just one that will stick with me for life" (15-year-old, Interview #5).

While many of the skin color related messages received about the unattractiveness of darker complexions largely pertained to females, it is important to note that the evaluation of dark skin as unappealing transcended gender, in that dark skin boys were also labeled as inferior. When asked why some girls don't like dark skinned guys, one participant responded, "They probably just think they aren't cute…" (13-year-old, Interview #8). When participants were

asked why Wale mentioned in his song "Shades" that the girls didn't like him, they replied, "Because of how he look or he probably was too Black or something."

Extreme gradations of dark skin were viewed as especially undesirable "…Very very black, like dark skin, like very very black, you ain't cute (16-year-old, Interview 2)". Also expressing disdain for those individuals situated on the far end of the color continuum, one participant stated, "Well, I don't prefer light skin, but as long as you not black black like charcoal…long as you not ugly (Focus Group #3 attendee). Extremely dark individuals were also considered dirty. "Yea, but some men like dark skin girls, they just like the color dark. It just can't be the dirty kind, like they have like all these dark spots on them, its just like, yea...dark people" (13 year-old, Interview #3). The same participant went on to explain, "A lot of people say that Black people look dirty."

While it should be recognized that a few participants categorized darker skin girls/boys as "pretty or cute", it is important to note that these individuals were either viewed as anomalies or subtyped as to exclude them from the general perception that darker skin is unattractive. For example, often times for a darker skin female to be qualified as pretty, she had to have either pretty hair, nice teeth, or "know how to dress". "Uh, she can be like dark skin, with curly natural hair, like with pretty teeth" (12-year-old, Focus Group #1). When asked what determines if a dark skin girl is cute, participants in Focus Group #3 noted, "If her face is cute", "Her hair", "Her body". The idea that hair allows a dark skin girl to transcend her typical classification as unattractive was also adduced by the following quote, "I just think I see a lot of cute dark skin girls with like long natural hair and the clothes and stuff (Focus Group #4 attendee)."

Additionally, swag was identified as a trait that could potentially override the unattractiveness normally associated with dark skin. "If they're dark skinned with swag, then

they're a keeper (13-year-old, Focus Group #5)." Overall, dark skin boys or girls that can "dress" or possess "nice or good hair" were considered attractive, but ordinarily their skin color would trump all other attributes. "As long as you wear decent clothes then you're ok", a 15-year old participant in Focus Group #5 said. "But…" one participant retorted, "…if a black or a dark skinned guy wore the same exact thing as the light skinned guy, they would prefer the light skinned guy more just because he's light skinned (13-year-old, Focus Group #5).

Subcategory: personality/behavioral traits. Another theme that emerged regarding skin color related messages speaks to the perception that differential personality and behavioral traits exist across complexion. With regard to the personalities of lighter skin individuals, although some participants mentioned that lighter skin people can be more friendly, outgoing, and potentially leaders, across seven out of the nine interviews and one of the focus groups, the most salient message that the girls' received about the personalities of lighter skin boys and girls was that they were conceited or had a bad attitude. This conceit often times was in reference to their looks or the belief that they are better. In Focus group #3, all six participants commented on this putative belief, "They think they the stuff", one participant yelled. "They just think they're better," commented another. Referencing redbones, another participant stated, "A redbone think they hot", to which another commented, "Redbones think they bout that." The notion that lighter skin individuals perceive themselves to be better was expressed by several participants, and in some cases personally endorsed. "Like a lot of people think light skin people are conceited. This is true because I look in the mirror way too much on a every day basis…Light skin people they stuck on themselves for a long time" (16-year-old, Interview #2). Relatedly, "Me personally, I think they act kind of…kind of you know, antisocial-able, and you know, they think they can get everyone because they are light skinned" (14-year-old, Interview #4). In a separate interview,

one participant stated, "Light skin people may think they all that because they think they have a better…what's the word? A better chance with going out with people because they light skin." Overall, the behavior of lighter skin individuals was polarized. While conceited was typically referenced, lighter skin individuals were also believed to be more proper and civilized. However, there was also mention of lighter skin individuals being more sexually promiscuous, indicating the messages girls are receiving are conflicting.

As alluded to earlier, messages related to the personality and behavioral traits of darker skin boys and girls primarily surrounded the notion of being "ghetto" or ill behaved. Mentioned across five interviews and two focus groups, participants revealed that darker skin individuals are not only perceived to grow up in the hood, but to possess such "ghetto" characteristics as being loud, defiant, and ill-behaved. According to one 13-year old participant in Interview #6, being raised in the ghetto has led darker skin girls to "smoke and drink". In a separate interview, another 12-year-old shared that she hears "dark skinned [boys] always have to put on a show" which, "makes it seem like they're bad (Interview #7)." When asked to describe the behavior and personalities of both dark skin boys and girls, a 14-year-old participant from Interview #9 shared that, "they're full of violence and rage" and "bad and racial". In varied instances, there appeared to be the general message that dark skin boys and girls display less eloquent speech patterns. "[Dark girls] are ghetto. They're loud (12-year-old, Interview #7)". A 14-year-old from Interview #1 put forth a similar claim, in that dark skin girls communicate in a way that is "ghetto".

Taken together, there was evidence across the focus groups and interviews that participants received skin color related messages about the personality and behavioral traits of dark skin and light skin individuals. While light skin individuals were considered conceited,

darker skin individuals were viewed as acting “ghetto” or “hood”, in that they speak boisterously or engage in deviant/criminal behavior.

Subcategory: skin color doesn’t matter. One of the most interesting messages girls appeared to receive in relation to skin color pertained to the idea that skin does not matter. Across the focus groups and interviews, this sentiment was expressed verbatim. Even more intriguing is that this response was produced effortlessly and without much thought. For example, when one girl spoke about what she learned from the session, she stated, “I learned that it doesn’t matter what color you are because once you get to a person, you know how they are, whether they’re dark skinned or light skinned.” Answering the same question a Focus Group #3 attendee stated, “ Um [I learned] that…it doesn’t really matter what kind of skin color you are or what color you are. It just matters what you’re based on” (Focus Group #3 attendee). This “lesson” was particularly intriguing, in that for nearly an hour and half, most of the girls discussed the varied ways in which skin color influences mate selection, evaluations of attractiveness, self-acceptance, and self-evaluations among African Americans. The same girls that would speak to the hardships experienced by darker skin African Americans or the preferential treatment bestowed upon lighter skin African American would later state, “skin color doesn’t matter”. Taking this information into account, it appears as if the notion of skin color being value-free is more of a formality, or rather an expectation of what “shouldn’t” matter, as oppose to what is actually grounded in reality. This message also appears to be taught, as previously mentioned, familial members were cited as paying little attention to skin color differences or deeming them irrelevant.

Skin color related messages can have critical social and psychological implications and effects, of which I will discuss in the next section.

Core Category: Effects of Skin Color Related Messages

The last core category to contextualize the central phenomenon is effects of skin color related messages. During the interview and focus group process, participants began to reveal how the endorsement of skin color related messages, by either themselves or others, has influenced their lives. Questions regarding perceived preferences for ideal partners yielded a large portion of this data. These effects manifested as 1) social effects and 2) self-evaluative/behavioral effects. Social effects occurred at the macro-level, pertaining, in large part, to the community, and at the micro-level, pertaining to intrapersonal relationships and the mate selection process. The behavioral and self-evaluative effects of the endorsement of skin color related messages occurred at the individual level.

Subcategory: social effects.

Subtheme: macro-level/communal effects. The macro-level social effects of the hierarchical perceptions of skin colors were also considered as community effects, in that they influence community structures and interactions within the community. The most transparent effects of the endorsement of skin color related messages were social. Across four of the five focus groups and five of the nine interviews, participants referenced some form of division or conflict that resulted from the conceptualization and dissemination of the belief that light skin and dark skin African Americans are different. The girls' descriptions of this division was particularly jarring, as they were often laced with substantial traces of resentment, jealousy, and envy, especially during discussions of the perception that lighter skin individuals want to separate from the group, "Like [they say] they mixed with something. Like 'Oh no, I'm not Black'. And I'm like 'Yea, you look Black to me'" (16-year-old, Focus Group #5). It is also critical to note that division between skin tones was reflective in the fact that many participants

believed dark skin was representative of Black while light was White. To several girls, the physical appearance of lighter skin African Americans, as well as their preferential treatment and benefits, mirrors that of White individuals, and as a consequence, light and White are virtually synonymous. “Light skinned people resemble White people more, so they’re not put in that category as Black because they look more White instead of Black (13-year-old, Focus Group #5)”. One participant in Focus Group #3 mentioned lighter skin girls are referred as “White chicks.”

