

The Relationship of Skin Tone and Hair to Perceived Beauty among African American University Students

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The impact of skin color in the African American community has been heavily documented. Light-skinned persons are viewed in a more positive manner—as more attractive, more competent and successful, and having greater social status. Perceptions related to African Americans' hair texture have not been studied as systematically, but evidence suggests hair is perceived in a similarly biased manner. The current study examines how skin tone and hair texture are related to perceived beauty among African American college students at a predominantly White university. Findings from surveys of student participants are presented.

For hundreds of years, skin color or skin tone has played a significant role in the lives and social status of African Americans. “Black history provides considerable evidence that the skin color of African Americans has exerted powerful and persistent influences on societal attitudes toward and treatment of Black persons—within both White and Black cultures” (Bond & Cash, 1992, 879). The treatment of African Americans created for some a skin color bias or made them color conscious. Skin color determined how African Americans were treated and what jobs they were given. Slaves who were considered lighter-skinned were given jobs and chores that were more respectable inside the house, such as cooking, cleaning, and attending to the children. On the other hand, the darker-complexioned slaves were given more menial jobs, such as working the fields, picking cotton, and laboring manually. After the abolition of slavery, the impact of skin color influenced the lives of African Americans in reference to status and achievement. Social clubs were segregated during this time, which led some prosperous African Americans to organize “blue vein” societies in the early 1900s. They were called this because, to join, the individuals had

to be light enough for their blue veins to show through their skin. The requirements to become a member of the club were, thus, certain Caucasoid features. There were other tests that potential members had to pass in order to be accepted into this elite group. An African American had to be lighter than a “paper bag” and be able to pass the “comb test” for what was called “good hair.” To pass this test, the person had to have hair texture straight enough for a comb to pass through it easily (Bond & Cash, 1992).

The privileged treatment given to African Americans who had light skin and other Caucasoid features suggested to many Blacks that “the more they physically conformed to the White, majority standard of beauty, the more rewarding their lives would be” (Gatewood, 1988, 15). However, there was a cultural as well as political revolution during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s for many Black Americans. The leaders of the movement wanted to show that “Black is beautiful.” This movement was a step in the right direction to stir awareness, but it brought about little change in the traditionally deep-rooted values of beauty of Western society (Bond & Cash, 1992).

Research Literature

The research in the area of skin color and its implications has spanned the 1960s to the present time. One study conducted in the 1960s showed that a lighter complexion became less uniformly desirable, dark skin remained undesirable, and brown was the hue desired by many African Americans. In the mid-1970s, when it came to mate selection, light-skinned Black females were still favored over their darker counterparts, “and darker females of lower socioeconomic status were less likely than their lighter counterparts to marry Black men of higher status” (Goering, 1971, 235). At present in our society, the implication of skin color is evident in the varied messages received by many Black Americans. Many African Americans are taught at an early age to be proud of their heritage and skin color, but many still remain “color struck” or color conscious. This means that they attend and respond differently to shades of dark skin (Clark & Clark, 1980; Neal, 1988; Neal & Wilson, 1989). These differing views foster ambivalence about having Caucasoid traits among African Americans.

A study by Thompson and Keith in 2000 described the importance of skin tone for evaluations of self-worth and self-competence. Their research asserts the possible disadvantages and emotional pain of being darker-skinned. It implies that skin color, not achievement, determines identity and attitudes about the self. The results confirmed the prevalence of the

idea that if African Americans conformed to White standards of beauty, their lives would be more rewarding and successful.

