

The Spectrum Of Inequality: Depictions Of Colorism In Make-Up Color Names

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In order to address issues of racism, sexism, and colorism in society, we must evaluate where these prejudices exist within ourselves—especially in our language. Dr. JeffriAnne Wilder, of University of North Florida, asserts that the way we talk about skin color is important in understanding the larger social

implications about racism and colorism. Colorism, or the social preference of light skin tones, affects the lives of many People of Color, but most harshly affects Women of Color. To demonstrate how colorism is a gendered issue, it has been widely observed that the skin complexion of Women of Color influences opportunities in



Image 1. Taken from Kylie Jenner's make up company's Instagram account, Kylie Cosmetics, promoting her matte lipstick color varieties across different skin tones (Jenner 2016).

job markets, marriage markets, and even personal self-esteem. Using unobtrusive methods, this paper analyzes the names of make-up colors to detect colorism biases fostered by the cosmetic

industry. Across a sample of over 300 foundation colors, there is evidence the light skin tone names portray more positive and feminine images than the names of medium and dark skin tones.

This paper offers a critical analysis of the cosmetic industry's use of color names for foundation. Specifically, this is a study about the depictions of colorism portrayed through the names of foundation. In literary arts, the use of color in descriptions can reveal a deeper meaning to the reader through symbolism and imagery. For instance, white is not just the name of a color, but it also symbolizes purity, lightness, cleanliness, and virtue. In opposition, the color black is associated with death, sexuality, evil, and mystery. Analyzing data using from unobtrusive methods, this paper applies theories of colorism to discuss these ideas further, arguing that despite the wide array of existing skin tones, popular and commercial culture continue to generalize skin color within the dichotomy of white and black.

Studying colorism as it pertains to the beauty industry is important for a variety of reasons. First, colorism is observed in many cultures across the world, indicating a universal social bias that favors lighter skins tones over darker ones. Uncovering these biases where they exist is the first step to take action against colorism prejudices. Second, make-up is a heavily socialized part of women's lives. A 2012 study found that nearly half of the women participants started wearing make-up between the ages of 14 and 16, plus half of them reported feeling unattractive and self-conscious without make-up (The

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Renfrew Center Foundation, 2012). With make-up carrying such importance in women's lives, it is crucial to see if racial biases are perpetuated by the multi-billion dollar cosmetic industry, especially if women are active agents that contribute to profiting from their own oppression. Third, if distinctions are found between drugstore brands and designer brands, the issue quickly becomes intersectional, meaning that the types of products women are exposed to relates to the places they shop which is dictated by their socio-economic status.

The following section of this paper discusses current sociological and historical literature on colorism and

it's relation to Women of Color and to the cosmetic industry. From the analysis of 300 different foundation names from both drugstore and designer brands, this paper concludes that traditional feminine imagery is more closely related to light skin tones; dark skin tones carry associations that relate to stereotypes dating back to the Slavery-era; and medium shades exist in an exotified state between the other shades.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colorism, first coined by Alice Walker in 1964, is a social bias of skin tone related to racism and prejudice. Issues of colorism and general intolerance of blackness are pressing global matters. These social biases work in tandem with beauty industries that perpetuate and profit from fabricated ideals of beauty formed from racial differentiation. Current sociological literature on this topic discusses colorism and gender, impacts of colorism within communities of color, and colorism in the make-up industry. This paper will develop the dialogue by focusing on colorism and make-up color names.

Colorism and Gender

Understanding the origins of colorism and the scope in which it affects society are the first steps to addressing skin color bias as an issue. There is speculation about the origins of when lightness became synonymous with superiority. For example, Phoenix (2012) argues that the association of lightness and beauty predates colonialism and existed in Elizabethan England. English aristocrats were known to flaunt their white skin as a sign of great wealth. Those who were poor were forced to work hard labor jobs outside, resulting in dirty or tanned skin. As a status symbol, the wealthy aristocrats would lighten their skin to further show how they did not need to work. Even in classical paintings, the truest depiction of European beauty, women are painted with fair or "shell pink" skin tones while men were traditionally represented in earthier tones (Hill 2002). It is widely accepted that European colonization and the institutionalization of slavery further established a social preference for lighter skin tones. Hill (2002) explains that an ideology of whiteness was used to justify slavery, and created a dichotomous way of thinking about race. Hill articulates, "whiteness became identified with all that is civilized, virtuous, and beautiful; blackness, in opposition, which all that is lowly, sinful, and ugly" (2002:79). In particular, Hill argues that slavery is at the root of colorism.