In general, most participants expressed frustration about the within-race division. “I wanna know what they be thinking, like, what’s wrong? Dark skin over light skin girls? What you mean?” (13-year old, Focus Group #4). However, there was one striking case in which a 13-year-old participant from Focus Group #5 expressed an overt desire for within-race separation. “I’m not trying to be racist but I think dark skinned and dark skinned should be together and light skinned and light skinned should be together and whites and whites should be together”. When asked if she could elaborate, she stated, “Because it’s [within-race and between-race mixing] just not right…I don’t know, it’s just something that irritates me about it.” While attempting to understand this rather extreme position, it is critical to recognize that this participant also revealed having conflicts with lighter skin boys in school. As such, the participant’s desire for separation may function as a defense mechanism.

Yet, this was not the only instance of division and separatism begetting further bifurcation. In the same focus group, one participant referenced the lyrics of comedic musician, Emmanuel Hudson, who is a dark skinned guy that claimed, “cuz everyone wants a redbone, he’s like team dark-skinned, we don’t like them redbones” (13-year-old). When the group was asked how they felt about the song, several expressed happiness. “It gave us, like yes, finally,

confidence. I was so happy" (13-year-old). Aside from social media, evidence of division and separatism could be seen elsewhere.

Upon closer examination of the participants' descriptions of light skin and dark skin girls, signs of competition and clues to divisiveness become more conspicuous. As one Focus Group #3 attendee remarked, "Yea, cause light skin girls be thinking they're all nice, when they're not!" Supporting this claim, another Focus group #3 attendee chimed in, "They [light skin girls] think they can get anyone they want, They'll be flirting with your man and stuff…" In an interesting exchange with a 13-year-old participant from Interview #8, after asking her what people say about light skinned Black girls, she replied, "…well if they aren't light skinned, then they probably say 'Oh, I don't like her or she looks better than me and all that other stuff'." When asked why those individuals would respond in that way, she commented nonchalantly, "Cause they want to be like her but they're not focused on themselves". Moreover, when asked why she believed some people want to be light skinned, she answered, "Some people might think that light skinned people get more attention".

The social exclusion and neglect of darker skin boys and girls was another social effect at the macro-level to emerge. Illustrated in the quote above, the elevation of lighter skin leaves little room for the celebration or recognition of darker skin individuals. Across five of the nine interviews and three of the five focus groups, participants made mention of the fact that darker skin people receive less attention than their lighter contemporaries. When a 14-year-old participant was asked during her interview what she thinks people think about dark skin Black girls, she replied, "I don't even hear much about them (Interview #4)." Reiterating that point, one participant stated, "Some people don't pay attention to dark skinned girls like that sooo…(16-year-old, Focus Group #5)." She would go on to say the same thing about dark skin girls. In

another extreme case, one participant believed the marginalization of darker skin individuals is evidenced by the differential levels of effort some people put forth to rescue kidnapped girls and women.

> That's why I say the news and like Black girls and people…it seems like people don't like dark skin girls because you see on the news like a dark skin person has been adducted and then they find their body somewhere, and if it's a light skin person, it's like, 'Oh my gosh. I feel sorry for this person.' Then in a matter days they find them. I just don't get it…I see it constantly. I just feel like if it's a dark skin…abducted girl, they find her somewhere dead, but if it's a light skin girl, and they show her photo on the news, they're like, 'Oh I want to find that person' (12-year-old, Focus Group #2).

Neglecting dark skin boys and girls was referenced as "pushing them to the side (14-year-old, Interview #5" and "kicking [them] to the curb (13-year-old, Focus Group #4)." As deduced from the participants' comments, messages that espouse hierarchical perceptions of skin color can have significant macro-level social effects, such as within-race separatism, favoritism, and relative indifference towards darker skin individuals. Similar effects are witnessed at the micro-level.

Subtheme: Micro-level-intrapersonal effects. The micro-level social effects of the hierarchical perceptions of skin colors were also considered as interpersonal effects, in that they influence interpersonal relationships and basic interactions. The effects of skin color related messages at the micro-level were, as expected, more personal. By far, the most prominent effect of the hierarchical perception of skin color was seen in females' and males' perceived selections

of mates. Across *all* focus groups and interviews, participants revealed that messages pertaining to hierarchical perceptions of skin color significantly influenced whom men and women chose to date. Likely inferred from the previously mentioned themes, an overwhelming number of participants specified that both men and women preferred to date lighter skin men and women. Compared to six comments identifying dark skin females as the primary preference of men and boys, 30 comments suggested the contrary. Relatedly, compared to only seven comments recognizing dark skin boys and men as the preferred partners of females, 36 comments presented the perspective that lighter skin men are favored. For example, when asked about the preferences of Black men and boys, one participant from Focus Group #2 replied, “It’s a 50/50 chance. Some boys they may be light skin and you go like oh I might like a darker skin girl…Like maybe a few times, but its more common to like the light skin girls. Like they’re the main big thing.” This concept of heterogeneous and homogenous relationships was cited frequently as well. While several participants would make statements like, “some boys go after light skin people because they’re light skin (15-year-old, Focus Group #2), others would say, “It’s always dark and light…dark and light. It’s never light and light [or] dark and dark (16-year-old, Interview #2). Yet, in spite of these incongruent observations, what is important to acknowledge is that generally speaking, with regard to both heterogeneous and homogenous couples, the female was often cited as being light skin. Supporting this assertion, but in an almost contradictory fashion, one participant stated, “I agree, like it doesn’t matter what complexion your skin is. If you like the dark skin boy and you [are] light skin, it doesn’t matter” (15-year-old, Focus Group #2). In a separate interview, another participant shared similar thoughts about heterogeneous relationships. “Dark skin boys, they think they look better with light skin girls. I think they just look for light skin. Just the color” (13-year-old, Interview #3). Rehashing the same notion, a 16-

year-old participant from Interview #2 remarked, “But most dark skin people date light skin girls, and I don’t know why.” In one bizarre circumstance, it was mentioned that the lack of attention dark skin males received could, at times, cause a female to exhibit pity and date him as a consequence (16-year-old, Focus Group #5).

The elevated perception of light skin as preferred also appears to have an effect on the babies that young women want to have. As alluded to earlier, several girls mentioned that men and women desire lighter skin babies, and that they engage in behavior or mating practices that ensures this happens: mating with a lighter skin individual. In fact, one girl stated that she wished her mother had selected a mixed race man to be her father. “I use to say ‘Ma, why didn’t you have me with a mix boy or something like that” (Focus Group #4 attendee). Among participants that made mention of this phenomenon, the primary reason and motivation behind not wanting a darker skin baby is that the baby would not be as attractive. Attempting to wrestle with this concept one participant explained, “I mean there is nothing wrong with a dark skinned baby…But light skinned babies are sooo pretty”. When asked what makes them so pretty, she replied, “the light skinnededness.”

Preferences for lighter skin men and women were clear intrapersonal effects of messages related to hierarchical perceptions of skin tones. However, analyses of data across the focus groups and interviews also revealed teasing and jokes related to skin color. In all of the focus groups and three of the nine interviews, participants discussed instances in which individuals were either teased or fearful of being terrorized because of their complexion. “Like some of my friends have been teased about their skin color…(12-year-old, Focus Group #1).” This participant also offered this example for clarity,

> Let's say you were in a room full like a classroom and its just ALL light skin people even the teacher is light skin. And you're the only dark skinned person in the classroom and then you won't speak your mind because you get made fun of…I think like everybody, they will just torture you about it, because of your skin color and because you're not like them.

