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# Cues of Colorism: The Psychological, Sociocultural, and Developmental Differences between Light-skinned and Dark-skinned African-Americans

Tasia M. Pinkston

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Cues of Colorism: The Psychological, Sociocultural, and Developmental Differences  
Between Light-Skinned and Dark-Skinned

African-Americans

by

Tasia M. Pinkston

(Under the direction of C. Thresa Yancey)

ABSTRACT

Skin color biases, henceforth referred to as colorism, are the biased judgments, attitudes and behaviors toward an individual based on the lightness or darkness of their skin. Available research on the topic has examined a select group of variables, such as mate selection, self-esteem and perceived attractiveness. However, there is no single study on differences between African-Americans across several domains, including their psychological (skin color satisfaction and self-esteem), sociocultural (media influence on appearance and discriminatory events), and developmental (ethnic identity) well-being. Moreover, there is no research on differences in these variables between African-Americans reared in rural versus non-rural areas. To examine this, 218 African-American participants were asked to complete several measures assessing their perceived skin color, rural status, and the psychological, sociocultural, and developmental variables mentioned above. Results showed that there were no differences in these variables between light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans and those reared in rural versus non-rural areas. Results did indicate gender differences on skin color satisfaction and an interaction of skin color and rural status on media influence on appearance. The current findings suggest that despite the pervasiveness of colorism, there may be protective cultural factors present that help African-Americans overcome some of the adverse effects of skin color biases and discrimination such as racial socialization, self-esteem, and ethnic identity. Future research should focus on

exploring these protective factors and the development of skin color discrimination assessments.

**KEYWORDS:** Colorism, Skin color biases, Rural status, Stereotyping, Discrimination

CUES OF COLORISM: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIOCULTURAL, AND  
DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LIGHT-SKINNED AND DARK-SKINNED  
AFRICAN-AMERICANS

by

TASIA M. PINKSTON

B.A., St. John's University, 2007

M.A., City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2010

M.S., Georgia Southern University, 2013

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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STATESBORO, GEORGIA

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by

TASIA M. PINKSTON

Major Professor: C. Thresa Yancey  
Committee: Jeff Klibert  
Rebecca Ryan

Electronic Version Approved:  
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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends, whose love and support are immeasurable and have guided me through this journey.

To my mother, Dara Pinkston-Scott, words can never express the gratitude and appreciation for your love, support, and sacrifices. Your strength, determination, beauty, kindness, fierceness, and resilience have shown me what it means to be phenomenal. I hope to lead my life with at least half the grace and courage you have led yours with. Simply put, without you I could not and would not be the woman I am today.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vii
LIST OF TABLES .....	x
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of Problem .....	1
Background and Significance.....	1
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
Historical Overview of Colorism .....	4
Colorism and Beauty .....	6
Colorism and Media .....	8
Colorism, Racial Discrimination, and Racial Identity .....	11
Colorism and Racial Discrimination .....	11
Racial Identity .....	12
Psychological Implications of Colorism .....	16
Colorism in Rural Areas.....	19
Hypotheses .....	21
Specific Aim #1 .....	22
Specific Aim #2.....	23
Role of Gender and Ethnic Identity.....	23
Chapter 3: METHODS .....	25
Participants .....	25
Materials.....	25
Skin Color Assessment Procedure (SCAP).....	25
Skin Color Satisfaction Scale (SCSS) .....	26
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE).....	27
Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Scale 3 (SATAQ-3).....	28
The Schedule of Racist Events (SRE).....	30

Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM).....	31
Demographics (DQ) .....	32
Procedures .....	33
Chapter 4: RESULTS .....	34
Descriptive Analysis .....	34
Skin Color and Rural Status .....	34
Gender .....	35
Skin Color, Rural Status, and Ethnic Identity .....	35
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION .....	37
Overview .....	37
Skin Color and Rural Status .....	37
Interaction of Skin Color and Rural Status.....	40
Gender .....	41
Skin Color, Rural Status, and Ethnic Identity .....	42
Limitations .....	43
Conclusions .....	44
REFERENCES .....	47

LIST OF TABLES

	PAGE
Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Measures Across Skin Color and Rural Status.....	62
Table 2: Test of Between-Subjects Effects for Measures Across Rural Status and Skin Color....	63
Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for SATAQ:IG Across Skin Color and Rural Status .....	64
Table 4: Tests of Between Subjects Effects for Gender Across Dependent Variables .....	65
Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Gender Across Dependent Variables .....	66
Table 6: Tests of Between Subjects Effects for Ethnic Identity Across Skin Color and Rural Status.....	67

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Statement of Problem**

Previous research on colorism (skin color bias) has only explored its effects on a select group of variables including perceived attractiveness, mate selection, and self-esteem. However, there is a dearth of research on how psychological, sociocultural, and developmental variables differ between light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans. In addition, the research examining the differences in these variables between African-Americans reared in non-rural and rural areas is non-existent. Research that is available has ignored the distinct and culturally salient events that African-Americans may be experiencing in rural areas. Subsequently, the aims of the current study are to 1) determine if psychological (skin color satisfaction and self-esteem), and sociocultural (media influence on appearance and discriminatory experiences) variables differ between light-skinned versus dark-skinned African-Americans, 2) determine if these variables differ between African-Americans reared in non-rural and rural areas, and 3) explore the role of gender and ethnic identity across these variables. This research identifies the prevalence of colorism in African Americans, and can lead to an increased cultural understanding of African-Americans residing in rural areas.

### **Background and Significance**

Skin color bias, henceforth referred to as colorism, is the “tendency to perceive or behave toward members of a racial category based on the lightness or darkness of their skin” (Maddox & Gray, 2002, p. 250). This definition of colorism is conceptualized as being both biased attitudes (prejudice) or judgments (stereotype) and behaviors (discrimination). While prejudice and discrimination always carry negative connotations, stereotypes can be perceived as negative or positive, depending on the context (Dovidio, Birgham, & Gaertner, 1996). This adds to the

complexity of how colorism affects African-Americans by suggesting that certain biases may be perceived as negative and/or positive, depending on the skin color of the person.

Colorism has been a controversial, stratifying, and salient topic within the African-American community since slavery (Robinson & Wade, 1995; Wade & Bielitz, 2005). Studies have often focused on the historical and cultural context of colorism within African-American communities (Hall, 1992; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Harvey, 1995; Neal & Wilson, 1989), and some research has illustrated the effects of colorism on African-Americans' psychological and sociological well-being; however, research illustrating differences in these effects on African-Americans reared in non-rural versus rural areas is non-existent. For example, historically the rural South has been a racial hotbed for African-Americans. Events such as segregation and the Jim Crow era were pivotal in creating race-related tensions between African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans in the rural South (Glaser, 1994). Moreover, African-Americans were seen as sub-class citizens. African-Americans whose skin color and phenotypes (nose, lips, and hair texture) closely resembled Caucasian-Americans were less susceptible to racism and discrimination (Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001). As a result, colorism may have also increased, positioning light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans against each other.

Subsequently, the effects of colorism in rural areas, like the rural South, may be more prevalent than in other geographical regions. Research exploring these effects can increase mental health practitioners' cultural understandings of their African-American clients, especially within a rural community. Moreover, research examining psychological, sociocultural, and developmental differences between African-Americans reared in non-rural and rural communities can add to the limited amount of information addressing skin color in therapy, and African-Americans reared in rural areas (Harvey, 1995). In addition, the current research can

provide a better conceptualization and understanding of individuals' biases and how they impact others.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Historical Overview of Colorism**

Colorism has been a polarizing topic within the African-American community since the time of slavery in the United States. During slavery, skin color was a discriminatory characteristic among African-American slaves and their Caucasian slave owners (Hall, 1995; Robinson & Wade, 1995; Wade & Bielitz, 2005). Light-skinned or “mulatto” slaves were often given coveted positions such as house servant, craftsman, and skilled laborers (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987; Wade & Bielitz, 2005). Light-skinned slaves also demanded a higher price on auction blocks (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Moreover, children of women slaves and White slave owners were often provided more privileges, such as an education, and even freedom due to their fair skin and White ancestry. Subsequently, light-skinned African-Americans were often seen as “genetically superior” to dark-skinned African-Americans because of their physical resemblance to European-Americans and the perception of shared ancestry (Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001).

Discrimination based upon skin color continued after the end of slavery (Keith & Herring, 1991). Status and affluence in the African-American community was correlated with skin color. Those who were light-skinned, “yellow,” or “red-bone” were at the top of the hierarchy, while dark-skinned, “charcoal,” or “blue-black” African-Americans were thought to be at the bottom (Wilder, 2010). Light-skinned African-Americans were perceived as being able to better acculturate in society, and were provided more advances and opportunities due to their kinship to Caucasian slave owners (Hughes & Hertel, 1990). Being “bright” (light-skinned) was usually preferred over being dark (Keith & Herring, 1991). Skin color was soon used as an exclusionary criterion in elite African-American social groups, and brought about the development of the “brown-bag test” and the “hair-comb test.” African-Americans lighter than a

brown-bag and whose hair could easily be combed were granted admission to elite and affluent African-American social groups (Bond & Cash, 1992; Lake, 2003; Okazawa-Rey et al., 1987).