To understand how colorism is a gendered issue, it is important to discuss how slavery formed a social

distaste towards dark women. As slaves, women were expected to do as much work as their male counterparts. The images of dark, strong, and muscular female slaves only advanced the starkly different images of white femininity (Hill 2002). Further, because slaves were seen as property, slave owners often bought Black Women as concubines— women who most resembled European features were bought and sold most often for this particular purpose (Phoenix 2014). Light skin slaves were usually products of rape from white slave masters, and children of these relations traditionally were treated better than other non-mixed slaves. It is documented that light skin slaves were given jobs that were not as labor intensive and generally had closer relationships with the masters (Phoenix 2014).

Evidence of the Black Community internalizing colorism is detected in the early 1900s (Wilder, 2008). Prestigious black social clubs adopted the “brown paper bag test” where those who were darker than a brown bag were denied entrance or membership into certain social circles. This practice ultimately established a racial hierarchy even within Black communities (Hill 2002; Wilder 2008). Social distinctions such as mulattos, quadroons, and octoroons, marked some of the racial hierarchies of the time and up until the 1920s. These social distinctions of multiracial people vanished by the 1930s, when the US Census Bureau and other legal systems incorporated the “One Drop Rule”, declaring anyone with African heritage to be classified as black (Hochschild and Weaver 2007). Having biracial and multiracial people be socially and legally classified as “black” was consequential to the formation of the black identity.

Impacts of Colorism Within the Community of Color

Skin color bias goes far beyond an individual’s perception and everyday encounters. Large social institutions grant different rewards and opportunities to African Americans (and other people of color) based on how closely their appearances resemble Eurocentric standards (Hill 2002). Vast amount of research documents that light skin blacks have a significant edge over darker skin individuals within the same racial category. Privileges associated with lighter skin tones include access to jobs, education, personal self-esteem, socioeconomic status, and marriage markets are all significantly better compared to their dark skin counterparts (O’Brien and Berry 2008; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Glenn 2008).

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) critiques Americans’ binary way of thinking about race. Collins asserts that white and Black women “represent two opposing poles, with Latinas, Asian-American women, and Native American women jockeying for positions in between” (89). This perspective coincides with other studies that argue how colorism exists as a three-tiered structure or as a continuum, rather than just a binary black/white construct. This insight is critical to this study because the color names will be analyzed according to the spectrum of shades and not limited to the dark/light dichotomy. Moreover, how we discuss skin colors influences attitudes and beliefs towards people of any given complexion. JeffriAnne Wilder (2010) conducted an analysis of forty self-identified “black” color names that range from light to dark and the perceived meanings associated with those names. Among African American females, the darker the color name, the more negative the meaning, and the lighter the skin color name, the more beautiful it was perceived. In addition, Wilder (2010) found that neutral or medium tones were generally most favorable for dark women to identify themselves as and are least scrutinized by fellow Black women.

Wilder’s study is pivotal to this analysis because she asserts that the language in which we describe skin tone carries heavy significance in the Black community and beyond. Evidently, the Black community has cultivated a culture rooted in colorism. It is common to describe light skin women being as “yellow” or “red” which carries meanings that reflect more positively than names like “tar baby,” “darky” or “blacky”, which are often used to describe dark skin women. Even “brown” is a more desirable identifier than “black.” Further, being called “red” or “redbone” is historically linked to the mixing of Native American or white heritages, which is generally more liked, agreeable, and carries an overall positive association within the Black community. In a focus group consisting of only Black women, “red” women were described as trustworthy, amiable, non-threatening, comfortable, and beautiful (Wilder 2010). More of her findings also indicate an interesting way in which we describe all skin colors. Several terms in all three categories, (light, medium, and dark,) had references to food. Wilder asserts, “From vanilla for light skin to caramel for medium tones and chocolate for dark skin, these food terms may point to the hyper-sexualized and erotic images of all Black women, regardless of skin tone” (2010:191).