A majority of participants identified dark skin individuals as the targets of skin color related bullying. For example, as one participant illustrated, "They joke on their [dark skin people's] skin color cause they all Black and they be like, 'Look at that burnt charcoal and chocolate'. " In that same vein, some participants made mention of the use of skin color related nick names, especially ones that are insulting. "[Dark skinned people] they're just called dull because their skin color, which is dull. Like I have been called dull (12-year-old, Focus Group #2)." In a couple of interviews and focus group sessions, participants made use of the names "Darkies", "chocolate", "caramel", and as previously mentioned "charcoal". Social media was also accused of offering a platform for skin color related bullying. A few girls commented on specific pictures posted on Facebook and Twitter of darker skin men and women that are 1) situated on the extremes of the color spectrum and 2) the butts of the joke, as only their teeth and eyes could be seen in the photos.

In sum, micro-level effects of skin color related messages can have a strong influence on how individuals select their mates as well as the nature of within-race social interactions. In the following quote, one participant not only speaks to the micro-level effect of intrapersonal teasing and bullying, but she taps into the next theme to be discussed: self-evaluative/behavioral effects: "Yea I think a lot of people think…sometimes… 'I hate this skin color. Why did I have to be this

skin color? Why could I be this skin color? Why couldn't I be lighter? (16-year-old, Focus Group #5)." When asked why people feel this way, another participant, age 15, answered, "Because other people." To which the entire group agreed. She went on to say, "Yea, the way they talk about dark people and make fun of them".

Subcategory: self-evaluative and behavioral effects. Messages endorsing hierarchical perceptions of skin tones appear to have a profound effect on how individuals evaluate themselves. This not only applied to the participants of the study, but to some their peers and friends as well. Due to biased evaluations of skin tones or rather the dissemination of messages that explicate a clear preference for light skin, varied participants spoke of darker skin men and women feeling insecure, having lower self-esteem, and just being overall dissatisfied with their skin color. Listening to Wale's song, "Shades", made one participant share this revelation, "He hates himself because of what people have said about him and that like he see that most people like love light skinned people…he just looks at himself and he's like, 'Why can't I be lighted skinned', like he hates Black". Another participant believed insecurities about skin color were more specific to girls, stating, "They um, I think like…not referring to boys, but girls sometimes I think wish they were like lighter skinned because they don't like the skin they're in" (12-year-old, Focus Group #2). More troubling is the fact that many of these feelings of insecurities, of lowered-esteem, and sentiments of being ignored manifested in desires to changes one's appearance and or engage in behavioral modifications to emulate and fit it. "Like some of my friends have been teased about their skin color…like I know one of my friends like she'll look in a magazine and she says like, 'Oh, I wish I looked like that.'" (12-year-old, Focus Group #2). This idea was echoed by another focus group. "…I feel like some dark skin girls try so hard to like be lighter (girls agree) (cross talk)…like they put on cover girl make-up…like Michael

Jackson" (13-year-old, Focus Group #4). Many of the attendees felt particularly strong about this topic, evidenced by the statement below.

> I know we all know, but you know how like girls they be trynna dress like light skin girls. I mean like it's like there are different dress codes. I mean I don't feel like this, but what I see on social networks and stuff, the dudes be like 'I want me a redbone super thick'. Girls try so hard to be a redbone (Focus Group #4 attendee).

In response to this comment, one attendee revealed information about her own past insecurities and attempts to blend in, illustrating, "I use to do it…yes…I, Nae, use to do that. Like I use to get the long tracks with the blonde hazel contacts…thought I was cute…I was trying to act like everybody else" (13 year-old, Focus Group #4). The behavioral effect of desiring to change one's appearance was also highlighted by the girls' comments that people use various tools on social networks to digitize their photos and make their pictures lighter. "Most teenagers…change it…they'll do it on twitter too…like just to please others" (15-year-old, Interview #5). Yet, what appeared to be most frustrating is that many of these attempts to assimilate simply do not bear fruit. As one participant put it, "Some dark girls they try to fit in but at the same time, it doesn't really work" (12-year-old, Focus Group #2).

In sum, analyses of the data revealed hierarchical perceptions of skin color among African American girls as the central phenomenon. In understanding this phenomenon, three core categories emerged: 1) sources of skin color related messages, 2) the content of skin color related messages, and 3) the effects of skin color related messages. Each of these core categories,

along with their associated sub categories and subthemes, offer insight into the existential nature of the central phenomenon as well as its social, intrapersonal, and self-evaluative implications.

Discussion

Skin tone biases within the African American community have been the subject of varied studies across multiple disciplines. However, very few studies have investigated whether or not African American girls are conscious of hierarchical perceptions of skin color, or, moreover, from where they receive skin color related messages. As such, the aim of the current investigation was to determine if and how African American girls are conscious of or endorse skin color biases, and additionally, what sources serve as the primary purveyors of skin color related messages. A comprehensive understanding of if and how African American girls are oriented towards skin color biases is critical to the progression of colorism research as well as efforts towards eliminating the continuation of skin tone discriminatory practices in the future.

The current study relied on the voices of African American girls to determine whether or not hierarchical perceptions of skin color existed among this population. Both focus groups and interviews were conducted. Focus groups are particularly useful in exploring a phenomenon and ascertaining a certain level of authenticity, as they allow the researcher to learn construct meaning from the perspective of the population under study (Vogt, King, & King, 2004). In essence, focus groups ensure the investigated phenomenon is examined through the cultural lens of the participants, rather than the biased interpretations of the researcher (Morgan, 1996). Focus groups can also yield robust and rich data, in that interactions between similar people can elicit more comfort, in-depth discussions, and contrasting viewpoints (Morgan, 1996). Conducting interviews also has its advantages, in that they can be more in-depth and comprehensive (Patton, 2002).

Moreover, one-on-one interviews can create a safe and confidential space for those individuals who may not be as inclined to divulge personal information around people they either do not know or know too personally (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

As previously discussed, data from the focus groups and interviews were combined and analyzed collectively, as the characteristics of the participants, the script used, and the overall data collection procedure were consistent. The following questions were posed to participants (this does not include the questions associated with the visual or audio stimuli): 1) What does the ideal Black girl look like? 2) What do people think about light skin Black girls? 3) What do people think about dark skin Black girls? 4) Do Black men and boys prefer girls with certain skin colors? 5) What messages have you received from family about skin color? 6) What messages about skin tone do you get from rap music? and 7) Do you get message about skin tone through urban websites? If so, which ones?

Analyzes revealed a central phenomenon of hierarchical perceptions of skin color among African American girls and the emergence of three related core categories: 1) sources of skin color related messages, 2) content of skin color related messages, and 3) effects of skin color related messages. From within these three core categories emerged 7 subcategories. In this section, each core category and related subcategories will be discussed in the order previously described. This will be followed by limitations, directions for future research, program implications, and a conclusion.

Central Phenomenon: Hierarchical Perceptions of Skin Color

African American children discern and categorize skin tones at a relatively young age (Hirschfield, 2008). Through various modes of socialization, values are attached to social categories (Fiske, 2008). In this study, the data revealed that African American girls are, in fact

cognizant of, and in some cases, endorse hierarchal perceptions of skin color. In understanding this phenomenon, three core categories and seven subcategories emerged that offer considerable insight into the mediums through which this phenomenon manifests, its related messages, and finally, associated sociopsychological effects. In interpreting and discussing the categories and subcategories, I rely upon research pertaining to adolescence and racial identity development. This, in large part, is due to the fact that I could not identify research that has charted the color conscious development of children independent of racial identity development. To my knowledge there is no existing developmental model that captures the process by which an adolescent comes to perceive, discern, and understand differences in skin tone, and thus, develop a color consciousness. For this reason, many theories related to racial identity development will be used. To begin, I will discuss sources of skin color related messages that were identified as 1) family, 2) peers, and 3) music.

Core Category: Sources of Skin Color Related Messages

One of the primary goals of this study was to identify potential sources for skin color related messages, or in other words, identify from where African American girls learn about skin tone biases. Children acquire much of their understanding of their social worlds from individuals, family members, and their environmental contexts (Hirschfield, 2008). Literature on socialization suggests that meaning making messages regarded social phenomena are either embedded within social environments or transmitted through modes of socialization (Quintana, 2008). Prior research on skin color biases has identified two primary modes of socialization responsible for disseminating messages related to hierarchical perceptions of skin color: family and media. In this study, *a priori questions* were developed to determine if these sources do in fact, transfer

information about skin tone preferences, which included: a) What messages have you received from family about skin color? b) What messages about skin tone do you get from rap music? and c) Do you get message about skin tone through urban websites? If so, which ones?