Other aspects of appearance also began to influence and affect this stratification.

African-Americans whose physical features (lips, nose, and body shape) resembled European-Americans were thought to be more attractive and appealing than those whose features were seen as being “too Black” or “negroid” (Hall, 1995; Wade & Bielitz, 2005). Hair texture was also used as a discriminatory tool. African-Americans with White ancestry often had what was perceived to be “good hair,” meaning that it was straighter and more manageable than African-Americans whose hair was tightly coiled, coarse, or “nappy” (Thompson & Keith, 2001).

Even in recent decades, skin color is still seen as an influential factor in mate selection, socio-economic status, and education. Hughes and Hertel’s (1990) research expanded on this notion. First, the authors found that light-skinned African-Americans were more likely to be married than dark skinned African-Americans. Second, they found that light-skinned African-Americans were more likely to be educated and have higher occupational positions compared to dark-skinned African-Americans. In addition, these differences were comparable to the education and occupation disparity between African-Americans and Caucasian Americans. Lastly, they found that light-skinned African-Americans were more likely to report a higher socioeconomic status compared to dark-skinned African-Americans. The authors posited that their results may be an outcome of the pervasiveness of colorism in the African-American community and biases toward dark-skinned African Americans.

Keith and Herring (1991) reported similar findings. The sample used in their study was from the 1979 - 1980 National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA); which collected data from 2,107 African-Americans living in the United States. When looking at educational attainment,



they found that dark skinned African-Americans on average achieved 10.2 years of education, while light-skinned African-Americans achieved 12.2 years. They also found that about 10% of dark-skinned African-Americans reported working in professional or technical occupational positions compared to around 30% of light-skinned African Americans. Lastly, the authors found there were significant differences between dark-skinned and light-skinned African Americans' personal and family income. Specifically, light-skinned African Americans' income was between 50-65% higher when compared to dark-skinned African-Americans.

Though colorism is thought to be an issue that affects all African-Americans, it has had more adverse effects on the development and self-image of African-American women as compared to their male counterparts (Falconer & Neville; 2000; Hall, 1995; Hunter, 1998; Hunter 2002; Robinson and Ward; 1995). As with most women in society, physical attractiveness and self-image are also aspects related to the success, status, and self-worth of African-American women (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Stephens & Few, 2007b). Many of the ideals are promoted by the media and how it portrays what is considered "beautiful" (Fears, 1998). Mass media's portrayal of beauty is often represented by the majority culture: Caucasian or European American women (Boyd-Franklin, 1991; Weitz, 2001). Translated to the African-American community, light or medium skinned women are often portrayed and admired more than dark-skinned women. This preference is also portrayed by cosmetic and hair care companies that advertise bleaching and hair straightening products to African-American women (Blay, 2011).

### **Colorism and Beauty**

Colorism is intrinsically linked to beauty and beauty standards due to shared focus on skin color, and other potentially related phenotypes such as hair texture, nose and lip shape (Hall,

1995; Weitz, 2001). Moreover, both concepts can lead to discrimination against individuals who do not fit the perpetuated ideals of appearance. For example, beauty and attractiveness is often equated with self-worth and self-esteem, particularly for women (Falconer & Neville, 2000). Moreover, the more beautiful or more attractive a person is deemed the more socially desirable they appear (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Therefore, adherence to a perceived standard of beauty may be crucial to an individual's self-worth and overall quality of life (Weitz, 2001).

Adherence to a beauty standard may be even more advantageous to minorities like African-Americans who are often discriminated against due to their ethnicity (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Due to this discrimination, perceived attractiveness may be valued, and adherence to a beauty standard may be pursued because of perceived benefits. Unfortunately, expectations and standards of beauty are often created by the majority group, who differ genetically and phenotypically from African-Americans (Wade & Bielitz, 2005). For example, the standard of beauty depicted in the United States is often fair skinned, Caucasian, thin, and with long, straight hair (Weitz, 2001). For African-American women who have coarse, short hair and darker skin, pursuing the majority's standard of beauty may be expensive, difficult, unsuccessful, and/or distressing (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Moreover, it may lead to dissatisfaction with their appearance and skin color. However, some of this distress may be lower or alleviated for light-skinned African-Americans. It may be even less distressing for light-skinned African-Americans who possess phenotypes similar to Caucasians (Bond & Cash, 1992; Weitz, 2001). Consequently, these light-skinned African-Americans may be afforded the benefits associated with perceived attractiveness. This may be the reason why some research has shown that light-skinned African-Americans have more prestigious occupations and higher education than dark-

skinned African-Americans, and are perceived by other African-Americans as more attractive (Frisby, 2006; Hall, 1995; Hughes & Hertel, 1990).

Research has also shown that attractive individuals are typically rated as more successful, pleasant, and intelligent compared to individuals who are deemed unattractive (Langlois et al., 2000; Umberson & Hughes, 1987). This may explain why light-skinned African-Americans are more likely to get married compared to dark-skinned African-Americans (Hughes & Hertel, 1990). Due to light-skinned African-Americans being perceived as more attractive, they may also be viewed as more successful, pleasant, and intelligent, thus impacting their mate selection and likelihood of marriage.

Due to the strong influence of the majority's standard of beauty and African-American's minority status, it is posited that the adoption and internalization of Caucasian beauty standards may be viewed as advantageous. Moreover, the benefits and opportunities afforded to those who are perceived as being attractive may be more psychologically and socially beneficial. However, adherence to the standard of fair skin, straight hair, and thin shape may be difficult for African-Americans whose phenotypes are starkly different. For African-Americans whose phenotypes are similar to Caucasians (i.e., light-skin, straighter hair), their adherence to the majority's standard of beauty may be easier. Subsequently, the skin color satisfaction of dark-skinned African-Americans may be significantly lower than that of light-skinned African-Americans.

### **Colorism and the Media**

Skin color preferences have also been portrayed in advertising and music (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009; Stephens & Few, 2007a; Strutton & Lumpkin, 1993; Watson, Thorton & Engelland, 2010). Moreover, these media outlets have created strict and damaging notions of gender roles in the African-American community (Stephens & Few, 2007b). For example,

research has found that African-American adolescents have developed and internalized several derogatory sexual schemas of African-American women, such as Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Momma (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). These schemas negatively characterize African-American women as promiscuous, materialistic, confrontational, violent, submissive, defiant, or ignorant, respectively. These schemas are adopted due to values and images portrayed through hip-hop music (Conrad et al., 2009; Stephens & Fews, 2007a). Consequently, with such a strong emphasis on sexuality, these media-driven ideas of how African-American women should behave, appear, and be treated by the opposite sex may influence their beliefs about their appearance.

Products and merchandise aimed at African-Americans have also perpetuated skin color biases by frequently utilizing actors who have light-skin (Fears, 1998; Watson et al., 2010). Although the “black revolution” of the 1960s fought against colorism and skin color biases, advertisements have continued to favor African-American models with Caucasoid features over models with Negroid features (Strutton & Lumpkin, 1993). The use of light-skinned actors and models may be due to multiple factors. First, using actors and models who are light-skinned may allow advertisers to market their products to more cultures and ethnicities. For example, a single model can simultaneously target African-Americans, Caucasians, Hispanic-Americans, and Asian-Americans due to the shared standard of beauty (Hunter, 2007; Jha & Adelman, 2009). Secondly, for products that are geared directly to African-Americans use of light-skinned models may trigger biases for lighter skin, thereby increasing the sense of need for the product. Although the former may be considered a cost-effective approach (hiring one racially ambiguous actor, rather than several), the latter aim perpetuates negative stereotypes and biases of skin color within the African-American community (Watson, et al., 2010). However, both of these practices

illustrate the preference for lighter skin that media and advertising promulgates. Consequently, these messages may be internalized by African-Americans, thus influencing perceptions of their appearance and subsequently a host of other factors.

Music has also been found to espouse skin color preferences within African-Americans. One such genre of music is hip-hop. Also known as rap, hip-hop was born in the 1970s as a rebellious and creative outlet for African-American youth (Alridge & Stewart, 2005). Since its inception, hip-hop has become a culturally significant phenomenon for the African-American community. However, it has been met with criticism due to its sometimes negative messages (Conrad et al., 2009). Specifically, it has been accused of embodying, influencing, and perpetuating skin color biases, sexual scripts or schemas in both men and women, and negative personal values in African-Americans (Conrad et al., 2009; Stephens & Few, 2007a; Stephens & Few, 2007b). In addition, hip-hop music videos have been found to exacerbate these messages through their images. Conrad et al. (2009) conducted a content analysis of over 100 hip-hop music videos and found that several themes relating to skin color, facial characteristics, and gender roles emerged. Specifically, they found that African-American women were often sexualized and placed in stereotypic gender roles. Moreover, African-American women in the videos were more likely to be portrayed using the majority's standard of beauty, specifically by having light skin, thin noses and lips, and straight and long hair. It is important to note that the effects of such biases may be exacerbated because they are espoused by other African-Americans. Moreover, since African-American men are more prevalent in hip-hop music videos, the emergent themes can convey harmful messages of mate selection to African-American women. One such message may be that women who have light skin, thinner noses, and straighter hair will be given more attention and admiration than those who do not (Stephens & Few,

2007a). African-Americans who are influenced by these messages may be more likely to have negative attitudes about their appearance and perceived attractiveness.

