Colorism Within Media & Effect on Students
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Did you know that students of color with lighter skin are perceived and treated more favorably compared to darker skin students (Webb, 2016)? This is an act of colorism, which is very common, favoring a lighter-skinned person compared to a darker-skinned person. Colorism is often referred to as an issue only in the black community, but the truth is that it’s a problem in every community of color. Due to colorism, black people are more likely to use products just to change their skin tones. Even in the media, it’s more likely a lighter-skinned person would be able to get a part in a movie/show than a darker-toned person. In this article, we will discuss colorism, dark-skin representation in the media, and the impact of representation on students from the perspective of six black girls.

Defining Colorism

In my definition, colorism is when an individual is treated or perceived worse or even discriminated against based on their skin tone. The real definition that Alice Walker discovered is that colorism is the “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (Webb, 2016). Colorism is sometimes mistaken for racism. Unlike racism, colorism can happen amongst people from the same race who will use someone’s skin tone to establish a superiority system. Racism can not be experienced by someone that is the same race as you (Webb, 2016). Colorism can be experienced by darker-skinned people of color perpetrated by other people of color or white people. Colorism is also related to beauty standards as it determines those desirable by society. Colorism can impact how young kids view their own beauty and mental health. Colorism affects people’s beauty standards to the extent of affecting opportunities for jobs, mental health, and self-esteem (Webb, 2016).

To sum it up, colorism is being discriminated against or treated differently based on tone or complexion. For example, you might see a light skin person being assisted in a store or getting better customer service solely because they are light and a darker skin tone person having a bad experience in that same store. Colorism presents itself in many ways, one being in the media. In my own experience on social media as a high school student, I noticed that whether I’m seeing my own personalized feed of other teenagers of color or advertisements, it’s evident that dark skin women are severely underrepresented.
Colorism impacts the way people see themselves, and the media influences the ideals and worldviews that are transferred to people, especially teenagers. When African Americans first began to take the stage in Hollywood, light skinned actors were preferred for the more notable roles (Farrow, 2021). Those with darker skin were cast into roles that played upon racial stereotypes. Many people, lighter skinned and dark, felt as if they couldn’t be black without being categorized (Farrow, 2021).

Nowadays, black people are more common in T.V shows and movies, in both supporting and leading roles (Tapp, 2021). In 2019 family films, 6.1% of all characters were black women and girls (Tapp, 2021). Black female characters are also more likely to be portrayed as “smart” than their white counterparts. But there are a few flaws. Black women are more likely to be depicted as violent, and shown nude. Almost 80% of black female characters have lighter to medium skin tones (Tapp, 2021). In the past decade, more than half of the female black main characters had their hair done in ways that matched white standards of beauty. Of the top 100 films of the last decade, back women and girls only represented 3.7% of leads and co-leads (Tapp, 2021).

Media representation of black people affects the attitudes and expectations children have of themselves and the world. Representing minorities stereotypically or even excluding them from the media can lower children’s self-esteem (Tapp, 2021). Positive representation of Black people can improve self esteem of kids when they see people like them portrayed in positive ways in media (Tapp, 2021).

Representation inside and outside of the classroom has a big impact on students (American, 2020). When it comes to representation inside the classroom, having teachers that look like you makes a big difference (American, 2020). Research done by Johns Hopkins University studied the impact of representation inside the classroom on black students and found that representation really impacts student outcomes (Rosen, 2018). For example, having at least one black teacher can make a black kid thirteen times more likely to get into college (Rosen, 2018).

Having black teachers as students gives you some sort of hope for the future. It shows that despite your skin color, you can still grow up to be anything you want. It lets students of color know that their skin color doesn’t define their future, and that despite their skin color, they can go to any college, take whatever career path they choose, and accomplish all their hopes and dreams.

Even outside of the classroom, representation can really impact black students. Despite the increase in representation of black people in the media, negative stereotypes still persist, especially in children’s shows (McCool & Moten, 2020). For example, in the TV show Tom and Jerry, which is still available to children, there’s a character named, Mammy Two Shoes, who embodies negative stereotypes of black women (McCool & Moten, 2020). This character
represents the “Mammy” stereotype, a historical stereotype in the United States picturing a specific, older, heavier, darker skinned black woman who works for a white family and cares for their children (McCool & Moten, 2020). Negative stereotypes such as the “Mammy” trope negatively affect black students’ self-esteem and can cause an inferiority complex (McCool & Moten, 2020).

Colorism can be experienced by darker skinned children through the media and through school. The media disregards the effects of colorism by how they present dark skinned people on screen. Darker skin African Americans are rarely acknowledged while lighter skin African Americans are praised. This can have a real impact on a darker skinned teenager’s self-esteem and self-worth. Cable T.V, Hollywood and other media claim they aren’t responsible for creating the culture of colorism, but a big part of the problem stems from the media’s negative portrayals (Batlanki, 2017). Not being welcomed in society for being black is one thing, but not being welcomed in your own community for simply having more melanin is another. In order to prevent colorism, you must address instances of colorism. If you ever witness colorism, say something by calling out colorist behavior and having empathy for those who experience colorism. The most important thing to do is to speak up and comfort those being impacted because by staying silent you are indirectly supporting harmful behavior. Always make an effort to learn and educate others on colorism. In the classroom, teachers should educate the classroom on such topics and they should have a whole discussion about it. Students should embrace their differences rather than bullying each other about it. Being made to feel like a minority because of the shade of your skin in any environment isn’t easy, let alone in an educational environment.

References


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