The study also conceptualized media more contemporarily in that it expanded its scope to include urban media websites. No participants mentioned or referenced urban websites as purveyors of skin color related messages; however, family, peers, and music were all readily identified.

Subcategory: Family. Using previous research as a guide, the current study posed *a priori* questions related to skin color and family to gauge whether familial members are responsible for disseminating skin color related messages to African American girls. Originally participants were asked, “What messages about skin color do you receive from your family?”; however, as this question did not generate much information, points of clarification were also made, including, “Does anyone say that they like one skin color better?” or “Do they say certain things about dark skin people and light skin people?” Yet in spite of these modifications, a majority of the participants in this study did not readily identify family members as primary purveyors of skin color related messages. Several participants stated their cousins and sisters endorsed stereotypical beliefs about skin color, however, family members were primarily said to disseminate messages that promoted self-love, ethnic pride, and impartial judgments of others. In this sense, this study does lend support for the influence of families on the socio-emotional development of African American girls; nevertheless, the degree to which this influence shapes or perpetuates stereotypical perceptions of skin color remains inconclusive.

While varied studies point to the role of parental socialization in the development of adolescent's perceptions of racial discrimination and categorizations (Hughes & Johnson, 2001; Quintana & Vera, 1999), findings from this study suggest that such influence may be limited in regards to skin color. Several explanations exist. The first deals with the comprehensive nature of the question posed. The question, "What messages do you receive about skin color from your family?" may have been too broad, in that it did not elicit specific instances upon which participants could have drawn support for familial endorsements of skin color biases. Second, participants may not be attuned to the covert and indirect social cues about skin color emitted by their family members, which would indicate the existence of skin color biases. Many of the participants in this study were between the ages of 12-13. From a developmental perspective, it is plausible that some girls may not have the social cognitive abilities necessary to adequately attend to or interpret social or environmental cues of skin color preferences or discriminatory behavior that were not explicit (Brown, 2008; Quintana & McKown, 2008). For example, family members might not verbalize explicitly that lighter skin persons are more beautiful, but the movie stars or entertainers that they identify as most attractive may, in general, have lighter complexions. Similarly, family members may not blatantly state that dark skin people are unattractive, but the notion may be implied if those they consistently categorize as physically unappealing are of a darker persuasion. For this reason, without direct vocalization on the part of familial members, it would have been difficult for girls to recall instances of skin color preferences or discriminatory behavior.

The third potential reason for why familial members did not emerge as a primary source of skin color related messages pertains to the inherently personal nature of discussions regarding families. Many of the questions were purposely framed as to create a comfortable space for

participants to discuss skin color biases without feeling personally threatened or vulnerable. For example, in asking "What do people say about dark skin girls?" participants were able to provide information not so much about their *own* stereotypical beliefs regarding skin color, but rather the personal beliefs of others. McKowan and Strambler (2009) define this recognition of stereotypes as "stereotype consciousness", or in other words, knowledge that people, outside of one's self, will and do endorse stereotypical beliefs that one may or may not agree with. In this regard, many of the questions in the current study were aimed to specifically tap into "stereotype consciousness" and allow the participants to speak about the general beliefs of others. While this technique and subsequent space appeared to facilitate more open and authentic responses, asking specifically about the thoughts and beliefs of family members may have been too close to home, and thus generated a barrier of defense. Social desirability may have also played a role in the desire or lack thereof, to disclose information about one's family. It has been well-documented that humans have an instinctive tendency to present themselves in a positive light, seeking to garner social approval rather than criticism (Fisher, 1993). However, in attempting to meet social standards, individuals may distort reality. In this study, as a result of perceived social norms, participants may have been disinclined to report familial biases and paint their loved ones in a negative light. Perhaps, the use of additional visual stimuli, such as pictures of homogenous or heterogeneous intraracial families, could have rendered more information, in that participants could have commented on how skin color differences cause preferential treatment for some family members and marginalization for others.

Subcategory: Peers and friends. Although peers and friends were not originally included among the sources of interest that disseminate skin color related messages to African American girls, participants in this study described their peers as engaging in skin color related bullying

and desiring to change their appearance to achieve a lighter and more preferable look. Given the well-documented influence of peers on adolescent behaviors and beliefs (Clark, Belgrave, & Abell, 2012; Rock et al, 2011) these findings are not surprising. Studies on adolescent relationships show peers can play a significant role in how adolescents develop their perceptions and attitudes of their social worlds, especially their perceptions of discrimination (Seaton, Neblett Jr. Cole, & Prinstein, 2013). Simons and colleagues (2002) found that among African American 10-12 year olds, a majority reported having experienced at least one instance of racial discrimination from a peer with verbal insults and racial slurs reported as the most commonly experienced discriminatory behaviors. In this study, participants also mentioned peers using derogatory names; however, instead of referencing race, the pejorative statements centered around individuals' skin tones, especially those situated on the extreme ends of the color spectrum. This has significant implications for the perpetuation of skin color related messages. The context of school has been recognized as one that imparts significant cues about what is or what is not considered to be normalized behavior (Brown, 2008). Peer victimization, without opposition or correction, can strengthen the belief that such behavior is acceptable and or warranted. When skin color discriminatory practices or behaviors garner social acceptability it is much more difficult to undermine hierarchical perceptions of skin color or curb its negative consequences. Fisher and colleagues (2000) showed that perceived peer discrimination was significantly associated with psychological distress and low global self-esteem among adolescents (13-19).

Friends' desire to distance themselves from membership of the outgroup (dark skin) by emulating those in the in-group (light skin) also reinforced hierarchical perceptions of skin color among African American girls in this study. Such forms of imitation projected the idea that one

complexion is far superior to the other. Peers who choose to change their physical appearance, via pictures on Facebook and Twitter, to more closely approximate those physical characteristics of in-group members further augmented this belief. While little information is available about the sociopsychological effects of Facebook or Twitter, there is existing literature that body modification behavior among peers can significantly influence how girls subsequently view and modify their own bodies (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Matera, Nerini, & Stefanile, 2012).

Although the current study did not initially operate with the intent of exploring the potential for peers to be sources of skin color related messages, data revealed the perceptions and behaviors of this social group have considerable influence on how African American girls develop a skin color consciousness. This source is likely influenced by the next source of skin related messages: rap music and rappers.

Subcategory: Rap Music and Rappers. The most consistent source identified by participants as a primary purveyor of skin color related messages was rap music and rappers. From this genre of music and affiliated artists, girls learned that lighter skin women were more desired than those with darker skin. In fact, participants made note that dark skin women are hardly mentioned at all in rap music or featured as models in rap videos. To many, this overt omission evinced the marginalization of dark skin females. And while being featured in a rap music video or referenced throughout misogynistic lyrics may not be a coveted prize, the fact remains that rap music represents the voices of the current generation, and as such, wields a considerable amount of power among young populations. As Sullivan (2003) revealed in her study of African American adolescents and rap music, this generational group is committed to rap's existence and find it to be life affirming. To this effect, as evidenced by the testimonies witnessed in this study, young girls are made painfully aware by their generation's unique outlet

that if you are not a redbone or yellowbone you are of little interest. Such findings are consistent with prior research, i.e. the work of Stephens and Few (2007), that recognized the sexualized scripts in hip-hop to have a significant influence on how African American adolescents identified and perceived women. Messages that light skin women are beautiful and that dark skin women are unattractive are also consistent with those found in the study by Ward, Hansborough, and Walker (2005), where increased viewership of music videos led to higher endorsements of the belief that women are sexualized objects.