Although research has examined the influence of the media on body satisfaction and perceived attractiveness in African-Americans (Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Perkins, 1996), there is currently no research on the influence of media on colorism and skin color satisfaction. This may be extremely important given the skin color preferences espoused in media. In addition, there is currently no research examining how and if media portrayals of skin color preferences affect African-Americans' attitudes about their appearance. Given the preference for lighter skin in media and hip-hop music, light-skinned African-Americans may be less affected by its influence, since they have the ideal skin color. Conversely, dark-skinned African-Americans may be more negatively affected by media influences because they are portrayed less favorably.

### **Colorism, Racial Discrimination, and Racial Identity**

#### **Colorism and Racial Discrimination**

Racial discrimination is defined as the “practices and actions of dominant racial and ethnic groups that have a differential and negative impact on subordinate racial and ethnic groups” (Broman, Mavaddat, & Hsu, 2000, p. 165). It can include being called derogatory terms or being discriminated against in various settings or environments (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). As with racial discrimination, colorism can occur in various settings, and include derogatory terms (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Wilder, 2010). Unfortunately, research on the frequency and effects of colorism with/on African-Americans is limited. However, an examination of racial discrimination of African-Americans may lend itself to the conceptualization of how colorism may impact this racial group.

Racial discrimination has been found to occur in various settings, including academia and business (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003; Evans & Herr, 1994; Pager & Shepherd, 2008; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). For example, researchers have found that Caucasians are hired more frequently than African-Americans, even when controlling for education and occupational experience (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003). In one of the few studies examining colorism in the job setting, Harrison and Thomas (2009) found there was an overall preference for light-skinned African-American applicants and that they were recommended for hire more often than dark-skinned African-Americans. Racial discrimination also occurs within schools and academics. African-American adolescents and college students who perceive racial discrimination (such as expectations of low academic achievement and criminality) in school reported being socially and psychologically effected by the stereotypes and biases about their race and gender (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003; Sellers et al., 2006). Due to this, African-Americans may be susceptible to the threat of being judged and treated stereotypically. This may lead to the self-fulfillment of the stereotypes and increased incidents of racial discrimination (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995). This also aligns with the theory of stereotype threat (for more see Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Psychologically, these biases can be related to higher levels of stress, depression, and feelings of self-doubt and frustration in African-Americans. Socially, racial discrimination may lead to African-Americans feeling isolated, disregarded, and incompetent (Breland, 1998).

### **Racial Identity**

Defined as “a person’s beliefs or attitudes about her or his own race” (Parham & Helms, 1981, p. 251), racial identity is a salient developmental process for individuals, especially those of color. Several models of racial identity have been developed, such as Cross’ (1995) Black

Racial Identity Model for African-Americans. Cross (1995) posited that racial identity in African-Americans develops across five stages, in which African-Americans tackle the acceptance, rejection, and unification of their cultural attitudes and beliefs. The first stage, *pre-encounter*, is when African-Americans look toward Caucasians for acceptance and approval. Their experiences are marked with a “pro-white/anti-black” attitude (Coard et al., 2001, p. 2258). The next stage is *encounter*. In this stage the individual begins to challenge previously held ideas and beliefs about Caucasians and the majority culture. This stage may be precipitated by a racially or culturally provoking event or experience. The third stage is *immersion-emersion*. This stage is characterized by a “pro-black” attitude, in which the individual completely rejects the worldview held in the pre-encounter stage. *Internalization* is the fourth stage. In this stage the individual has developed a more holistic view of African-American and Caucasian cultures. They have a more secure sense of self, and are able to identify with both cultures. The fifth and final stage is *internalization-commitment*. Although the fourth stage, internalization, is primarily a cognitive stage, in which perspective shifts, internalization-commitment is characterized by behavioral changes. Individuals in this stage may be more involved in interracial relationships and social groups.

Research using Cross’ (1995) model and other ethnic identity models have found that African-Americans’ racial identity development is an extremely significant process, which can buffer or exacerbate sociological and psychological experiences (Coard et al., 2001; Parham & Helms, 1981; Parham & Helms, 1985; Phinney et al., 1997; Sellers et al., 2006; Smith et al., 1999). African-Americans with higher levels of racial identity (sense of belongingness, ethnic exploration, and commitment) were found to have higher levels of self-esteem and perceived academic achievement, compared to African-Americans with lower levels of racial identity



(Phinney et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1999). Racial identity has also been found to be a protective factor against criminality and substance use in African-Americans and other minority groups (Caldwell et al., 2004; Townsend, & Belgrave, 2000).

It is posited that racial identity development is initiated in response to cultural conflicts that create dissonance between the individual's in-group and out-group environments (Plummer, 1995). In African-Americans, this crisis may occur the first time they perceive racial discrimination, or the first time that they realize they are different from the majority group. Racial identity development typically occurs when the individual is in adolescence (Cross, 1995; Plummer, 1995); however, the initiation of the development and advancement through identity stages may vary depending on the context the African-American is in (Harvey, LaBeach, Pridgen, & Gocial, 2005; Spurgeon & Myers, 2010).

Experiences of colorism or perceived skin color preferences may also initiate identity development in African-Americans. The first time that African-Americans become aware of skin color biases and stereotypes, or experience discrimination related to their skin color, can be conceptualized as a cultural conflict, sparking their identity formation. Due to similarities between colorism and racial discrimination, perceived prejudice, or discrimination based on skin color may cause differences in ethnic identity development in African-Americans.

Harvey and colleagues (2005) examined how racial identity and skin color preferences varied between African-American students at a predominantly White university as compared to a predominantly Black university. The authors operationally defined racial identity as "the degree to which one acknowledges his or her membership in and feels a sense of "belongingness" to a particular racial group and the degree to which perceived group values are internalized within the person's own self-concept" (p. 240). They found that African-Americans at the predominantly

Black university placed higher emphasis on skin color than those at the predominantly White university, and that dark-skinned African-Americans at both universities had higher racial identity than light-skinned African-Americans. This indicates that dark-skinned African-Americans felt a higher sense of acceptance and belonging to their racial group compared to light-skinned African-Americans. Coard et al.'s (2001) study found similar findings, in that light-skinned African-Americans reported having lower racial identity compared to dark-skinned African-Americans. In addition, Harvey and colleagues (2005) also found that racial identity was higher with African-Americans who attended the predominantly White university, compared to those at the predominantly Black university.

These findings suggest several relationships that may be occurring for dark and light-skinned African-Americans. Light-skinned African-Americans may have lower racial identity because they are more likely to assimilate and acculturate into the majority's culture due to similar physical characteristics. Historically, this has been seen as advantageous and allowed light-skinned African-Americans to increase their social status. Racial identity in dark-skinned African-Americans may be higher due to their intergroup minority status and their darker skin color. While light-skinned African-Americans can appear Caucasian or biracial, dark-skinned individuals typically cannot. Subsequently, they are identified as African-American more easily than light-skinned individuals. Being easily identified as such may strengthen dark-skinned African-Americans' identification with their racial group, more so than African-Americans who appear racially ambiguous. Light-skinned individuals may be identified as African-Americans less frequently, therefore decreasing their racial identity. While research does suggest that having high racial identity is beneficial (Phinney et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1999), in the context of the current study, having lower racial identity may also be valuable. Specifically, African-Americans

with lower racial identity may be accepted by the majority culture more easily compared to those with high racial identity. The benefits of being accepted by the majority culture may lend to greater opportunities and more positive social interactions and experiences.

As found in the Harvey et al. (2005) study, these differences in racial identity may also be apparent in other contexts. The current study also posited that these differences may also occur in different geographical regions where African-Americans may encounter more culturally salient experiences, such as skin color prejudice or discrimination.

The determination of someone's racial group identity (i.e., African-American or Caucasian), may also inadvertently affect racial identity development. Stepanova and Strube (2012) found that Caucasians depended more heavily on skin color, compared to other phenotypic characteristics (hair texture, lips, nose), than African-Americans when categorizing racial group. Consequently, skin color can have significant effects on how African-Americans are racially categorized by other racial groups. In addition, skin color biases held by Caucasians can lead to preferential or discriminatory treatment of African-Americans. Subsequently, light-skinned African-Americans may experience less colorism than dark-skinned African-Americans, causing differences in their ethnic identity development and discriminatory experiences.

### **Psychological Implications of Colorism**

There is a dearth of research on the effects of colorism on African-Americans' psychological well-being. Moreover, the research that is available only examines the effects of colorism on perceived attractiveness, and subsequent self-esteem (Azibo, 1983; Hill, 2002). However, there is abundance of research that examines the psychological effects of racial discrimination on African-Americans. Using the definition proposed by Broman and colleagues

(2000), racial discrimination will also be used to highlight some of the psychological effects that may occur in African-Americans who experience colorism.