The social advantages afforded to persons of light complexion seem to continue today. “At the structural level, studies have noted that skin color is an important determinant of educational and occupational gain” (Thompson & Keith, 2000, 337). The Thompson and Keith study notes that the effect of skin color on earnings of “lighter” and “darker” Blacks is as great as the effect of race on the earnings of White vs. Black people. Skin color is highly correlated with other phenotypic features – eye color, hair texture, broadness of nose, and fullness of lips. European features are all accorded higher status both within and beyond the African American community. These European traits function along with color in complex ways to “shape opportunities, norms regarding attractiveness, self-concept, and overall body image” (Thompson & Keith, 2000, 340). The authors of this study also declare that their findings indicate that women with more Caucasoid features are perceived as more attractive to the opposite sex and are more successful in their love lives than women with more Negroid features (Thompson & Keith, 2000). Dark-skinned women are seen as occupying the bottom rung of the social ladder, being least marriageable, and having the fewest options for higher education and career advancement.

A preponderance of colloquial terms are used to describe various African American shades of skin. These terms include dark skinned, brown skinned, light skinned, ebony, chocolate, fair skinned, and café au lait, among others. In their seminal study of African Americans and skin tone variance, Keith and Herring (1991) revealed that African Americans achieve different levels of success regarding occupational prestige, educational attainment, and family income. They suggested that African Americans operate in a highly stratified socioeconomic structure. Furthermore, they compiled strong empirical evidence to support the explanation that the stratification might be accounted for primarily by the various skin tones existent within the race (Keith & Herring, 1991).

The “what is beautiful is good” stereotype has created a “halo” effect for light-complexioned persons. This means that regardless of their deeds and actions they are viewed as good just because of how they look.

Hair texture. There is little to no research documented about the implications of hair texture within the African American population, although common knowledge and subjective evidence suggest it influences perceptions. Akintunde (1999) explains the notion that skin and hair closer to European style are more desirable attributes is a dominant theme underlying the African American experience. The phrase “light skinned with

good hair” is still commonplace within the African American vernacular. The implication of skin color and hair has been documented when referring to “light skinned with good hair,” but hair texture has apparently not yet been researched.

Research Question

As an addition to the research literature, the current study examined the element of hair separately and along with skin color. The primary research question was: Do skin color and hair texture have any relationship to the level of perceived beauty for African American college students at The University of Alabama?

Method

A 28-question survey was administered on skin color and hair; fifteen questions pertained to skin color, 13 questions to hair. (See survey in Appendix A.) A survey table was set up in the lobby of Rose Towers, which is a dormitory at The University of Alabama, on July 21 and July 22, 2005 from 10am to 3pm. These hours were chosen because there is more student traffic at this time, so more students were available to participate in the study. A sign on the table stated the research topic and the program that was sponsoring the research. The investigator sat at the table to administer the surveys. The participants were given a survey, a scantron sheet, and a pencil to record their answers. They were asked to read carefully and follow the directions on the survey. An informed consent form (see Appendix B) was presented with the survey for participants to read and sign before they began. Once the materials were completed, the informed consent form was put into a separate folder that was later sealed. The survey was put into a folder to be reused, since no answers were marked on it. Any African American student who came by the survey table in Rose Towers during the hours of research and was willing to participate was given a survey. As an incentive, the participants were given their choice of candy upon completion of the survey. The 28-question survey took the participant approximately 15 minutes to finish.

At the end of each day of data collection, the scantron sheets were taken to UA's Testing Services to be scored. The box of surveys along with the informed consent forms and scantron sheets were stored in a locked cabinet in the office of my faculty mentor, Dr. Jerome Rosenberg. After the research was completed, the informed consent forms and scantron sheets were destroyed.

Results

Forty-two African American students participated in the survey: 64% were male, 36% female; 74% were between the ages of 18 and 21. See Appendix C, Table 1, which lists all their responses to items 4-28.

Seventy-four percent of the participants said they thought that there is still a specific shade of skin that is considered beautiful or attractive (item 12), and 76% said that there is such a thing as “good hair” (item 16).

