

Colorism and Its Impact on Women's Mental Health: A Scoping Review

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Introduction

- Colorism is discrimination based on skin tone within and across racial and ethnic groups. Unlike racism, which operates between racial groups, colorism privileges lighter skin within the same community.
- Although racism has been widely studied as a social determinant of health, colorism remains underexamined as a distinct contributor to psychological outcomes.
- Emerging research suggests that darker-skinned women experience higher levels of stigma, social exclusion, and internalized bias. However, the extent to which colorism independently affects mental health outcomes remains unclear.
- This study explores how skin tone discrimination influences mental health among women across diverse populations.

Methods

This study utilized a scoping review methodology following PRISMA-ScR guidelines.

- Peer-reviewed articles were identified using databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, and ProQuest.

Inclusion criteria:

- Studies explicitly measuring skin tone or colorism
- Female participants
- Reported mental health outcomes
- Peer-reviewed publication

- Limitations:

- Studies examining race without skin tone distinction
 - Non-mental health outcomes
- Data extracted included:
- Country/region
 - Sample characteristics
 - Measurement tools
 - Evidence of colorism–mental health linkage
 - Whether colorism was analyzed separately from race

Results



- Across reviewed studies, colorism was consistently associated with adverse psychological outcomes.
- Reported mental health outcomes included:
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
 - Psychological distress
 - Trauma-related symptoms
 - Low self-esteem
 - Body dissatisfaction
- Several studies demonstrated that darker-skinned women reported higher depressive symptoms and lower self-worth compared to lighter-skinned peers.
- Internalized colorism and interpersonal discrimination emerged as key predictors of anxiety and distress.
- Multiple studies confirmed that skin tone bias operated independently from racial identity.

Discussion and Future Direction

- Findings suggest that colorism functions as a chronic psychosocial stressor contributing to cumulative psychological strain.
- The distinction between racism and colorism is critical for advancing mental health equity research.
- Future research should:
 - Incorporate standardized colorism measurement tools
 - Utilize longitudinal study designs
 - Apply intersectional frameworks
 - Expand global representation beyond U.S.-based samples
- Recognizing colorism as a distinct social determinant of mental health is essential for developing equitable research, prevention strategies, and culturally responsive interventions.

References