Research indicates that perceived racial discrimination can have deleterious effects on African-Americans' mental health, particularly contributing to symptoms of depression and anxiety (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; McKenzie, 2006; Soto, Dawson-Andoh, & BeLue, 2011). Furthermore, continued exposure to perceived racial discrimination can affect African-Americans' coping skills and their physical health (Borrell et al., 2006).

As previously discussed, colorism and skin color preferences influence numerous aspects of society and African-American culture, such as media and music. Biases that are presented continuously through these means can begin to affect how African-Americans conceptualize their worth in society and compared to other African-Americans (Conrad et al., 2009). Moreover, biases for or against a skin color may influence the self-concept of those who are discriminated against (Stephens & Fews, 2007a). Consequently, lower levels of self-esteem or self-efficacy may result (Robinson & Ward, 1995; Thompson & Keith, 2001). For example, research suggests that individuals who are exposed to images of people deemed physically attractive will rate their own attractiveness low (Thorton & Moore, 1993). Moreover, their self-esteem related to social interactions may also decrease (Thorton & Maurice, 1999). Hill (2002) assessed physical attractiveness in African-Americans and found that skin color significantly influenced attractiveness ratings. Specifically, light-skinned women were rated as more attractive than dark-skinned women by African-Americans. Subsequently, African-Americans who evaluate their physical attractiveness based on the majority's standard of beauty or skin color may suffer psychologically. Colorism in the workplace, romantic relationships, and educational setting can also alter how African-Americans evaluate the efficiency, capability, and personality of

themselves and other African-Americans (Wade & Bielitz, 2005). Taken together, these research findings suggest that African-Americans who are discriminated against due to colorism are at risk of suffering from lowered self-esteem related to their romantic relationships, occupation, perceived physical attractiveness, and competence. These effects can be compounded when the African-Americans being evaluated have low racial identity. Azibo (1983) found that African-Americans who identified less with Black culture rated other African-Americans as less attractive and as having a less desirable personality. Extrapolating from these findings, it is likely that African-Americans who identify less with Black culture may also adopt skin color biases against other African-Americans more frequently than those who identify more with Black culture. Subsequently, this could increase the psychological distress of those who are ostracized or discriminated against (Smith, Burlew, & Lundgren, 1991).

African-Americans' psychological well-being may also be affected by skin color preferences perpetuated amongst their peers. Wilder (2010) found that African-Americans are often teased and called derogatory names based on their skin color by other African-Americans. More specifically, dark-skinned African-Americans were often given offensive names, including midnight, darkness, charcoal, tar baby, watermelon child, burnt, and jigaboo; while light-skinned African-Americans were often given more favorable names such as pretty skin, vanilla, caramel, mulatto, mixed, French vanilla, and fair. Research has shown that young adults who were frequently teased (i.e., taunting, name-calling) as children because of their appearance and body image may have lower self-esteem in the future (Gleason, Alexander, & Somers, 2000). Subsequently, dark-skinned African-Americans who are teased using these derogatory terms or are aware of the terms given to their skin color may then have lower self-esteem when compared to light-skinned African-Americans.

Given the literature on psychological well-being and skin color, the proposed study posits that there will be differences between light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans reports of psychological well-being. Research suggests that light-skinned African-Americans experience fewer events of colorism and therefore may not experience the associated negative psychological effects. Moreover, light-skinned African-Americans have been perceived as more attractive than dark-skinned African-Americans, resulting in higher levels of self-esteem as it is related to their appearance.

### **Colorism in Rural Areas**

“The South” or southeastern region of the United States has a distinct and influential cultural history that has played a significant part in African-American culture and community. The United States’ history of slavery, racism, and oppression of African-Americans is heavily rooted the South (Thorton Dill & Williams, 1992). Subsequently, African-Americans and Caucasians who live in the South may be exposed to a unique cultural and racial experience that is unequalled in other regions of the United States. One such experience may be colorism.

As previously discussed, during slavery light-skinned African-Americans were often favored over dark-skinned African-Americans due to their phenotypic similarities to Caucasians. This was often due to miscegenation between affluent Caucasian men and their female slaves (Horton, 1993). Mulattoes, the progeny of these relations, were often provided more advantageous social and economic opportunities due to their Caucasian lineage (Bodenhorn, 2003; 2006; Lake, 2003). As Mulattoes saw their social and economic status rise, they began to separate themselves from the African-American culture and community. This separation was reinforced by Caucasians who believed that Mulattoes were genetically superior. Though they were not completely accepted by Caucasians, many Mulattoes were allowed in the upper society

circles of Caucasians and European socialites (Lake, 2003). This was extremely prevalent in the lower Southern region (Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana) (Bodenhorn, 2003, 2006; Horton, 1993). Caucasian and Europeans in the North and Upper South (Virginia, Maryland) were not as liberal with their distinction, and treated and labeled Mulattoes as African-Americans, affording Mulattoes no social or economic advantages (Bodenhorn, 2003, 2006). Seeing the social and economic advantage of being physically akin to Caucasians, many Mulattoes in the South begin to reject and eschew dark-skinned African-Americans. Due to this, there were often separate churches, social clubs, and businesses for dark-skinned African-Americans (Lake, 2003). Moreover, Mulattoes in the south began to implement tests to insure that only Mulattoes were allowed entry into their social circles (Lake, 2003). Tests such as the “blue-vein test” inspected the inner wrist of an African-American for visibility of blue veins. Only visible blue veins would grant the individual entry. In the upper South and North these social clubs and skin color distinctions were less frequent. However, in the lower South, Mulattoes, African-Americans, and Caucasians relied on skin color gradations to determine the social class of minority populations. This subsequently led to more instances of colorism (Bodenhorn, 2003).

Currently, there is no available research that examines the geographic prevalence of colorism in African-American communities within the United States. Moreover, there is no research on the psychological, sociocultural, and developmental differences between non-rural and rural African-Americans. The most comparable research examines racial discrimination in non-rural and rural areas; however, it is limited to non-African-Americans, physical health, or was conducted outside of the United States (Berkel et al., 2009; Bonnar & McCarthy, 2012; Fowler-Brown et al., 2006; Poon & Saewyc, 2009). However, given that colorism is a form of

discrimination, these findings may help conceptualize how skin tone biases may appear in rural America. Minority populations, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, living in rural areas experience more discrimination compared to their urban counterparts (Kosciw et al., 2009; Poon & Saewyc, 2009). When examining ethnic minorities in rural areas, the results are similar. African-Americans residing in the rural South are more likely to perceive racial barriers to obtaining health care compared to Caucasians (Fowler-Brown et al., 2006). Moreover, African-Americans residing in rural areas, where they are the ethnic minority, are more susceptible to mental health problems compared to the ethnic majority (Bonnar & McCarthy, 2012). This effect is exacerbated by the limited psychological resources available for individuals living in rural areas (Human & Wasem, 1991; Lutfiyya et al., 2012; Murray & Keller, 1991).

Based on previous studies, it can be posited that colorism may still be a prevalent issue in rural areas due to its historical origins. Moreover, the South has the highest population of African-Americans in the United States, increasing the likelihood that skin color biases are present within the rural areas of this region (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel, & Drewery, 2011). Although there is a dearth of research on the topic, the prevalence of discrimination in rural areas also suggests that colorism may also be present in these areas. In addition, given disparities for African-Americans residing in rural areas it can be posited that those reared in rural areas will differ on several outcome variables when compared to African-Americans reared in non-rural areas.

### **Hypotheses**

Examining the literature on colorism suggests that skin color biases are still a significant aspect of the African-Americans community. However, there is no available research on how



colorism differs between African-Americans reared in rural areas compared to those reared in non-rural areas. The historical prevalence of colorism in the rural South suggests that light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans may experience skin color biases more frequently than their counterparts in the North and other non-rural areas. Moreover, the literature suggests that colorism is still prevalent in African-American communities and culture, indicating that light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans may experience specific outcomes differently.

The first goal of the current study is to determine the psychological, sociocultural, and developmental differences between light-skinned versus dark-skinned African-Americans. The second goal of the study is to determine if the psychological, sociocultural, and developmental experiences of African-Americans reared in rural areas differ from African-Americans reared in non-rural areas.

### **Specific aim #1**

Examination the psychological (satisfaction with skin color and self-esteem), and sociocultural (media influences and discriminatory experiences) differences in African-Americans (light-skinned versus dark-skinned). Based on the available literature we hypothesized that light-skinned African-Americans' psychological and sociocultural experiences would differ compared to dark-skinned African-Americans (Blair et al., 2002; Conrad et al., 2009; Harvey et al., 2005; Robinson & Ward, 1995; Stephens & Few, 2007a; Strutton & Lumpkin, 1993; Thompson & Keith, 2001; Watson et al., 2010). More specifically, we expected light-skinned African-Americans to have higher satisfaction with their skin color and higher self-esteem compared to dark-skinned African-Americans (Robinson & Ward, 1995; Thompson & Keith, 2001). We also expected dark-skinned African-Americans to report higher levels of media

influence on their appearance when compared to light-skinned African-Americans (Blair et al., 2002; Conrad et al., 2009; Harvey et al., 2005; Stephens & Few, 2007a; Strutton & Lumpkin, 1993; Watson et al., 2010). Lastly, we expected light-skinned African-Americans to report fewer discriminatory experiences than dark-skinned African-Americans (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003; Seller et al., 2006).