Additionally, as evidenced by the studies above, findings from this study offer support for the gendered effect of skin color biases. The skin color related messages participants received from rap music spoke specifically to polarized perceptions of women, not men, in that women were scrutinized and evaluated for aesthetic appeal on the basis of their skin color alone. Very little was mentioned about the value of being a dark skin or light skin man. However, given the misogynistic and objectifying nature of rap music (Weitzer, 2009), it was not surprising to find skin color to be yet another physical attribute by which women are evaluated and judged. Similar to the studies of Keith (2009) and Hunter (2005), the current investigation bolsters previous assumptions that skin tone biases are more central to the lives of women.

The emergence of music as the most influential source of skin related messages as well as the reportedly limited influence of family on held hierarchical perceptions of skin color, may, at first blush, be intuitively surprising; however, research indicates children have a tendency to recognize and endorse beliefs and practices that reflect their normative community (Quintana & McKown, 2008). Given the widespread appeal of rap music as well as its generally high rates of consumption among African American youth (Sullivan, 2003), it is clearer as to why this modality was more influential than families among participants.

The elevation of lighter skin women over darker skin women can have significant implications for girls. The effects of skin color bias are similar to those associated with racial bias in that they are based on unfair evaluations of physical markers. Literature has linked perceptions of racial discrimination or exclusion to racial mistrust, more problem behaviors, and greater anger and depressive symptoms (Albertini, 2004; Bowman & Howard, 1985; Brody et al, 2006; DuBois, Burk-Braxton, Swenson, Tevendale, & Hardesty, 2002). Preferential treatment for one skin color over another can also lead to skin color dissatisfaction. Defined as being content with one's skin color, regardless of its hue (Bond & Cash, 1992), skin color satisfaction can influence how individuals evaluate themselves and are evaluated by others (Russell, Wilson, & Hall 1992; Hall, 1992). For example, Bond and Cash (1992) found skin color satisfaction to be positively related to satisfaction with overall appearance and the face. Falconer and Neville (2000) revealed that women who were less satisfied with their skin color were also less satisfied with their overall appearance. The authors were also able to show skin color satisfaction was related to internalized acceptance of societal notions of beauty and satisfaction with specific body areas (e.g. hair, hips, and thighs).

The substantial influence of rap and rap musicians on the dissemination of skin color related messages among African American girls was a key finding of this study. Participants spoke of messages from this genre of music that suggest lighter skin women are more beautiful and preferable for mate selection than darker skin women. Such differential perceptions of beauty across skin tone can have a considerable impact on how girls feel about their bodies, their overall appearance, and overall psychological wellbeing. Understanding the role rap music plays in skin color bias is critical in developing possible strategies for mitigating the effects of skin color biases.

Core Category: Content of Skin Color Related Messages

In addition to verifying whether or not African American girls are exposed to or endorse hierarchical perceptions of skin color, the current study was also interested in exploring the specific nature of these perceptions, that is the content of skin color related messages. What exactly are African American girls hearing about skin color differences, especially about skin color stigmas? To ascertain this information, the following questions were posed: a)What does the ideal Black girl look like? b) What do people think about light skin Black girls? c) What do people think about dark skin Black girls? and d) Do Black men and boys prefer girls with certain skin colors? Data analyses revealed that girls received skin color related messages that referenced individuals' social standing, physical attributes, and personality and behavioral traits. In order to interpret these messages, the psychological concept of essentialism is critical to consider. First theorized by Medin and Ortony (1989), psychological essentialism is the belief that each member of a category is endowed with a category-group-specific essence that governs the category member's development and behavior (Gelman, 2003). Applying this theory to the current investigation, participants received messages that supported the notion that skin color governs one's social standing, physical attributes, and personality/behavioral traits.

Subcategory: Social standing. Many participants believed lighter skin individuals reside in affluent, high class neighborhoods, while darker skin individuals live in the "ghetto" or low class communities. As literature from Hunter (2005); Russell, Hall, and Wilson (2013); and Wilder and Cain (2011) indicate, notions that social status differentiates across skin color are well documented in prior research, and more importantly, has significant roots in the past. Recalling the historical backdrop of colorism in the United States, some lighter skin enslaved individuals, as a result of their approximation to whites, were afforded opportunities to engage in

socioeconomic mobility that were not equally extended to darker skin enslaved persons. This ascension was critical, in that it laid the foundation for the social elevation of lighter skin African Americans. Some darker skin persons, on the other hand, were marginalized from vocational and educational opportunities, and as a result, found it more difficult to enter into the middle class. The fact that young African American females are still associating skin color with social standing speaks volumes about the transgenerational teachings and continuation of skin color related messages.

Subcategory: Physical attributes. Overall the most consistent message received regarding lighter skin individuals was that their skin color, along with their eye color and soft, non-kinky hair texture, render them more physically attractive. This was in stark opposition to the messages received about darker skin individuals, which were that they are ugly, unattractive, and less appealing because of their skin color. Such findings support previous literature on skin color related stigmas and attractiveness (Hunter, 2005; Russell, Hall, & Wilson 1992; Wade, 2008 Watson, Engelland, & Thorton, 2010). For example, in his study of how African American interviewers subjectively assessed the physical attractiveness of African Americans who responded to the NSBA, Hill (2002) found lighter skin women were overwhelmingly identified as more physically attractive than darker skin women. The perceptions of darker skin as physically unattractive and light skin as physically appealing are hallmark manifestations of the colorism phenomenon in multiple contexts, not just in the United States. Some research has pointed to the evolutionary causes of these preferences, stating that light skin is more feminine while darker skin is more masculine (Frost. 2005); however, in this study, the stereotypical beliefs regarding the attractiveness of skin color were not specific to women alone. Men were also subject to the pervasive belief that dark skin is unappealing. As it stands, it would appear

that the evolutionary argument that feminine and masculine dichotomies dictate our preferences for skin color does not carry as much weight. However, as previously alluded to, the findings of the current study do offer support that skin color preferences, particularly with regard to mate selection and beauty, may disproportionately influence women.

Additionally, participants found individuals on the far end of the color continuum to be extremely unappealing. However, it is important to note that this disdain was primarily the case when the individual was too dark, not when they were too light. The unequal evaluation of skin tones along the extremes offers further evidence of colorist ideologies and the hierarchical perceptions of skin color among African American girls. While some dark skin individuals were considered to be beautiful, these individuals were also subtyped, meaning they were re-categorized utilizing some physical quality that would allow for their deviation from the norm (Kuda & Oleson, 1995). Subtyping occurs when an individual confronts an atypical person and attempts to reconcile the discrepancy between what is presumed and what is perceived and can strengthen and perpetuate the use of stereotypes (Kunda & Oleson, 1995). Almost any quality can be utilized to subtype an individual and explain away their departure from that which is expected. For example, dark skin boys with swag and dark skin girls with "good" hair were considered attractive in spite of their skin color. However, without these qualifying attributes, participants were clear that dark skin would, under normal circumstances, classify these individuals as physically inferior. Thus, even if a dark skin young girl or boy were to be perceived as physically attractive, through subtyping, they would be viewed as extraordinary rather than normative. In this respect, subtyping allows for the maintenance of the previously conceived notion that dark skin people, in general, are unattractive.

These exceptions to the perceived norm warrant consideration, in that they speak volumes about the pervasive nature of skin color related stereotypes. For example, literature on stereotypes suggests that evaluations of individuals are often based on the category or group to which they belong as well as those standards specifically constructed and tailored to account for their unique characteristics (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). This subjective method of evaluating others implies that people often shift their standards to accommodate those perceived to warrant a specialized model of evaluation. For example, statements such as, "You are cute for a dark skin boy or girl" indicates that an entirely separate and exclusive measurement of beauty is applicable for rating dark skin individuals. This refers to the "shifting standard model". On the other hand, the "status characteristics theory" (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997) predicts that standards of ability are higher for low-status than high-status group members and conversely, that standards are lower for high-status than low status. Thus, if dark skin individuals (low status) were to be judged along side light skin individuals (high status) it would be more difficult for them to achieve a standard of beauty, while a lighter skin person may find little difficulty in achieving this level of classification. In this respect, both the shifting standards model and status characteristics theory illustrate the difficulty many darker skin persons have in fitting in with the status quo or attaining an equal position along side their lighter contemporaries. Furthermore, it raises important questions about the likely frustration and sadness some darker skin individuals may experience as a result of these unfair evaluations. While I will discuss some the effects of skin color related messages in the subsequent section, additional research on self-esteem, and self-concept, is needed to fully understand the psychological effects of being unfairly judged on the basis of one's skin color.