It is undisputed that colorism is a powerful force in

both the majority American culture as well as within the minority African American culture. Many scholars, like Wilder (2010) and Hill (2002), made it clear that Black women are fully aware of the skin color bias within the

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African American community. As a result, an important question in the matter is how Black women cope in a world that systemically devalues them.

In order to be perceived as feminine and beautiful it is popular for dark Women of Color to emulate whiteness—often through the use of skin bleaches, hair dyes, cosmetics surgeries, and straightening combs (Hill, 2002). The beauty industry has manufactured a market specifically for skin bleaches, and it is projected to reach to \$23 Billion by the year 2020 (Global Industry Analytics, Inc 2015). This industry is problematic because it encourages Women of Color to attain a beauty ideal that was fabricated in spite of their most natural appearance. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2008) articulated,

"the yearning for lightness is evident in the widespread and growing use of skin bleaching around the globe can rightfully be seen as the legacy of colonialism, the manifestation of 'false consciousness,' and the internalization of 'white is right' values by people of color, especially women" (298).

Companies like Fair & Lovely capitalized on and perpetuate the idea that fair skin color is more beautiful than black and brown skin. Fair & Lovely uses rhetoric like "with regular daily use, you will be able to unveil your natural radiant fairness in just 6 weeks" (Glenn 2008). Additionally, skin bleaches are under heavy criticism from the FDA because of their carcinogenic ingredients, specifically mercury and hydroquinone, that cause damage to the adrenal glands, kidneys, liver, and cause skin cancer (Draelos 2007; Global Industry Analytics, Inc 2015; Hunter 2011). That is to say, in addition to being held to unattainable images of white beauty, Women of Color are also seriously harming

themselves in the process. To address this public health issue, popular solutions call for heavier regulation of skin bleaches and promoting health campaigns that endorse women's personal acceptance of their skin color. Mire (2005) argued these solutions do not address the larger social systems in place that promote hegemonic standards of beauty. Focusing on the individual's attitudes and perceptions of skin color is like putting a band-aid on a bullet wound—it merely covers up the problem and does little to heal deeply embedded wounds of colorism, racism, and sexism.

Colorism in the Make-Up Industry

In addition to selling skin bleach products, the cosmetic industry also upholds the societal preference of lighter skin by staunchly marketing to light and medium skin tones with exclusively white female models and through availability of products. Mainstream cosmetic companies are notorious for hiring predominantly white models to advertise their products. To exemplify this phenomenon, it was only twenty-four years ago when CoverGirl Cosmetics signed their first Black model, Lana Ogilvie, to advertise their traditional natural "All-American" brand (Anon., 2011). Companies like L'oreal, Garnier, and Dove, as well as some women's magazines have run advertisements that digitally altered the complexions of their Black models and celebrities to look much lighter (Phoenix 2014; Wischhover, 2011). In general, most mainstream beauty products are made for white consumers—this is evident by the availability of certain foundation colors, the use of predominantly white models to advertise products, and the types of products offered. In order to traverse through this white-washed cosmetic market, some Black women are making their own tools to help them shop. Instagrammer, Ofunne Amaka, dedicated her account to sampling and "swatching" different make-up products for Black consumers to evaluate how certain products will look on their skin (Harrison, 2016). Often, eyeshadow pallets, lipsticks, and other highly pigmented make-up have completely different color effects depending on the skin color of the wearer (See image 1 for an example). Some companies like Colorpop, Anastasia Beverly Hill, and Kylie Cosmetics have taken notice of this dilemma and have adopted "arm swatch" features to their websites. Some say this is a step in the right direction, but these companies still face criticism for choosing models that are not dark enough. Regardless of this progress, there is still a far way to go for mainstream beauty to be as diverse and inclusive as the markets they reach. These

examples show how prevalent colorism and racism can be in this industry—the analysis of make-up color names will uncover how biases can be found in every aspect of this industry.