### **Specific aim #2**

Identification psychological or sociocultural outcome variables that differ between African-Americans reared in rural areas versus non-rural areas (Bodenhorn, 2003; 2006; Horton, 1993; Lake, 2003; Thorton Dill & Williams, 1992). More specifically, we hypothesized that African-Americans reared in non-rural areas would report higher levels of satisfaction with skin color and self-esteem, when compared to African-Americans in rural areas. In addition, we hypothesized that African-Americans reared in non-rural areas would report lower levels of media influence on their appearance when compared to African-Americans reared in rural areas. Lastly, it was expected that African-Americans reared in non-rural areas would experience less racial discrimination when compared to African-Americans reared in rural areas.

### **Role of Gender and Racial Identity**

Current literature does not provide a clear idea of the role of gender and racial identity for skin color and rural status. However, few studies have empirically examined possible gender differences related to satisfaction with skin color, self-esteem, media influences on appearance, discriminatory experiences, and ethnic identity in African-Americans. As a result, an exploratory analysis was conducted to examine gender differences between the outcome variables in a sample of African-American college students. A second exploratory analysis was conducted to examine differences in reported ethnic identity between light-skinned versus dark-skinned

African-Americans reared in non-rural versus rural areas. Literature suggests that there may be differences in ethnic identity between light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans (Coard et al., 2001; Harvey et al., 2005). However, there is currently no research that examines possible differences in ethnic identity in African-Americans reared in rural versus non-rural areas.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### Participants

Participants included 218 African-American psychology undergraduate students at a large southeastern university. They included 72 (35%) men and 134 (65%) women. Most participants (200; 97.1%) were between the ages of 18 to 24, 2 (1.0%) were between the ages of 25 to 34, 1 (0.5%) reported being between the ages of 35 to 44, and 1 (0.5%) reported being between the ages of 45 to 54; mean age was 21.17 (SD = 62.35). Most participants (164; 83.2%) reported being reared in rural areas, and 33 (16.8%) reported being reared in non-rural areas. In regard to skin color, 102 (48.6%) participants identified as light-skinned, while 108 (51.4%) participants identified as dark-skinned.

### Materials

Measures were either obtained by the primary investigator with permission from the original authors or are public domain. Participation in the study included an informed consent document, demographic questionnaire, and self-report questionnaires measuring skin color, satisfaction with skin color, self-esteem, media influences on appearance, discriminatory experiences, and ethnic identity. The following measures were used in the study: Skin Color Assessment Procedure, Skin Color Satisfaction Scale, Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale, The Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Scale-3, The Schedule of Racist Events, and the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure.

#### **Skin Color Assessment Procedure (SCAP; Bond & Cash, 1992)**

The original SCAP is a measure developed by Bond and Cash (1992) to assess African-American skin color. The SCAP uses nine pre-selected skin color swatches that are randomly positioned and numbered on a 20 inch x 30 inch poster board. From a distance of two feet away from the poster board participants are asked to (1) choose the swatch that most resembles their

actual facial skin color, (2) choose the swatch that is the facial skin color they would prefer to have, and (3) choose the swatch that their other gender African-American peers find most attractive. The skin color swatches range from 1 (very light, cream colored) to 9 (very dark, ebony). Participants in the current study were divided into three groups based on their ratings of skin color: *light-skinned* (ratings 1 through 4), *brown-skinned* (rating 5), and *dark-skinned* (ratings 6 through 9).

The original SCAP was augmented in several ways to fit the scope of the current study. The skin color swatches used in the original SCAP were selected from the Pantone Matching System (PMS). The PMS catalogs hundreds of colors used as a standard in several industries, such as paint, fabrics, and plastics (Pantone, n.d.). However, the colors represented in the PMS differ substantially from real skin colors, and force participants to compare their skin color to unrealistic hues and colors (Harvey et al., 2005). Since the development of the SCAP, a new version of the PMS has been developed specifically for skin color hues and shades (Pantone, n.d.). For the purpose of this study, the skin color swatches were selected from the new Pantone SkinTone Guide (PSG). However, to ensure reliability, the swatches selected from the PSG were closely matched to those used in the original SCAP. In addition, in past research the original SCAP was administered in-person; however, for this study the skin color swatches were scanned and uploaded to Qualtrics.com for online administration. Lastly, item 3 was changed to state “choose the swatch that their other gender same ethnicity peers find most attractive,” to decrease demand characteristics, and be consistent with inclusive terminology used in other measures.

### **Skin Color Satisfaction Scale (SCSS; Falconer & Neville, 2000)**

The Skin Color Satisfaction Scale (SCSS) was developed by Falconer and Neville (2000) to assess skin color satisfaction, self-perceived skin color, and ideal skin color. The full

scale consists of nine items rated on a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (extremely dissatisfied/strongly disagree) to 9 (extremely satisfied/strongly agree). The full SCSS was developed using three items from Bond and Cash's (1992) Skin Color Questionnaire (SCQ): (a) "How satisfied are you with the shade (lightness or darkness) of your own skin color?;" (b) "Compared to most African-American people, I believe my skin color is...;" (c) "If I could change my skin color, I would make it lighter or darker." Falconer and Neville (2000) added four additional items: (d) "Compared to the complexion (skin color) of members of my family, I am satisfied with my skin color;" (e) "I wish the shade of my skin was darker;" (f) "I wish my skin was lighter;" (g) "Compared to the complexion (skin color) of other African-Americans, I am satisfied with my skin color." A modified version of the SCSS (Falconer and Neville, 2000) (items d, e, f, and g) was used for the current study, due to reported problems with internal consistency reliability with the full version. In addition, item (g) was modified to state "Compared to the complexion (skin color) of peers that I share the same ethnicity with, I am satisfied with my skin color" to decrease demand characteristics and reflect more inclusive terminology. Scores on the modified version were summed and averaged, with higher scores indicating higher skin color satisfaction (Buchanan, Fischer, Tokar, & Yodar, 2008; Falconer & Neville, 2000). Internal reliability for the modified four-item version is  $\alpha = .80$ , and discriminant validity was found to be  $r = -.39$  with a measure of satisfaction with specific parts of the body and overall appearance (Buchanan et al., 2008). In the current study, the internal consistency was fair ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

### **Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965)**

The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale is a widely used 10-item measure that assesses attitudes toward the self and self-concept (Gray-Little, Williams, & Hancock, 1997). Responses

are coded on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 4 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) (Rosenberg, 1965). Scores from each item are summed, with lower scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. The RSES has acceptable to high reliability, ranging from  $\alpha = .72$  to  $\alpha = .88$  (Gray-Little et al., 1997). The RSES has also been found to have very good construct validity (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). Test-retest reliability of the RSES has been found to be .85 for two weeks, and .73 for seven months on a sample of college and high school students (Wylie, 1989). A study examining racial discrimination and coping skills in African-Americans college students found that the internal consistency of the RSES produced a Cronbach's alpha of .83 (Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynold, & Cancelli, 2000). For a more straightforward analysis and interpretation, items were reversed scored so higher scores would indicate higher self-esteem. In the current study, the RSES produced excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

**Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Scale-3 (SATAQ-3; Thompson, Van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004)**

The full version of the SATAQ-3 is a 30-item questionnaire measuring the impact of media influence on beauty standards across four dimensions: Information, Pressures, Internalization-General, and Internalization-Athlete. Higher scores on the SATAQ-3 indicate the media has a significant influence on beliefs about appearance. The Information dimension consists of nine items measuring the extent to which the media is an important source of information about attractiveness and fashion. The Pressures dimension consists of seven items measuring the extent to which the media has pressured participants to change their appearance. The Internalization-General dimension consists of nine items measuring the extent to which participants have adopted and espoused beliefs about body shape and weight espoused by the

media. The Internalization-Athlete dimension consists of five items and measures the extent to which participants want body types and shapes similar to athletes portrayed in the media.

Items on the SATAQ-3 are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree) (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2005; Thompson, et al., 2004), with higher scores indicating greater media influence on beliefs about appearance. Participants rate items such as “I do not feel pressure from TV or magazines to look pretty,” and “Music videos on TV are not an important source of information about fashion and “being attractive.”” High internal consistency has been shown for each dimension (Information,  $\alpha = .96$ ; Pressures,  $\alpha = .92$ ; Internalization-General,  $\alpha = .95$ ; and Internalization-Athlete,  $\alpha = .96$ ) (Calogero et al., 2005). The SATAQ-3 has also been found to have good construct validity (Thompson et al., 2004). In the current study, the SATAQ-3 demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

For the purpose of this study, the format and use of the SATAQ-3 was modified. Given this study’s focus on the extent in which media messages of colorism have been espoused by African-Americans, only the Internalization-General subscale (items 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, and 23) was used in the statistical analysis. In addition, several items on the Internalization-General scale (items 3, 4, 7, 11, 12, and 14) were modified to assess attitudes toward skin color rather than attitudes of their overall body and body image. For example, item 3 “I do not care if my body looks like the body of people who are on TV,” was modified to, “I do not care if my skin color looks like the skin color of people who are on TV.” Lastly, items on the Internalization-Athlete were not included in the study due to their focus on body image and athleticism (not salient to this study). In the current study, the Internalization-General subscale demonstrated good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .86$ ).