When looking at influences of color bias, 83% said that they thought the media has affected the issue of color consciousness among African Americans (item 15). It was shocking to find that 83% said that they have experienced a situation in which their skin color helped or harmed them in some way (item 6), along with 67% saying that their skin tone affects their life now (item 5). Forty-eight percent said that having a “good texture” of hair makes a person more attractive (item 17), and 74% said that someone has described another person to them as being “light skinned with good hair (item 11).” Eighty-one percent said that hair texture is more important to women (item 18), and 62% said that the kind of hair they have impacts how others perceive them (item 25).

Several interesting contrasts and similarities between men and women were observed:

Males	Females	
93%	47%	felt that having “good hair” was important.
74%	93%	believed that hair texture and length were more important for females.
33%	7%	considered ethnic or natural hair less attractive.
18%	40%	felt that skin color made a difference in attractiveness.
26%	7%	said that they were only attracted to light complexioned people.
63%	47%	thought skin color was more important for females.
70%	80%	felt that lighter complexion was more attractive.
44%	13%	considered that the length of the hair made a difference in attractiveness.
56%	73%	felt that hair impacts how others perceive them.
52%	40%	answered that hair was important in who they would marry or date.

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that skin color and hair texture play a significant role in the lives of African American college students at The University of Alabama. Students were able to show that within the African American community there still exists a color bias. The majority of the participants also confirmed the notion that having “good hair” is more attractive whether the individual is male or female. It was not surprising to find that a large number of participants felt that the many forms of media influence the issue of color consciousness within the African American community. The media shows many African Americans, especially women, with a light complexion and “good hair,” which communicates the standard of beauty.

The impact of skin color in everyday life was evident in the percentage of participants who had experienced a situation in which their skin color helped or harmed them in some way, which was in the capacity of their career, professional/job promotions, educational experiences, and opportunities. This illustrates that skin color continues to play a role in the livelihood of African Americans, as it has since the time of slavery. The study also showed that hair texture has a significant part in how others perceive the students. Whether the participants had curly, straight, braided, twisted, or dreaded hair, they realized that they were being judged and viewed in different ways due to that element.

The males who felt that skin color was more important for females, also felt that lighter complexion was more attractive. Most of the men who thought having “good hair” was important also felt that hair would impact who they would marry or date.

Limitations

Time was a limitation in this study in that the research was conducted during a summer term, when not many students were available on campus. If the study had been performed during the fall or spring semesters, the participant pool would have probably been larger.

This study implemented a survey to tap the views and opinions of African American students on campus, but a focus group might have been a more effective methodology. A focus group may have been able to explore the feelings and experiences of the participants more fully. The subjects of skin color and hair type are such complex issues in the African American community that it would have been beneficial to study the responses of the participants in an environment in which they could freely express their thoughts.

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Appendix A

Skin Color/Hair Survey

Directions: Please read each question carefully and indicate to the best of your ability, on the scantron sheet that is provided, whether you agree with each item. Mark A for True or Yes, B for False or No, and C for Maybe.

Skin Color Survey

- 1) Male or Female (A=Male, B=Female)
- 2) Are you between the ages of 18 and 21?
- 3) Or are you between the ages of 22 and 25?
- 4) Can you remember your earliest memory of discovering what skin tone/skin color you are?
- 5) Do you think your skin tone affects your life now (your career, professional/job promotions, educational experiences/opportunities)?
- 6) Have you ever experienced a situation where your skin color helped or harmed you in some way?
- 7) Did the skin color of your significant other (husband/wife/partner) have any bearing on why you chose that person?
- 8) If you do not yet have one, does the skin tone of a potential mate have any bearing on whether or not you chose that person?
- 9) Are you only attracted to light complexioned people?
- 10) Are you only attracted to dark complexioned people?
- 11) Has anyone ever described someone to you as being "light skinned with good hair"?
- 12) In the African American community do you think that there is still a specific shade of skin that is considered beautiful or attractive?

- 13) When it comes to attractiveness or beauty, do you think skin color is more important for males?
- 14) When it comes to attractiveness or beauty, do you think skin color is more important for females?
- 15) Do you think the media (TV, music videos, and film) affects the issue of color consciousness with African Americans?