There is no denying that colorism exists within this multibillion dollar make-up industry. This industry profits from the insecurities of women and, despite marketing to diverse populations, sells only one image of Eurocentric beauty. It is evident that Women of Color have internalized these white beauty ideals that are perpetuated by the make-up industry, despite the standards being traced back to slavery and colonization. Women of Color know that their complexions hold heavy importance in their life, more so than Men of Color. Make-up companies are bias towards white audiences through the use of white models, types of products, and limited availability of diverse shades. Findings from Wilder (2010) are valuable for this study, as I will also be analyzing skin color names and their social implications. This study fills a gap in the literature that investigates other ways skin color bias can exist within the make-up industry.

METHODS

The best way to conduct this study is through an unobtrusive content analysis method. Trochim (2006) distinguished unobtrusive methods as measures that don't require the researcher to intrude in the research context—meaning that the researcher does not participate in the construction of the data to be analyzed. The data collected are the names of colors for only foundation products. The distinction in make-up products is important because foundation is specifically intended to resemble skin color in order to enhance facial complexion. My search included cosmetic make-up lines in both designer and drugstore brands. The distinction to separate drugstore from designer make up is by the price of the make-up—if the price of one product costs more than \$25, I indicated the brand as designer. Additionally, brands found in local grocery and drugstores (such as Loreal, Maybelline, CoverGirl, and Revlon) will be labeled as drugstore brands. I obtained my data by visiting the local San Marcos Ulta Beauty store, local CVS/Walgreens outlets, and online retailers to gather a sample of twenty make-up brands. I annotated the color names according to brand then categorize each color into three shades—Light, Medium, and Dark. After the names were categorized, the color names were critically analyzed. Specifically, I looked how names were displayed, repetition of names,

where repeated names fell in the gradient of color, and symbolism behind repeated color names. Foundation is always displayed from the lightest to darkest color, therefore, my findings are formatted from Light to Medium to Dark within each theme.

FINDINGS

After analyzing over 300 color names, there are three prominent ways in which companies show colorism biases. First, make-up companies use adjectives in their color names to portray different meanings amongst the tones. Secondly, companies rely heavily on foods as descriptions unevenly amongst skin tones. Lastly, companies use make-up color names to objectify women differently across skin tones. Each theme portrays the most favorable depiction of light skin tones, which ultimately affirms that colorism exists in this context.

Use of Adjectives in Color Names to Portray Differing Meanings Amongst Tones

A common practice make-up companies use is pairing an adjective with a color to better describe or name the color—the problem is that some of the adjectives companies employed are not typical words used to describe colors. Words like “light,” and “dark,” are adjectives that are traditionally used to accurately depict a color (i.e. light blue and dark blue are two very different shades of the color blue due to the preceding adjectives). What is problematic is that companies are using adjectives that have virtually no meaning in the context of color. My findings show that the non-color adjectives used to describe skin tones roughly follows this spectrum: fair, pale, cool, light, fresh, classic, nude,

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natural, creamy, medium, warm, tan, rich, spiced, and lastly, deep. These adjectives, rather than describing color, are describing the type of woman that wears the make-up color. These words are problematic because the meanings that are associated with these non-color adjectives are not equally revered across the spectrum of skin colors—especially considering how the spectrum uses almost direct antonyms from one end to other.

These unequal and bias adjectives reveal the engrained racism in the cosmetics industry and beyond. This type of racism isn't the result of an ill-natured, uneducated, prejudice person, but these names are a result of ingrained system of racism in our society. Critical race theorists, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2012), explain that "racism is ordinary...[It is] the way society does business, the common, everyday experience of people of color." (9) These color names are just another example of how racism is so second-nature to Americans that we fail to recognize it until it is analyzed critically.