### **The Schedule of Racist Events (SRE; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996)**

The Schedule of Racist Events is an 18-item questionnaire that measures the frequency of different types of racial discrimination in African-Americans' lives, and their appraisal of these events (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). Items load onto three subscales: Recent Racist Events (RRE), Lifetime Racist Events (LRE), and Appraised Racist Events (ARE), which measure the frequency of racist events in the past year, over a lifetime, and the stressfulness of each event, respectively (Greer, 2010). Responses on the subscales are coded on a 6-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (the event never happened to me/not at all) to 6 (the event happens almost all of the time/extremely). Higher scores on the SRE indicate a higher frequency of racial events, and subsequent stress. The three subscales have been found to have high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .94 to .95). In the current study, the SRE produced excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .97$ ). The subscales have also been found to have good test-retest reliability ( $r = .95$  to  $.96$ ), as well as strong construct and convergent validity (Greer, 2010; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996).

For the purposes of this study the format and use of the SRE were modified. Given the pervasiveness of colorism, identifying the lifelong prevalence of discriminatory experiences was more salient to the current study. Therefore, only the SRE's Lifetime Racist Events (LRE) subscale was used in the statistical analysis. Examining lifelong prevalence provided a more comprehensive understanding of African-Americans' experience with racist events. Landrine and Klonoff (1996) also indicated that the SRE subscales could be treated separately to yield relevant information about the prevalence of African-Americans' racist events. In addition, items on the SRE were modified. To decrease demand characteristics, items were modified to more inclusive

terminology. For example, item 1 states “How many times have you been treated unfairly by *teachers and professors* because you are Black?” This was modified to state “How many times have you been treated unfairly by *teachers and professors* because of your race?” In the current study, the LRE subscale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

**Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Roberts, Phinney, Masse, Chen, Roberts, & Romero, 1999)**

The full version of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) is a 20-item measure consisting of two subscales: Ethnic Identity (EI) and Other-Group Orientation (OGO) which measure ethnic identity and attitudes toward other ethnic groups, respectively. The MEIM conceptualizes ethnic identity as a continuum, with higher scores indicating higher ethnic identity (Avery et al., 2007). The EI subscale consists of 14 items which measure ethnic identity and positive ethnic attitudes, sense of belonging, ethnic identity achievement, and ethnic behaviors and practices, while the OGO subscale consists of six items which measure how participants orientate to other groups (Phinney, 1992). The authors note that although the OGO subscale does not measure ethnic identity, it may give information about one’s orientation to the majority culture.

Items on the MEIM are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Scores are derived by summing across the 20 items and obtaining a mean. Mean scores of one to five indicate very low or very high ethnic identity, respectively. Internal consistency of the EI scale has been found to range from .81 to .92; while internal consistency for the OGO subscale has ranged from .35 to .82 (Ponterotto et al., 2003). A modified version of the MEIM was developed, which includes fewer items and does not include the OGO subscale (Roberts et al., 1999). This modified version consists of 12 items, rated on the same Likert scale

as the original MEIM. Ethnic Identity is conceptualized through two factors: ethnic identity exploration, and ethnic identity commitment. This modified version was found to have similar reliability and validity to the original MEIM EI subscale. Cronbach's alpha on the modified MEIM ranged from .81 and .89 across ethnic groups (Roberts et al., 1999). For the purpose of this study, the modified version of the MEIM was used due to its shortened length and exclusion of the OGO subscale. In the current study, the modified MEIM demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### **Demographics (DQ)**

Participants provided their age, gender, marital status, religiosity/spirituality, political affiliation, and highest year of education for their mother and father. Participants also provided information regarding rural status. Participants classified their hometown (place where they resided most of their life) as rural, suburban, or urban, provided the population of their hometown, and listed their hometown's zip code.

Geographic areas were classified as rural or non-rural using the United States Census Bureau website. Non-rural areas were defined as areas with a population of 50,000 or more, whereas rural areas were defined as areas with a population of 49,999 or less (United States Census Bureau, n.d.b). Participants were categorized as non-rural or rural using zip codes via the United States Census Bureau's American Factfinder website; which provides data collected from several United States Census Bureau surveys and censuses conducted yearly (United States Census Bureau, n.d.a). Participants' zipcodes were used because they provided more objective data compared to their perceptions of their hometown's rural status and population.

## **Procedure**

Students enrolled in the study via Georgia Southern University's Experiment Management System (SONA). All data collection occurred via Qualtrics.com. The measures were randomly ordered using Qualtrics.com to control for order effects. After completing the measures, participants were directed to a debriefing page with further explanation of the goals of the research, information about free mental health services, and contact information for the primary investigator. Lastly, participants were given information on how they would be given participation credit for their psychology course.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted for all measures across light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans and for participants reared in non-rural and rural areas. Means, standard deviations, and score ranges are illustrated in Table 1.

### Skin Color and Rural Status

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) for each dependent variable was conducted. (Table 2). Results from the between-subjects tests revealed only one significant finding. There was a significant interaction of skin color and rural status on media influence on appearance (SATAQ: IG),  $F(1,192) = 4.007, p < .05, \eta^2 = .020$ . This finding suggests that the influence the media has on appearance depends on African-Americans' skin color and their rural status. Dark-skinned African-Americans reared in rural areas reported higher media influence on appearance ( $M = 21.10, SD = 8.06$ ) compared to light-skinned African-Americans reared in rural areas ( $M = 18.74, SD = 6.76$ ). However, this trend is reversed for non-rural African-Americans. Specifically, light-skinned African-Americans reported higher media influence on appearance ( $M = 22.64, SD = 6.22$ ) compared to dark-skinned African-Americans ( $M = 19.26, SD = 8.06$ ) (Table 3).

A 2 x 2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine differences between skin color (light-skin vs. dark-skin) and rural status (rural vs. non-rural) across measures of skin color satisfaction, self-esteem, media influence on appearance, and discriminatory experiences. Results revealed non-significant main effects for rural status,  $F(4,189) = .314, p > .05, \eta^2 = .007$ , and skin color,  $F(4, 189) = 1.358, p > .05, \eta^2 = .028$ . Results also revealed a non-significant interaction for skin color and rural status,  $F(4,189) = 1.573, p > .05, \eta^2 = .032$ . Overall, these findings suggest that light-skinned and dark-skinned African-

Americans' do not differ in their reported skin color satisfaction, self-esteem, discriminatory experiences, and the influence the media has on their appearance. In addition, there were no differences in the reported skin color satisfaction, self-esteem, discriminatory experiences, and the influence the media has on appearance between African-Americans reared in non-rural and rural areas.

## **Gender**

An exploratory one-way MANOVA examined the effects of gender across the dependent variables. Results revealed a significant multivariate main effect for gender,  $F(4,200) = 3.893$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .072$ . Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) for each dependent variable provided further analysis (Table 4). There was a significant interaction of gender and skin color satisfaction (SCSS) ( $F(1, 203) = 12.037$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .056$ ). These results indicate that women ( $M = 7.40$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) reported higher satisfaction with their skin color compared to men ( $M = 6.62$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) (Table 5). Alternatively, there were non-significant interaction on the remaining variables: media influence on appearance (SATAQ:IG), discriminatory experiences (SRE/LRE), and self-esteem (RSES). These results indicate that African American women and men report comparable rates of self-esteem, discriminatory experiences, and media influence on their appearance.

## **Skin Color, Rural Status, and Ethnic Identity**

There was a non-significant interaction of skin color and rural status on ethnic identity,  $F(1, 193) = .015$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .000$ . Statistics are presented in Table 6. An exploratory 2 x 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) examined the effects of skin color and rural status on ethnic identity. Results revealed a non-significant main effect of skin color on ethnic identity,  $F(1, 193) = .000$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .000$ , indicating no significant differences between light-skinned and dark-

skinned African-Americans' ethnic identity. There was also a non-significant main effect of rural status on ethnic identity ( $F(1, 193) = .166, p > .05, \eta^2 = .001$ ), indicating no significant differences in ethnic identity between African-Americans reared in rural and non-rural areas.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **Overview**

There is a dearth of quantitative research examining colorism within the African-American community. Moreover, there is currently no research examining the difference in reports of colorism and rural status on this population. Given the current gaps in literature and research, the current study provides further understanding of African-Americans' well-being based on their skin color.

The purpose of the current study was to examine the differences between light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans across several variables: skin color satisfaction, self-esteem, discriminatory experiences, and media influence on appearance. The study was also designed to explore differences between African-Americans reared in rural versus non-rural areas. Lastly, gender differences across the variables and the effects of skin color and rural status on ethnic identity were explored. Overall, the goal of the study was to determine differences between African-Americans based on skin color and rural status.