Subcategory: Personality/behavioral. Another subcategory witnessed in the content of skin color related messages was personality and behavioral traits. Similar to the women in the studies conducted by Wilder and Cain (2011) and Hunter (2005), participants expressed the idea that people believe lighter skin men and women are more conceited and arrogant, which they perceived to be a result of their preferential treatment and adoration. Evidenced by the demeanor with which the girls spoke of this message, beliefs regarding the putative superiority complexes of lighter women served as substantial sources of frustration. Darker skin women, on the other hand, were considered to be hood, loud, obnoxious. This also applied to darker skin boys, who were identified as being more violent and ill-behaving, in that they were perceived as smokers and drinkers. The polarized perceptions of personality types and behaviors across skin color reflect a sense of duality that has been previously discussed in psychology. Borrowing from the teachings Franz Fanon and “Manichaeism”, a religion focused on the struggle between evil and evil, Harrell (1999) believes African populations, especially African Americans, have adopted a “Manichean” way of thinking, in that they have internalized the dichotomized belief that light is representative of good and black is representative of evil. According to Harrell, viewing the world through a “Manichean” lens renders biased interpretations of social beings and contexts, such that individuals who more closely approximate black are classified as immoral or negative, while those who are lighter are categorized as good and virtuous. Given the perceptions of the participants in this study that darker skin individuals behave negatively and lighter skin individuals revel in their glorification, it would appear that they, too, are subject to “Manichean thinking”. The consequences of such thinking can include intra-group conflict, mistrust, and dispositional misattributions (Harrell, 1999).

There are several implications for holding stereotypical beliefs about an individual's behavior and personality. One derives from literature on behavioral confirmation, which suggests that a perceiver's actions, although based on unfounded beliefs about a target individual, may shape subsequent social interactions in ways that cause the behavior of the target to confirm the perceiver's beliefs (Snyder & Swann Jr., 1978). In this sense, if young girls hold the perception that light skin girls are arrogant and snobby and that dark skin girls are loud and obnoxious, they may respond to these individuals in a manner that will generate this behavior. For example, they may treat dark skin girls with more hostility or light skin girls with more disdain, and thus spark corresponding behavior. The consequence of this interaction leads to the second implication of endorsing stereotypical beliefs about individuals' behaviors: conflict. Conflict between groups can be a serious consequence of holding stereotypical beliefs, especially if they are expressed. As evidenced by earlier research on group experiences, especially that conducted by Hunter, 2005 and Russell et al (2013), if left uncorrected, generalized and erroneous notions about a group may cause a perceived target to experience feelings of ostracism, marginalization, and unworthiness.

Subcategory: Skin color doesn't matter. Another interesting message to emerge from this study is the belief that skin color doesn't matter. This message was conveyed even in the midst of participants providing detailed and existential evidence of skin color related messages and discriminatory behaviors. Most of the girls, especially at the end of the study, revealed this message as the lesson learned. This was particularly intriguing as many of the girls, if not all, at least spoke to the hierarchical perception that light skin is more physically attractive than dark skin. In this respect, the idea that "skin color doesn't matter" appears to be more rhetorical than a tangible action or theory, reflecting what individuals *should* be doing, not necessarily what they

are doing. However, despite the fact that participants in this study may have been speaking to an idealized process of perceiving and evaluating skin tones, the ease with which they were able to recall on this message, in the face of contradictory information, was troubling. It was almost without thought or analysis, which indicates automaticity. The message that skin color doesn't matter was internalized and expressed in a way that participants rarely gave the notion a second thought. There was only one participant out of 30 that came to the realization after the study, that skin color may in fact be unequally assessed. However, this participant was 14 and older than most of the other girls, and as such, differential cognitive abilities may influence this analysis. Blatant contradictions between the concurrently held notions that "skin color is of no consequence" and "skin color is important" were seen throughout the study. Interestingly those girls who shared the message that "skin color doesn't matter" also simultaneously revealed preferences for lighter skin boys or the endorsement of the belief that extreme gradients of skin color were unattractive. The paradoxical belief held among African American girls that skin color does and does not matter, speaks to the complexity of colorism and the contradictory ways in which young females are negotiating this phenomenon. They are obviously aware of how skin color *should* be perceived; however, as evidenced by the findings in this study, they are equally cognizant of how skin color *is* perceived. The juxtaposition of these two messages warrants additional examination as to more clearly understand how this incongruence affects the cognitive processes of young African American girls.

Core Category: Effects of Skin Color Related Messages

The final core category that contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of hierarchical perceptions of skin color among African American girls is effects of skin color related messages. Although questions were not originally designed to capture this information,

the effects of endorsing colorist ideologies and beliefs emerged. During this discussion, potential implications for the internalization and adoption of skin tone biases have been theorized; however, the following effects are those that were gleaned directly from the responses of participants. The pernicious social and self-evaluative effects of the dissemination of messages related to hierarchical perceptions of skin color included: social effects at the macro-level, which included disengagement, conflict, and inharmonious intraracial interaction and at the microlevel, which included feelings of inadequacies, desire to change one's appearance, and mate selection choices.

Subcategory: social effects.

Subtheme: macro-level- community effects. In terms of the social effects of skin color related messages, one of the more salient subthemes at the macro-level was separatism and intragroup conflict. Many of the participants mentioned light skin individuals seeking to be white, mixed, or anything other than Black. As mentioned in the literature review, the perception that lighter skin persons consciously desire to dissociate from their Black identity is one that has also been documented in historical studies. Research on race relations and African Americans in the 19th century reveals an asserted effort, on part, of mixed raced persons to avoid marrying darker skin individuals and maintaining exclusive social circles (Drake & Cayton, 1945). This practice was largely presumed to be a result of the belief that lighter skin is superior to dark skin, and should be preserved absent adulteration. Now whether or not lighter skin persons are still, consciously or subconsciously, engaging in this behavior is not exactly known. However, some participants in this study believed such attempts to separate are still relevant. Intragroup conflict was also exacerbated by the social neglect of darker skin boys and girls. Participants often mentioned these individuals as being ignored or rejected. Literature indicates that when

individuals feel rejected they can experience sadness, loneliness, hurt feelings, jealousy, guilt, shame, embarrassment, and social anxiety (Leary, 2001).

Social identity theory lends itself to understanding the separatist ideologies and beliefs apparently engendered by within-race categorizations. Originally developed by Tajfel and Turner (1978), social identity theory offers a framework for explaining why people tend to discriminate against other groups and in favor of their own. Typically, social identity theory is applicable to intergroup interactions; however, evidenced by the findings of this study, skin tone related divisions within the African American community renders the social identity theory useful for interpreting intragroup relations as well. Of particular interest to this study are the consequences of intragroup comparisons on dimensions of relevance when out-group members (lighter skin individuals) are perceived to have a superior status to in-group members (darker skin individuals). According to Taijfel and Turner, such comparisons can generate one or more of the following individual behaviors: 1) efforts to leave the in-group, which in the case of this study, manifested in darker skin individuals modifying their appearance to separate from their social category and attain access to the out-group (lighter skin) 2) efforts to redefine either the in-group itself or the basis of the comparison between the in-group and the out group, which, in the study, was evidenced by the belief of a few that darker skin was, in fact, more superior to lighter skin and 3) efforts to change the social structure such that members of a low status in group challenge the position of the high status out group. Examples of the latter strategy were girls rejecting the notion that lighter skin girls are prettier, and instead, imposing negative attributes onto these individuals, such as conceit, arrogance, and sexual promiscuity.

Subtheme: micro-level-interpersonal effects. The most prominent social effect to emerge at the micro-level was preferences for light skin mates. An overwhelming majority of

participants stated that African American women and men prefer to date lighter skin men and women. This finding is very consistent with previous literature. Studies by Russell, Wilson, and Hall (2013) and Watson, Thorton, and Engelland (2010) have all cited lighter skin persons as the ideal mates. Bond and Cash (1992) also found that a majority of the participants in their study believed lighter women were the preference of African American men. Given the elevation of light skin women in rap music and the perception that lighter women and men are inherently more beautiful, the perception or message that African Americans desire to mate with these individuals was not unexpected. Although darker skin persons were also referenced as beautiful, very few participants cited these persons as being preferred.