As seen in the light skin tone shades, common adjectives found in the color names are "classic," "natural," "soft," "fresh," "cool," and "light." As supported in the literature, these adjectives are words that are typically associated with traditional white femininity in juxtaposition to black slave women. Additionally, the words "nude" and "natural" were both used as colors and color adjectives (Maybelline's "Warm Nude" versus "Nude Beige" and NYX Cosmetics' "Creamy Natural" versus Covergirl's "Natural Beige"). What is central to this theme is that adjectives like "nude" and "natural" are most often assigned to light or medium skin tone shades, never dark skin tones. "Nude" and "natural" are particularly poignant names because they do not portray a actual colors—the definitions are literally to be naked and coming from nature. Moreover, the overwhelming use of "classic" in light skin tone color names indicate that light tones have either been around the make-up industry longer or very literally represent the classic image of beauty. To exclusively represent light skin tones as "natural," "nude," and "classic" very plainly insists that dark skin tones are unnatural and not traditionally beautiful. The prominent othering of dark skin tones in this context mirrors how we see light skin and dark skin in our society.

For medium skin tone shades, the use of meaningless, non-color adjectives in the color names are less problematic but still troubling. The primary adjectives found in medium tone color names are "warm," "tan," "golden," and "medium." Generally, The use of these words are only used as comparative terms to slightly darken the light skin color names. For instance, "tan beige" and "golden beige" are the two most reoccurring color names for medium colors—beige being an already established light skin color. The addition of these other adjectives reinforces the idea that white/light skin tones are the primary skin tone in the mainstream cosmetic industry. The medium shades seem to only exist in a realm that was more similar to light tones than to dark

tones. Supported by the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2000), women of medium skin tones exist in a world negotiated between white and Black women. This is yet another example of the ways the make-up industry describes skin tone colors echo how the grander society favors lighter complexions.

For dark skin tones, the meaningless adjectives used to describe light skin tones are not shared for dark skin tones. The most commonly used adjectives for dark skin color names are "spiced" and "deep." Again, the lack of similar adjectives found in the light and medium skin tone names reflects the societal belief that these colors are not as "natural" or "classic" when it comes to women's beauty. In fact, these two words are some of the only adjectives for dark color names. Further, "deep" and "spiced" couldn't be any more opposite than "light" and "creamy"—which are previously noted light skin tone adjectives. As supported by the literature, lightness and fairness are the pillars of white feminine beauty—mostly established in opposition to the imagery of black female slaves (Hill 2002). These make-up color names affirm proof of colorism in the make-up industry by reiterating that dark skin tones are the antithesis of light skin tones, therefore are the antithesis of beauty.

Exotification of Skin via Food Comparisons

Although all shades have their examples of using foods as skin color descriptions, this particular caveat most highlights skin color bias in the make-up industry. Right away, food based color names were not common for light skin colors. The few food based colors consist of foods like "peach," "honey," and "champagne." Coincidentally, these foods represent sweet, simple, and ordinary flavors. Additionally, these foods are conventionally found domestically the Western world. The associations with the foods and flavors do not present themselves as exotic or erotic. Although there is an element of objectification that is present, these names are far less dehumanizing and sexualizing compared to the other shades.

As the spectrum of skin color tones darkens, the use of food names increases in frequency. Amongst the medium shades, "honey," (again) "olive," "cashew," and "caramel," are some of the most common color names depicting food. There is an element of exotification or sexualization when it comes to these names. Women who fall into these skin tones are often sexualized for being exotic (i.e. not white) but not too different to be presented as inherently othered.

The use of food as description is most prevalent in the color names of dark skin tones. It is all too common

to see color names such as “cocoa,” “toffee,” “ginger,” “expresso,” “cappuccino” “chestnut” and “mocha.” In fact, there are very few examples of dark skin tone color names that are not based on food. These color names are not the typically derogative names that Wilder (2008) analyzed (“darky,” “redbone,” “tar baby” etc.); however, the reliance of food for description presents a problematic situation. These foods and drinks present an array of rich, sweet, savory, bitter, exotic, and complex flavors. These flavors allude to a particular association or attitude about the group that is portrayed onto them. If this wasn't the case, then there would've been As previously stated, each skin tone group has examples of being compared to food—but dark women face this issue to a much higher degree. The overwhelming reduction of dark woman's skin tone down to a type of food or drink for consumption is clear fetishization of these women. Again, the lack of regard of how make-up companies describe dark skin is analogous to how the grander Global society feels about dark women. These color names continue to perpetuate and profit from the long standing stereotypes of dark Black women being hyper sexualized objects made for consumption.