### **Skin Color and Rural Status**

Non-significant results were found between light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans on reports of skin color satisfaction, self-esteem, discriminatory experiences, and media influence on appearance. Results also revealed non-significant differences between African-Americans reared in rural versus non-rural areas across the same variables. These findings are inconsistent with the current study's hypotheses and available research on colorism's effects on African-Americans' psychological and sociocultural well-being (Solorzano et al., 2000; Thorton & Moore, 1993; Wade & Bielitz, 2005; Weitz, 2001).



Though non-significant, these findings offer a glimpse into the cultural experiences of African-Americans. Much of the literature states that colorism is a pervasive cultural phenomenon, which has been a prevalent aspect of African-American culture for over a hundred years. The current findings suggest that despite the pervasiveness of colorism, there may be protective cultural factors present that help African-Americans overcome some of the adverse effects of skin color biases and discrimination. One such protective factor may be racial socialization (Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006; Landor et al., 2013; Miller & Macintosh, 1999). Defined as “the process by which explicit and implicit messages are transmitted regarding significance and meaning of race and ethnicity” (Landor et al., 2013, pg. 818), racial socialization has been found to help foster the emotional and psychological health of minority children. The instruction of racial socialization is typically provided by parents or guardians of these children. Research has found that parental messages conveyed to children about racial socialization emphasize “promoting high self-esteem, instilling racial pride, and preparing children for bias” (Hughes et al., 2006, pg. 747). Lastly, racial socialization is typically conveyed through exposure to environments or contexts, modeling of behaviors, and specific verbal statements regarding race and ethnicity (Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990).

Research on racial socialization has also explored its effects on and relationship with several variables, including gender, age, acculturation, and socioeconomic status (SES; Caughy, O’Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002; Landor et al., 2013; Thomas & Speight, 1999; Thompson, Anderson, & Bakerman, 2000). For example, research has suggested that African-American parents with a higher SES reported more racial socialization as compared to parents with a lower SES. In addition, African-American parents with a middle-class SES focus more on

racial discrimination and mistrust. Research also suggests that there are gender differences in racial socialization, with African-American women receiving different messages than African-American men (Landor et al., 2013; Thomas & Speight, 1999).

In regard to the current study, racial socialization may have acted as a protective factor against dissatisfaction with skin color, self-esteem, discriminatory experiences, and media influence on appearance, despite skin color and rural status. African-American parents may have provided specific messages about cultural values, experiences with discrimination, the majority culture, and racial stereotypes that engendered the skills needed to navigate a majority culture as a minority individual. Subsequently, these messages may have also protected against colorism. For example, descriptive statistics for the current data show that participants reported moderate levels of self-esteem and ethnic identity, and moderate to high skin color satisfaction (Table 1). These findings suggest African-Americans' ratings of self-esteem, skin color satisfaction, or ethnic identity did not differ based on their skin color and rural status. Moreover, the results suggest that participants did not experience low self-esteem and low sense of belongingness to their ethnic group.

Although not consistent with the current study's hypotheses, results also indicate that there were no differences in discriminatory experiences of light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans and those reared in rural versus non-rural areas. This is inconsistent with previous research, which states that African-Americans experience discrimination based on their skin color (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Wade & Bielitz, 2005; Wilder, 2010). Landor and colleagues (2013) had similar results and found that skin color was not a protective or exacerbating factor in discriminatory experiences. Although the participants in the current study reported experiencing racial discrimination, these experiences may be more related to their

ethnicity or race rather than their skin color. In addition, the assessment of discriminatory experiences due to colorism may not have accurately captured these incidents. Future research on colorism and its effects on psychological and sociocultural variables should examine the mediating effects of racial socialization on African-Americans. In addition, the development or utilization of assessments that specifically measure skin color discrimination should be considered.

**Interaction of skin color and rural status.** Results of the current study revealed an interaction of skin color and rural status on media influence on appearance. Rural dark-skinned African-Americans reported higher media influence on appearance compared to rural light-skinned African-Americans. Whereas, non-rural light-skinned African-Americans reported higher media influence on appearance compared to non-rural dark-skinned African-Americans. This finding suggests that the saliency of messages from the media about beauty standards and body image is dependent on the level of African-Americans' skin color and rural status. Previous research demonstrated similar findings, stating that skin color biases are perpetuated in media advertisements and music (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009; Fears, 1998; Stephen & Phillips, 2003). However, it is still unclear how the appearance of African-Americans, reared in rural versus non-rural areas, is influenced by the media. Furthermore, identifying what messages are internalized with this group has still not been achieved. Specifically, why media messages effect rural dark-skinned African-Americans and non-rural light-skinned African-Americans differently. Although the current study's results are promising, future research should focus on exploring how skin color and rural status effect the internalization of media messages about appearance. Also, further research on this topic can provide context and insight into how cultural values are espoused and adopted in different geographic regions.

## **Gender**

Results from the current study indicate no gender differences in African-Americans' discriminatory experiences, self-esteem, and media influence on their appearance. Given that this analysis was exploratory, these findings offer insight into the cultural experiences of African-Americans. For example, despite non-significant differences, both men and women reported moderate self-esteem and moderate levels of media influence on appearance (Table 4). In addition, descriptive statistics suggest that African-Americans experience few lifetime discriminatory incidents. This suggests that African-Americans' reported levels of self-esteem, perceived messages about their appearance, and discriminatory experiences are similar for both women and men. Though the results are not conclusive, they may suggest a shift in the sociocultural and psychological experiences of African-Americans. For example, research shows that reported self-esteem is negatively correlated with perceptions of racial discrimination; whereas individuals with lower self-esteem tend to report higher incidents of perceived discrimination (Green, Way, & Pahl, 2006). In regard to the current study, participants reported moderate levels of self-esteem, which may have acted as a protective factor for perceived racial discrimination. In addition, research has shown that racial socialization experiences moderate the relationship between discriminatory experiences and mental health. Fisher and Shaw (1999) found that low preparation for bias and racism decreased African-Americans' global mental health when they were exposed to discriminatory experiences.

Results did reveal that African-American women reported higher skin color satisfaction compared to African-American men. When examining colorism and beauty, the literature available on gender differences suggests that due to the increased pressure on women to adhere to beauty standards, African-American women's self-esteem and skin color satisfaction would be

negatively affected (Falconer & Neville, 2000; Hall, 1995). However, the current findings indicate otherwise, suggesting that there are other variables influencing skin color satisfaction for African-Americans. One such factor may be racial socialization. As mentioned previously, research suggests that there are gender differences in how racial socialization messages are conveyed and received (Landor et al., 2013; Thomas & Speight, 2009). For example, Thomas and Speight (2009) examined the racial socialization messages that African-American parents convey to their children. Results indicated that African-American boys received more messages about negative racial stereotypes and coping strategies to deal with racism and discrimination while African-American girls received more messages about racial pride and the importance of educational achievement. In the current study, African-American men may have lower skin color satisfaction because they did not receive as many messages about racial pride, which subsequently conveyed negative messages about their skin color. In addition, they may have received more messages about racial discrimination that increased their awareness of negative stereotypes of race and skin color. Future research on African-Americans' skin color satisfaction should explore these dynamics as well. This research may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of gender on colorism.

### **Skin Color, Rural Status, and Ethnic Identity**

Non-significant results were found for the effects of skin color and rural status on participants' ethnic identity. Specifically, results indicated that there were no differences in ethnic identity in light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans or for those reared in rural versus non-rural areas. Results also showed that there was no interaction effect of skin color and rural status on ethnic identity. This was an exploratory analysis conducted to examine how

African-Americans' sense of belonging to their ethnic group differed based on their skin color and rural status.

Ethnic identity has been found to be highly correlated to self-esteem (Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Phinney et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1999), where individuals with higher self-esteem report more ethnic identity. Participants in the current study reported moderate levels of self-esteem and moderate levels of ethnic identity (Table 1). These results are consistent with previous research examining the relationship between individuals' developmental and psychological well-being.

### **Limitations**

The current study has several limitations that should be noted when attempting to interpret and generalize the results. First, the current study's sample population was comprised of college students. Research has shown several disadvantages of using this group, including inexperience of psychological and social experiences due to age, less formulated sense of self and cognitive abilities, and increased homogeneity when compared to the general population (Peterson, 2001). Due to the use of a college sample, generalization of these results should be done with caution.

Nearly all of the participants were from the Southeastern region of the United States. Although, this was relevant to the study's examination of rurality in the Rural South, the results may not be representative of African-Americans' experiences in other rural and non-rural areas in the United States. To increase objectivity of self-report rural status was classified by zip code. However, this does not capture the subjective experiences of being reared in rural areas. More specifically, the culture of participants' hometowns may have been similar to a rural area; however, their zip code may have classified it as a non-rural region. Future research should

assess perceptions of rural status to account for subjective cultural experiences that may be salient to the study's variables.