The consequences of lighter skin persons being preferred mates are similar to those that have been previously mentioned and associated with other outcomes. Not meeting the criteria of an "ideal" partner could lead to feelings of being inept, unwanted, and inferior (Russell, Wilson, Hall, 2013). Additionally, as recent literature suggests (Russell, Hall, & Wilson, 2013), it can lead to further social conflict, especially among women. As the paucity of marriageable Black men has only been exacerbated by high unemployment and incarceration rates (Hamilton, Goldsmith, & Darity Jr., 2009), the idea that lighter skin women have an increased likelihood of obtaining a mate has generated tension and competition among African American women (Ross, 1997). Participants in this study also referenced this type of competition, in that they believed light skin women feel as if they can also "get your man". More research is needed to explore the extent to which light skin preferences serve as the source for within-group strife and competition.

Another micro-level social effect to emerge was bullying and teasing. Participants revealed that individuals who are especially dark disproportionately face ridicule and condemnation from their classmates or on the internet via Facebook or Twitter. Participants also

linked this teasing to confrontations. Adolescents who are victims of bullying can suffer from depression, suicidal attempts and ideation, and poor self-esteem (Klomek et al, 2007; Nation et al, 2008; Swearer et al, 2001). Experiences with bullying can also lead to poor academic performances and truancy (Rothon et al, 2011). To date very few studies on bullying have examined the influence of skin color. However, as Golden (2005), Wilder and Cain (2011), and the women in *Dark Girls* illustrate, the ostracism, marginalization, and mockery darker skin individuals endure as a consequence of their skin color warrants consideration within bullying research. Future intervention work that targets victims of bullies and bullies themselves, may include skin color among other physical characteristics that should not be subject to teasing.

Subcategory: Self-evaluative and behavioral effects. Despite the indelible nature of skin color, there was still an expressed desire held by some participants, as well as their peers, to modify their appearance as to garner the perceived social benefits of lighter skin. As a result of the elevation of light skin and denigration of dark skin, some participants revealed that they either knew of someone who or had themselves engaged in behavior to emulate supposed traits of lighter skin persons, e.g. wearing light makeup, colorful contacts, or long weave. However, participants also mentioned that many of these attempts were futile, causing feelings of inadequacy or frustration. The desire to experience an external transformation was largely a byproduct of negative evaluations of self. Literature indicates that negative perceptions of self can also have such psychological ramifications as decreased self-esteem, self-concept, and/or self-efficacy (Fiske, 2008). In fact, many of the participants mentioned darker skin individuals feeling insecure about and/or dissatisfied with their complexions. As previously mentioned, skin color dissatisfaction can lead to other forms of body dissatisfaction as well. An extreme form is body bleaching (Gleen, 2008).

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. One limitation pertains to the nature of the questions posed. As previously mentioned, while most of the questions allowed participants to be comfortable and open in their responses, questions regarding family members may have generated pushback and consequently less information on the influence of family on colorist practices. Additionally, the format of the questions may have potentially biased participants to respond in a certain way. For example, participants were asked specifically what messages have you received from family about skin color and what messages about skin tone do you get from rap music? By asking questions based on *a priori*, the study may have been limited in capturing other sources of skin color related messages. Although peers emerged as a source of skin color messages, less structured and exploratory questions may have flushed out additional sources (e.g. magazines, movies, television shows, etc.)

Another limitation deals with the number of participants in some focus groups. In some instances, having more than 4 girls in a focus group made it difficult to control when individuals responded. As such, girls often times spoke over one another, leading to an inability to identify their voices or distinguish them individually on tape recordings. For this reason, the ages of all participants were not noted and could not be included in the data.

The last limitation is in relation to data analysis. While preliminary analyses were conducted at the end of the first sessions to reframe questions to better capture information, coding did not occur until the final stage of the data analytic process. This is a significant limitation to this study. As suggested by Charmaz (2006), data analysis and coding should occur before further data collection, as to inform the selection of questions and inquires for subsequent interviews and focus group sessions. Although the process employed in this study may not be as

rigorous as the iterative coding method suggested by Charmaz, it did allow for comparisons across data and throughout the data collection process, such that clarifying prompts and questions were generated to comprehensively understand hierarchical perceptions.

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, this study offers considerable insight into the perceptions of skin color among African American girls, especially about the quality and dissemination of skin color related messages.

Future Research

Taken together, the findings from this study identify varied socio-contextual factors that lead to the hierarchical perceptions of skin color among African Americans, including the sources, content, and effects of skin color related messages. As discussed previously, no existing literature has put forth a theoretical model that illustrates the development of skin color related attitudes and perceptions among adolescents. However, in that vein, the results of this study could serve as the foundation for the development of such a theoretical framework. Interestingly there exist a model of adolescence racial identity development on to which many of the subcategories discussed in this study could be mapped. This theoretical model is based on the societal- social-cognitive motivational theory (SSCMT) for the development of children's social identifications and attitudes (Barrett, 2007). In addition to incorporating elements of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1978) and the Self-Categorization Theory (Turner, 1987), which posits self categorization influences our perceptions of self, the SSCMT model takes into account and emphasizes the manifold of variables discussed in this study that influence the endorsement of hierarchical perceptions of skin color among African American girls. The SSCMT recognizes various factors operate interdependently to shape the racial identities of African American children. These factors include but are not limited to: family, peer group

discourse, choice of school, historical, economic and political situation of child's in-group, and parental control of media. If adopted and modified for colorism research, the SSCMT has the potential to offer a greater understanding of how adolescents develop color consciousness, and more importantly, assist in identifying those factors that can be attenuated to reduce the endorsement of skin tone biases.

Future studies of skin color and African American girls may also be conceptualized from a quantitative perspective, with a specific focus on the measurement of skin color satisfaction—a limitedly explored variable. To date, only two scales, the Skin Color Questionnaire (SCQ) (Bond & Cash, 1992) and the Skin Color Satisfaction Scale (SCSS) (Falconer & Neville, 2000), have been developed to measure the construct. Notwithstanding, only a hand full of researchers have taken the opportunity to employ these instruments and examine the moderating influence of skin color satisfaction on other indicators of adequate psychosociological functioning, i.e. positive self-evaluations, ethnic identity, etc. (Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001). In this respect, future studies may find the skin color satisfaction construct to be useful in exploring and understanding some of the sociohistorical factors that contribute to positive well being or conversely, engagement in high risk behaviors among African American girls. Specifically, research may turn to the influence of skin color satisfaction on high-risk sexual practices. To my knowledge, no studies have considered the potential influence of skin color satisfaction on this outcome. The only study that has come relatively close examined the relationship between Afrocentric appearance, sexual refusal self-efficacy, and body image (Plybon et al, 2009). Skin color satisfaction may lend itself to a more comprehensive assessment of African American girls' satisfaction with their physical features and associated outcomes.

The paradoxical assertion that skin color simultaneously influences social interactions but "doesn't matter" could also serve as the subject of future research. As Wilson and Dunn (2004) articulate in their article of self-knowledge, social psychologists have traditionally believed individuals to have one attitude at a time toward an attitude object. This attitude, which is considered to be the implicit attitude, differs from explicit attitudes in that it is typically crude and representative of individuals' unconscious evaluations or perceptions of stimuli. Explicit attitudes, on the other hand, are believed to be subject to an internal motivation to present one's self in a positive light, and as a result, may diverge significantly from one's implicit attitudes. Returning to the participants in the current study, how, then, was it possible for the girls to express two conflicting explicit attitudes towards skin color? Was this an issue of social desirability? But even if that were the case, why did the phenomenon of social desirability not suppress the latter attitude towards skin color? Could the latter attitude towards skin color more accurately reflect and confirm the existence of skin tone biases? How might cognitive dissonance contribute to this discrepancy in attitudes?

