

# Colorism and Black Women's Mental Health

Emal Kashif<sup>1</sup>, Emma Grimes<sup>2</sup>, and Dr. Eugenia Flores Millender<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

### Background Information

- Colorism refers to differential treatment based on skin tone within racial and ethnic groups.
- This form of intra-racial stratification often privileges lighter skin tones while disadvantaging individuals with darker skin.
- Growing evidence links colorism to experiences of discrimination and psychosocial stress.
- However, the mental health impacts of colorism among men and women remain insufficiently examined.

### Purpose

- To examine the relationship between colorism and mental health outcomes among men and women through a structured review and synthesis of existing literature.

## Methodology

- This scoping review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA-ScR recommendations.
- **Search Strategy and Information Sources**
  - A comprehensive literature search discussing Black women, Colorism, and mental health was conducted across four electronic databases:
    1. Embase ( $n = 718$ )
    2. Web of Science ( $n = 509$ )
    3. PubMed ( $n = 462$ )
    4. CINAHL ( $n = 186$ )
  - An additional  $n=1,476$  references were imported from supplementary or unspecified sources (e.g., citation chaining, grey literature searches, database export limitations), resulting in  $n=3,351$  total records identified for screening.
- **Study Selection**
  - A scoping review following PRISMA-ScR guidelines was conducted to examine literature on colorism and mental health among Black women.
  - Systematic searches were performed in Embase ( $n=718$ ), Web of Science ( $n=509$ ), PubMed ( $n=462$ ), and CINAHL ( $n=186$ ), with additional records identified through citation chaining and grey literature searches (total records = 3,351).
  - Records were imported into Covidence for de-duplication and screening.
  - Title and abstract screening removed 1,809 records not relevant to colorism and mental health.
  - Full-text screening was conducted by trained UROP undergraduate reviewers using standardized eligibility criteria under faculty supervision.
  - Two student presenters each reviewed 40 full-text articles (80 total).
  - Of the 80 articles, 3 were not found, 42 were excluded and 34 advanced to data extraction and thematic synthesis.
  - Discrepancies were resolved by reviewer consensus and senior investigator adjudication; review is ongoing.

Population	
<b>Include</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empirical studies that examine colorism/skin tone/skin shade (as exposure or main construct) and at least one mental health outcome.</li> <li>• Human participants of any age, gender, or country; quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs; cross-sectional, cohort, case-control, or intervention studies.</li> <li>• Peer-reviewed journal articles (and in-press) in English and/or Spanish.</li> </ul>	<b>Exclude</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studies that focus only on general racism/discrimination without any skin tone/colorism-specific measure or analysis.</li> <li>• Non-empirical work (editorials, commentaries, theoretical papers, protocols, dissertations, theses, conference abstracts only).</li> <li>• Studies with no mental health-related outcome (e.g., only physical health, dermatologic, or cosmetic outcomes).</li> </ul>
Intervention / Exposure	
<b>Include</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colorism terms: "colorism", "skin tone", "skin colour/skin color", "skin shade", "shadeism", "pigmentocracy", "skin tone discrimination", "skin color bias", "color-based discrimination", "skin bleaching".</li> <li>• Mental health terms: "mental health", "depression", "anxiety", "stress", "psychological distress", "PTSD", "suicide/suicidal", "self-esteem", "body image", "well-being/wellbeing", "internalizing symptoms", "psychiatric disorder".</li> </ul>	<b>Exclude</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "melanoma", "skin cancer", "psoriasis", "vitiligo", "dermatology clinic", "UV exposure", "sun protection", "cosmetic surgery", "aesthetic procedure" when no mental health outcome is mentioned.</li> <li>• "animal study", "mouse", "rat", "in vitro" (non-human/biological only).</li> </ul>
Comparator / Context	
<b>Include</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparisons by lighter vs darker skin tone, presence vs absence of colorism experiences, or gradients of skin tone bias.</li> <li>• Any geographic, cultural, or clinical context where colorism is explicitly examined.</li> </ul>	<b>Exclude</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studies where the comparator is unrelated to skin color (e.g., SES only) and colorism is not analyzed.</li> <li>• Contexts focused solely on physical/dermatologic outcomes (e.g., sun damage clinics) without mental health.</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Study selection inclusion/exclusion criterion

## Results

### Key Takeaways

- After full-text reviews, 3 key themes were synthesized from the presence of Colorism:
  1. Increased levels of depression
  2. Decreased self-esteem
  3. Increased general anxiety
- With a preference for lighter skin amongst Black women, these mental health outcomes were most observed.
- Colorism presents itself majorly within educational institutions.

### Significance

- These results highlight Colorism's discriminatory nature as a major psychosocial stressor, negatively impacting mental health globally.
- Colorism can result in long-term, pervasive consequences

### Strengths and Limitations

- Analyses were solely conducted for studies in English/Spanish, limiting generalizability.
- Covidence allowed for specificity in selecting abstracts and removed ~1,202 duplicate records.

## Discussion and Interpretations

Findings suggest darker skin tone is associated with poorer mental health outcomes, including depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety, particularly among Black women in the United States.

- Evidence indicates that colorism can emerge early in youth, potentially contributing to long-term psychosocial stress and reduced quality of life.
- Existing literature examining skin tone-specific mental health outcomes remains limited, with many sources identified as recent dissertations rather than peer-reviewed studies.
- These findings highlight the need for greater empirical research examining colorism across diverse populations and developmental stages.
- Future work should explore community and youth-based interventions aimed at reducing colorism-related stigma and improving psychosocial well-being.



Simone Noronha

### Quick Column Guide (1-21)

1. Article ID → Copy from Covidence/Form 1
2. Study Design → Cross-sectional, qualitative, etc.
3. Sample Size → N analyzed
4. Age Group → Children / Adolescents / Adults / Mixed
5. Population Descriptors → Race/ethnicity, gender, etc.
- 6b. Country/Region → Where study took place
6. Setting → School, clinic, community, etc.
7. Exposure Type → How skin tone/colorism measured
8. Scale Name → Exact scale name or NR
9. Operationalization → Continuous, categorical, qualitative
10. Intra-racial Analysis → Y / N / U
11. Exposure Evidence → QUOTE + PAGE
12. MH Outcomes → Depression, anxiety, etc.
13. MH Tools → PHQ-9, CES-D, NR
14. MH Evidence → QUOTE + PAGE
15. Primary Finding → 1-3 sentences
16. Direction → Darker skin → worse MH / Null / Mixed
17. Mediators/Moderators → Discrimination, SES, gender
18. Theory/Framework → Minority Stress, CRT, NR
19. Key Limitations → Cross-sectional, self-report
20. Notes for Synthesis → How to group paper
21. Notes → Anything PI should know

Figure 2. Form 2: Full-text review guide

## Progress and Future Directions

### Progress & Future Directions

- This review is in progress and has advanced to the thematic synthesis and manuscript development stage.
- Full-text review has been completed by undergraduate researchers following a standardized screening protocol.
- Emerging themes will inform the final synthesis, interpretation, and reporting of findings.
- Final analyses will further define key mental health outcomes, cross-study trends, and priorities for future colorism research.

## References