Hair Texture Survey

- 16) Is there such thing as good hair?
- 17) Does having “good texture” hair make you more attractive?
- 18) Is hair texture more important to women?
- 19) Is hair texture more important to men?
- 20) Are natural or ethnic hair styles less attractive?
- 21) Are natural or ethnic hair styles more attractive?
- 22) When you perceive beauty or attractiveness, does it matter whether the hair is real or synthetic?
- 23) Regardless of whether the hair is “straight” or “nappy,” does the length make a difference in attractiveness?
- 24) Is hair an important feature in deciding who you will date/marry?
- 25) Does the kind of hair you have impact how others perceive you?
- 26) Is relaxed or straight hair more attractive?
- 27) Is relaxed or straight hair less attractive?
- 28) Are issues of hair texture in the African American community different today than they were 50 years ago?

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by faculty mentor, Dr. Jerome Rosenberg and Stefanie R. Snider, from the University of Alabama's McNair Scholars Program. We hope to learn whether skin tone and hair texture have a relationship to beauty in the African American community at a predominantly White university.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked questions about skin tone and hair texture to learn how these two variables affect the notion of beauty among the African American population at The University of Alabama. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The information collected from the surveys will be used for research purposes only.

There are no apparent risks associated with this study. By participating in this research you will be helping to add to the knowledge of color consciousness and the implications that go along with that. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and there will not be any identification of participants.

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Alabama in any way. By taking part in the study you are expected to answer all questions truthfully and to the best of your ability.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Dr. Jerome Rosenberg at (205) 348-8414, Dr. Nancy Campbell at (205) 348-0580, or Stefanie R. Snider at (205) 657-5030. Dr. Rosenberg is the primary contact person for this study.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, and that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty.

Signature

Date

Appendix C

Participant Responses to Survey

Table 1. Number and percentages of participants selecting alternative answers A, B, or C to survey items 4 - 28.

	A	B	C	Total
4	23 (55%)	19 (45%)	0	42 (100%)
5	28 (67%)	11 (26%)	3 (7%)	42 (100%)
6	35 (83%)	6 (14%)	1 (2%)	42 (100%)
7	11 (26%)	29 (69%)	2 (5%)	42 (100%)
8	10 (24%)	29 (69%)	3 (7%)	42 (100%)
9	8 (19%)	31 (74%)	3 (7%)	42 (100%)
10	7 (17%)	33 (79%)	2 (5%)	42 (100%)
11	31 (74%)	11 (26%)	0	42 (100%)
12	31 (74%)	9 (21%)	2 (5%)	42 (100%)
13	10 (24%)	31 (74%)	1 (2%)	42 (100%)
14	24 (57%)	16 (38%)	2 (5%)	42 (100%)
15	35 (83%)	7 (17%)	0	42 (100%)
16	32 (76%)	9 (21%)	1 (2%)	42 (100%)
17	20 (48%)	20 (48%)	2 (5%)	42 (100%)
18	34 (81%)	5 (12%)	3 (7%)	42 (100%)
19	10 (24%)	29 (69%)	3 (7%)	42 (100%)
20	10 (24%)	31 (74%)	1 (2%)	42 (100%)
21	26 (62%)	13 (31%)	3 (7%)	42 (100%)
22	15 (36%)	25 (60%)	2 (5%)	42 (100%)
23	14 (33%)	26 (62%)	2 (5%)	42 (100%)
24	20 (48%)	21 (50%)	1 (2%)	42 (100%)
25	26 (62%)	14 (33%)	2 (5%)	42 (100%)
26	20 (48%)	20 (48%)	2 (5%)	42 (100%)
27	6 (14%)	35 (83%)	1 (2%)	42 (100%)
28	33 (79%)	9 (21%)	0	42 (100%)