Descriptive statistics of the current study reveal that a majority of the participants were women (65%) and from rural areas (83.2%). Due to this, an appropriate degree of caution is recommended when generalizing the results to African-American men reared in non-rural areas. In addition, the measures used in the study were self-report, therefore they may not be an accurate reflection of the skin color satisfaction, discriminatory experiences, ethnic identity, self-esteem, skin color, and media influence on the appearance of African-Americans. Racial socialization may have been a protective factor for participants in the current study; however, this was not measured. Future research should assess whether protective factors, including racial socialization, function as moderators in the psychological, sociocultural, and developmental experiences of African-Americans and their experience with colorism. Lastly, several of the measures (SCSS, SATAQ-3, and SRE) were modified for the purposes of the current study. These modifications may have resulted in an inability to capture participants' experiences. In addition, standard administration of the SCAP is done in person, whereas in the current study it was administered via a computer. The quality or pixilation of the skin color swatches may have affected, thus impacting participants' ability to accurately report their skin color.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, the current study sought to examine the psychological (self-esteem and skin color satisfaction), sociocultural (discriminatory experiences and media influence on appearance), and developmental differences (ethnic identity) between light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans, and those reared in non-rural versus rural areas. Results indicated that there are few differences among these four groups. Specifically, light-skinned and dark-

skinned African-Americans report similar amounts of self-esteem, skin color satisfaction, discriminatory experiences, and media influence on their appearance. African-Americans reared in non-rural versus rural areas reported similar experiences as well. Results also indicated that there were no significant differences in reported ethnic identity between light-skinned African-Americans and dark-skinned African-Americans and for those reared in rural versus non-rural areas. However, findings from the current study did indicate that rural dark-skinned and non-rural light-skinned African-Americans report higher media influence on appearance compared to rural light-skinned and non-rural dark-skinned African-Americans, respectively. In addition, results revealed that African-American women have more skin color satisfaction compared to men. Given the results, there are several practical implications that can be pursued. Assessment of protective factors, such as self-esteem and racial socialization, would provide clinicians in-depth information about African-Americans who have experienced or perceive discrimination. Subsequently, assessment of these factors can provide the foundation to address cultural issues, such as messages regarding skin color and attraction from the media and other sources, which impact African-Americans and the implementation of more cultural salient interventions and treatment. Moreover, given that rural dark-skinned African-Americans report higher media influence on appearance compared to rural light-skinned African-Americans, clinicians may be more prepared to address issues of body image, appearance, and living in rural areas.

Though the study's hypotheses were not supported, the findings do contribute to the growing body of literature on colorism. First, there is a dearth of research on how colorism affects the abovementioned variables in light-skinned and dark-skinned African-Americans. Though the findings are not conclusive, they do provide a more comprehensive understanding of colorism and African-Americans' well-being. Research on colorism has suggested that there are



adverse effects of experiencing skin color biases. While the current study does not undermine past findings, it does suggest that there may be other variables protecting or exacerbating the effects of colorism. Secondly, there is currently no research that examines how colorism affects the well-being of African-Americans reared in rural versus non-rural areas. Current research on rural status has primarily focused on perceived discrimination and access to mental and physical health services for other minority groups. Although the current study's hypotheses were not supported, the findings do provide a foundation to further explore differences in African-American experiences based on geographic region. Lastly, the experience of colorism is salient for many African-Americans, their culture, and their community. While the current study suggests that the effects of colorism are not as profound as expected, it is hoped that the study further facilitates the conversation on colorism and its effects on the African-American community.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of Measures Across Skin Color and Rural Status*

		N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>LIGHT SKIN</b>							
	RSES	102	30	10	40	31.01	6.231
	SRE/LRE	102	87	17	104	39.03	14.745
	MEIM	101	3.17	1.83	5.00	3.7538	.78378
	SATAQ:IG	99	27	9	36	19.34	6.751
	SCSS	101	5.75	3.25	9.00	7.3342	1.49594
Valid N (listwise)		99					
<b>DARK SKIN</b>							
	RSES	108	25	15	40	31.62	5.560
	SRE/LRE	107	91	17	108	65.95	18.234
	MEIM	107	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.7676	.76938
	SATAQ:IG	106	34	9	43	20.89	8.037
	SCSS	107	7.25	1.75	9.00	6.9136	1.63580
Valid N (listwise)		106					
<b>RURAL</b>							
	RSES	164	30	10	40	31.39	5.996
	SRE/LRE	164	91	17	108	40.08	15.358
	MEIM	164	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.7839	.78537
	SATAQ:IG	163	34	9	43	19.93	7.522
	SCSS	164	5.75	3.25	9.00	7.1814	1.53220
Valid N (listwise)		163					
<b>NON-RURAL</b>							
	RSES	33	19	21	40	30.88	5.689
	SRE/LRE	33	48	20	68	40.18	11.406
	MEIM	33	2.92	1.83	4.75	3.7206	.76109
	SATAQ:IG	33	29	9	38	20.70	7.427
	SCSS	33	7.25	1.75	9.00	6.7955	1.81299
Valid N (listwise)		33					

Note. RSES = self-esteem, SRE/LRE = lifetime discriminatory experiences, MEIM = ethnic identity, SATAQ:IG = media influence on appearance internalization general scale, SCSS = skin color satisfaction

Table 2

*Test of Between-Subjects Effects for Measures Across Rural Status and Skin Color*

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power <sup>a</sup>
RURAL STATUS	SCSS	2.938	1	2.938	1.189	.277	.006	.192
	SATAQ:IG	28.771	1	28.771	.521	.471	.003	.111
	SRE/LRE	1.418	1	1.418	.006	.936	.000	.051
	RSES	9.877	1	9.877	.276	.600	.001	.082
SKIN COLOR	SCSS	6.996	1	6.996	2.831	.094	.015	.388
	SATAQ:IG	7.041	1	7.041	.127	.722	.001	.065
	SRE/LRE	5.620	1	5.620	.025	.874	.000	.053
	RSES	19.480	1	19.480	.544	.462	.003	.114
RURAL STATUS*	SCSS	.236	1	.236	.095	.758	.000	.061
SKIN COLOR	SATAQ:IG	221.450	1	221.450	4.007	.047	.020	.513
	SRE/LRE	67.575	1	67.575	.305	.581	.002	.085
	RSES	2.478	1	2.478	.069	.793	.000	.058
ERROR	SCSS	474.526	192	2.471				
	SATAQ:IG	10611.674	192	55.269				
	SRE/LRE	42497.528	192	221.341				
	RSES	6871.653	192	35.790				

Note. a. Computed using alpha = .05, SCSS = skin color satisfaction, SATAQ:IG = media influence on appearance internalization general scale, SRE/LRE = lifetime discriminatory experiences, RSES = self-esteem

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics of SATAQ:IG Across Skin Color and Rural Status*

		N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>RURAL</b>						
	LIGHT-SKIN	81	9	35	18.74	6.762
	DARK-SKIN	82	9	43	21.10	8.075
Valid N (listwise)		163				
<b>NON-RURAL</b>						
	LIGHT-SKIN	14	10	36	22.64	6.222
	DARK-SKIN	19	9	39	19.26	8.061
Valid N (listwise)		33				

Note. SATAQ:IG = media influence on appearance internalization-general subscale

Table 4

*Test of Between-Subject Effects for Gender Across Dependent Variables*

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power <sup>a</sup>
GENDER	SCSS	28.322	1	28.322	12.037	.001	.056	.932
	SATAQ:IG	.337	1	.337	.006	.938	.000	.051
	SRE/LRE	257.287	1	257.287	1.180	.279	.006	.191
	RSES	23.541	1	23.541	.672	.413	.003	.129
Error	SCSS	477.630	203	2.353				
	SATAQ:IG	11370.560	203	56.013				
	SRE/LRE	44277.562	203	218.116				
	RSES	7115.454	203	35.051				

Note. a. Computed using alpha = .05, SCSS = skin color satisfaction, SATAQ:IG = media influence on appearance internalization general scale, SRE/LRE = lifetime discriminatory experiences, RSES = self-esteem

Table 5

*Descriptive Statistics for Gender Across Dependent Variables*

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	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
SCSS	Men	6.6162	1.67696	71
	Women	7.3974	1.45296	134
	Total	7.1268	1.57485	205
SATAQ:IG	Men	20.20	6.807	71
	Women	20.11	7.817	134
	Total	20.14	7.466	205
SRE/LRE	Men	41.44	18.330	71
	Women	39.08	12.493	134
	Total	39.90	14.775	205
RSES	Men	30.93	6.200	71
	Women	31.64	5.768	134
	Total	31.40	5.916	205

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Note. SCSS = skin color satisfaction, SATAQ:IG = media influence on appearance internalization general scale, SRE/LRE = lifetime discriminatory experiences, RSES = self-esteem

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Table 6

*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Ethnic Identity Across Skin Color and Rural Status*

Dependent Variable: MEIM Mean Score

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power <sup>a</sup>
SKIN COLOR	4.711	1	4.711	.000	.993	.000	.050
RURAL STATUS	.102	1	.102	.166	.684	.001	.069
SKIN COLOR *	.009	1	.009	.015	.902	.000	.052
RURAL STATUS	.009	1	.009	.015	.902	.000	.052
Error	119.061	193	.617				

Note. a. Computed using alpha = .05, MEIM = ethnic identity