Further Objectification of Skin Tones

Comparatively, each color group faces objectification but to varying degrees—similar to the discussion to the use of food as color names. Feminist theorists typically defines sexual objectification as when a person is viewed as a mere body that exists for the pleasure and use of others (Saguy, Quinn, Dovidio, Pratto 2010). Objectification is observed through interpersonal interactions with gazes and comments aimed at women's bodies and frequently seen through the portrayals of women in the media (Saguy et al. 2010). Objectification is an intersectional issue because all women may be objectified but not all are objectified to the same degree or in the same ways. The different ways society objectifies white women versus Women of Color can be observed through make-up color names.

The color names “ivory” and “porcelain” contribute to the objectification of white women. Both color names represent materials that have great value and used in expensive products such as porcelain dolls, fine china, and ivory jewelry. The way these products are treated (with care, protection and great value) is reminiscent to the way white women are treated in society. This observation supports the Hill's (2002) assertion about the white femininity being delicate, fragile, and in need of protection (mostly from Black men).

Notwithstanding the pattern of colorism, medium shades continue to exist between the realms of lightness and darkness. Many of the color names in this category are not dependent on objects. Medium color names are mostly various ways to describe beige or plainly contains the word “medium.” The primary objects (other than food) the are used to portray color are “sand” and “gold” Again, these images give way to luxurious images such as hot tropical beaches and expensive jewelry. The portrayal of these color names lend themselves to the exotification of these skin tones.

Continuing to dark skin tones, the use of food as description is the most prominent form of objectification of Women of Color. Outside of food and drinks, other names that also objectify dark women are “mahogany” and “amber.” These names bear feelings of heaviness and darkness, further alluding that blackness is the antithesis of traditional white femininity. Overall, the oppression due to sexism outweighs racism in this analysis because women of all skin tones cannot escape from sexist objectification. It should also be noted that the variety of foundation colors were not evenly distributed amongst the three skin tones. Most brands (especially drug store brands) had a greater variety of light and medium shades than the variety of dark shades. The designer brands I observed offer a better array and selection of colors from all tones; however, the color names were just as bad as drugstore brands.

CONCLUSION

In order to fix this blatantly racist (and sexist) naming system, I suggest eradicating color names all together. I did come across some companies that had more unique ways of labeling their colors. The brand PHILOSOPHY adopted a straight forward number system that followed

"The use of food as description is the most prominent form of objectification of Women of Color."

the light to dark gradient. Other companies, like Tarte and BECCA, use their color names as details of the hues and undertones for each specific shade ("medium w/ yellow and pink undertones"). With a little creativity, I believe that make-up companies can adopt better and less problematic naming algorithms.

As with any study, there are some limitations to this project. First, there is room to include many more

make-up brands into the study. There is a limited number of designer make up brands; however, there are many hundreds of designer brands out there that I did not include; including Black-owned make-up lines. To further advance this study, the same analysis should be conducted amongst Black-owned make-up brands. There could be a discrepancy in the ways Black make-up entrepreneurs name their skin tones versus national companies that are notoriously known for catering to white clients. Another limitation of the study is simply my own perceptions of skin colors. Additionally, I categorized if each color name qualified as a light, medium, or dark shade. Due to personal judgement, there could have been some colors in the medium shades that could have been categorized as light or dark. These limitations, I believe, do not influence my study enough to diminish my findings, nor do they interfere with the answering of my research question.

In conclusion, evidence of colorism in the make-up industry is right under our noses everyday, quite literally. Wilder was right in her assertion that the way we talk about skin color carries importance to how we feel about skin color. This study uncovered racist and sexist notions that go unnoticed in the everyday lives of women. Not only are women subjected to sexism, racism, and colorism fostered by the make-up industry, they are also the consumers that allow for this industry to profit from socialized and institutionalized inequality. Additionally, a woman's socioeconomic status influences the availability and access to certain make-up lines. Specifically, poor Women of Color have less access to make-up carried in their natural skin tones due to the limited availability of shades in Drugstores.

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