

# Relationship between Colorism and Mental Health

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## Background

- Colorism is differential treatment based on skin tone within and across racial/ethnic groups and reflects phenotype-based stratification rooted in colonial and racialized hierarchies.
- Unlike broad racial discrimination, colorism operates through within-group and between-group social valuation of skin tone, shaping lived experiences in distinct ways.
- Growing evidence suggests colorism may function as a chronic psychosocial stressor associated with depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem, internalized stigma, and identity-related distress.
- These effects may accumulate across the lifespan through repeated exposure to appearance-based bias, social exclusion, and devaluation.
- However, the literature remains fragmented across disciplines, with inconsistent definitions, limited measurement standardization, and uneven representation across populations.
- This lack of conceptual and methodological consistency limits the ability to draw firm conclusions about the mental health burden of colorism and slows development of targeted interventions.

## Purpose

- This scoping review maps how colorism is conceptualized and measured, synthesizes its reported associations with mental health outcomes, and identifies methodological and population gaps to guide future research and inform prevention and clinical strategies.

## Methods

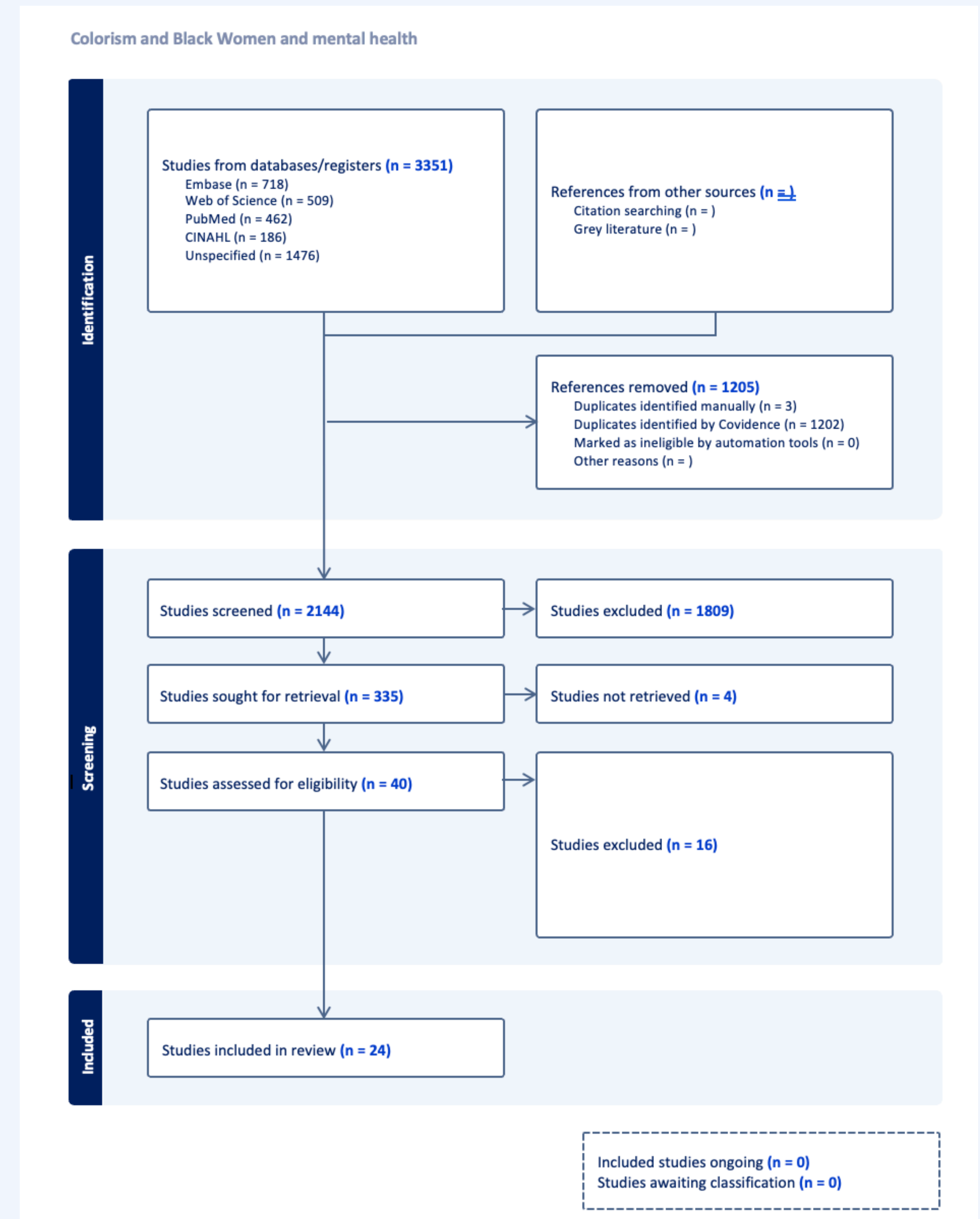
- Scoping review conducted using established methodological guidance and reported in accordance with PRISMA-ScR.
- Systematic searches were performed in Embase (n=718), Web of Science (n=509), PubMed (n=462), and CINAHL (n=186), with 1,476 additional records identified through supplementary sources, yielding 3,351 total records.
- Records were imported into Covidence for de-duplication and screening; 1,205 duplicates were removed, leaving 2,144 unique records for title and abstract review.
- Following title and abstract screening, 1,809 records were excluded for lack of relevance, and the remaining studies advanced to full-text review.
- Full-text screening was conducted independently by trained undergraduate research assistants using standardized eligibility criteria.
- For the presenter's subset, 24 studies met inclusion criteria and 224 were excluded based on prespecified criteria. Included studies proceeded to data extraction and thematic synthesis.
- Screening discrepancies were resolved through reviewer discussion and senior investigator adjudication.