To answer these questions, one may conduct a study to measure the implicit and explicit attitudes of African American females towards skin color. Of particular interest could be what Brauer et al (2000) described as two distinguishable types of implicit prejudice, 1) the extent to which prejudiced attitudes are activated automatically and 2) the extent to which they are applied when judging members of a target group. Using objective measures of skin tones, the study may determine whether or not implicit attitudes are applied when judging members of a target group that fall along either extremes of the color continuum. Through such experimentation, we may better understand how discrepant or concordant the implicit and explicit attitudes of African American girls towards skin color are.

Lastly, future colorism research may use intervention work to foster a greater appreciation of self-love among African American girls and discontinue the perpetuation and modeling of skin color biases. Existing curriculum and programs, such as “Sisters of NIA” (Belgrave et al, 2008) or “ Sisters Informing Healing Learning and Empowering (SIHLE)” (DiClemente et al, 2004) may be modified to integrate intervention components that focus on countering skin color ideologies, showcasing the beauty of all skin tones, and ending skin color discriminatory practices. Such efforts may lead to an increase in self-efficacy and self-esteem among African American girls as well as a decrease in future intraracial conflicts and division based on differences in skin tone.

Conclusion

Skin color significantly influences the lives of African Americans. Much of our understanding of this influence has been derived from explorations of adult populations. In this study findings revealed that African American girls do endorse and are exposed to hierarchical perceptions of skin color. Additionally, the current investigation was able to identify where African American girls receive skin color related messages as well as the quality and effects of such messages. Results suggest that further exploration of the ways in which young American Americans come to discern skin color and categorize it as either negative or positive is needed to adequately address the teaching of colorist ideologies and to stymie their future occurren

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Appendix A

RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMATION AND PARENT CONSENT FORM

TITLE: Colorism among African American Female Girls

VCU IRB NO.:

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the study staff to explain any words that you do not understand. You may keep a copy to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to explore skin color and how it is perceived among African American female girls. We are interested in understanding what young African American girls are learning about skin color and how they feel about it. We also want to know from where they receive skin color messages.

Your child is being asked to participate in this study because she is an African American female adolescent between 12-16 years of age.

Description of involvement

If you decide that your child can be in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. Please sign this form after you have had all your questions answered and after you understand what your child will do.

Your child will be asked to participate in an interviews or a group discussion with 3 to 4 other girls about skin color and how the African American community and the media views or presents men and women of different skin colors. We will ask girls about what people think about light skin boys and girls? What do people think about dark skin boys and girls?

Risks and discomforts

There are no known risks for girls participating in this study. We do not think that participation in these discussion groups will cause participants to feel embarrassed or upset. In the event that this does occur, there will be time after the session to discuss these feelings and resolve any issues. However, participants do not have to answer any questions they do not want to and they can stop at any time.

Benefits to you and others

Your child may not get any direct benefit from this study, but the information we learn may help us to better understand how color is perceived.

Costs

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend completing the questionnaire.

Payment for Participation:

Your child will receive $10.00 and small gift bag.

Alternatives:

The alternative is for your child not to participate in the study.

Confidentiality:

We will not tell anyone the responses your child gives us. We will not use any real names during the discussion, but rather fake names. We will use this name to identify your child’s answers. . Information from the study may be looked at for research. What we find from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers. However, your child’s name will not be used in these presentations or papers.

We will not tell anyone the responses your child gives us. But, if your child tells us that someone is hurting him or her, or that he or she might hurt himself/herself or someone else, the law says that we have to let people in authority know. This is so they can protect your child.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Your child does not have to participate in this study. If your child participates, she may stop at any time without penalty. She may also choose not to answer any questions that are asked.

Questions?

In the future, you may have questions about your child's participation in this study. If you have any questions contact:

Morgan Maxwell, M.A.
14 North Blvd.
Richmond, Virginia 23220
maxwellml@vcu.edu
(704) 500-7484

Or

Faye Z. Belgrave, Ph.D., Department of Psychology
PO Box 842018, Virginia Commonwealth University
fzbelgra@vcu.edu
804 827-3908

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact:

Office for Research
Virginia Commonwealth University
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 113
P.O. Box 980568
Richmond, VA 23298
Telephone: 804-827-2157

Additional information about participation in research studies can be found at http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm.

Consent:

I have read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. All my questions about the study have been answered. I am willing for my child to participate in this study.

Please have a witness sign this consent. The witness can be any adult person such as a friend, relative, or neighbor over the age of 18.

____

Name of Child

Parent/Guardian Name (printed) Parent Signature Date

Witness Signature (Required) Date

Signature of person conducting informed consent Date

Investigator Signature (If different from above) Date

Assent:

I have read this form. I understand the information about this study. All my questions about the study have been answered. I am willing to be in this study.

Youth Name (printed) Youth Signature Date

Witness Signature (Required) Date

Signature of person conducting informed consent Date

Investigator Signature (If different from above) Date

Appendix B

10-4-12

We are looking for African American girls to participate in a study about skin color in the Black community.

Who?

1) an African American female **2)** 12-16 years old and **3)** return a signed parental/guardian permission form

Why?

We are seeking to better understand what young African American girls are learning about skin color and how they feel about it.

What?

Group discussions will be held for an **hour and a half** . **Refreshments will be served**

Incentives?

You will be provided incentives for your participation.

If interested please let your counselor or group leader know or contact Morgan Maxwell at 704-500-7484 maxwellml@vcu.eduor Dr. Faye Belgrave 804-827-3908, Psychology Department Virginia Commonwealth University.

APPROVED

Appendix C

Appendix D

Wale "Shades" Lyrics:

(Boy) Beautiful (x7)

Uh,
Chip on my shoulder big enough to feed Cambodia see I Neva fit into they quotas
Sneakers wasn't fitting and my knees needed lotion long before I knew the significance of a comb
I roam like phone with no vocal reception immigrant parents had me feeling like a step kid
And black Americans Neva did accept me that's why I grab so much when respect dig
I Neva fit in with them light skins I felt the lighter they was the beta that they life is
So I resented them and they resented me cheated on light skin, Dominique when we was seventeen
I figure id hurt her she evidently hurt me and all women who had light features, see
Id Neva let a light broad hurt me, that's why I strike first and the verse cuts deep

Chorus

All my light skinned girls to my dark skin brothers
Shades doesn't matter heart makes the lover
Boy you're so beautiful boy you're so beautiful shades doesn't matter heart makes the lover
Boy (beautiful caramel), Boy (beautiful coffeepot) Boy (Beautiful chocolate)
Boy (Beautiful toffee) Boy (Beautiful pecan) Boy
(beautiful licorice) (boy you're so beautiful)

Verse 2:
Just another naughty head nigga hoping Wes snipes make my life a bit different
In middle school I had to write to be timid I had beautiful words but girls never listened
Listen, blacker the berry sweeter the powder well im fruit punch concentrate and they water
Walk into my room thinking how to make moves ain thinking like a student but how Ice T do it
Light dudes had the girls looking there all year it's not fair, the ones with the good hair

Couldn’t adapt to naps I wear caps they nap and slept on me man I hate black
Skin tone I wish I could take it back or rearrange my status maybe if I was khaki
Associating light skin with classy the menstrual show showed a me that was not me

Chorus

Black is beautiful but, but ask them beautiful light girls if its black they attract to usually
What if Barack skin was all black truthfully would he be a candidate or just a blackened community because black dudes tend to lack unity and them black girls ain on the tube usually
Right Now at 23 I ain mad at them reds no more but for long time I had gone cold in
Blindfolded my own insecurity was holding me back to reds I ain know how to act
They would get the cold shoulder and know it was an act a defense mechanism what I thought that I lacked

Chorus

Read more: **WALE - SHADES LYRICS http://www.metrolyrics.com/shades-lyrics-wale.html#ixzz1tcuw2Rb5**
Copied from MetroLyrics.com

Appendix E

Sign In Sheet			
Name	**Age**	**Grade**	**School**

Vita

Morgan Lindsey Maxwell was born on May 12, 1986, in Torrance, California, and is an American citizen. She graduated from Myers Park High School, Charlotte, North Carolina in 2004. She received her Bachelor of Science in Psychology with honors from Howard University, Washington, DC in 2008. She received her Master of Arts in Latin American Studies from Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, T.N. in 2010.