## Progress and Preliminary Synthesis

- Six UROP student reviewers completed independent full-text screening and data charting using a standardized protocol. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus and primary reviewer adjudication.
- Included studies examined associations between colorism and mental health across diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural populations, reflecting the broad reach of colorism across groups.
- Reviewer-extracted data are being consolidated into a unified analytic file to support the final scoping review synthesis.
- Ongoing thematic analysis will characterize how colorism is conceptualized and measured, identify common contexts of exposure, and summarize mental health outcomes most frequently associated with colorism, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, low self-esteem, and internalized stigma.
- The final synthesis will also identify methodological strengths, limitations, and research gaps to inform future studies and intervention development.
- Results and the thematic framework will be refined through mentor consultation and incorporated into the final manuscript.

## Key Takeaways & Next Steps

- Colorism appears to function as a chronic psychosocial stressor linked to multiple mental health outcomes, yet the current evidence base remains fragmented and methodologically inconsistent.
- This scoping review will produce the first structured synthesis mapping how colorism is conceptualized, measured, and associated with mental health outcomes across populations.
- Findings will inform a peer-reviewed manuscript and future empirical research aimed at improving measurement, expanding population coverage, and guiding prevention and clinical strategies addressing colorism-related mental health disparities.



## Resources:

- Kiang, L., Espino-Pérez, K., & Stein, G. L. (2020). Discrimination, Skin Color Satisfaction, and Adjustment among Latinx American Youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 49(10), 2047–2059. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-020-01244-8>
- Cureton, A., Cross, F. L., & Polk, S. (2025). Erratum to “An Exploration of the Impact of Racism and Discrimination on the Mental Health of Latinx Youth” [Acad Pediatr. 2024;24(suppl 7):S139–S146]. *Academic Pediatrics*, 25(4), Article 102813. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2025.102813>
- Leath, S., Bart-Plange, D.-J., Moseley, S., & Teklu, H. (2023). Colorism as Historical Trauma: Exploring School Racial Context, Peer Dynamics, and Counternarratives Among Black Women. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 49(5), 646–683. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00957984231191856>