

Shades of Inequality: A Survey-based Analysis of Colorism in Social and Professional Settings

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ABSTRACT

Background

Colorism, a discrimination against individuals based on their skin color. It remains an under-researched social problem in the South Asian region, particularly in countries like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. This silent bias shape one's social acceptance and identity, education, and career opportunities. Despite its significance, this topic has received limited attention in Pakistani research.

Methodology

In order to analyze the impact of colorism on self-perception and confidence along social dimensions, a cross-sectional online survey was conducted with over 385 residents from Karachi, Pakistan. The questionnaire is designed in a way to cover the insights across four key domains: socio-demographic information, including age and grade level, as well as socioeconomic status, like income or occupation; self-esteem; and self-efficacy. Assessed through carefully constructed sets of assertive/non-assertive items, participants' perceptions about their skin tone worth together with capabilities were evaluated for endorsement at varying levels of confidence.

Results

The findings highlight the widespread yet unspoken influence of colorism on societal views and personal confidence within Pakistani society. Although many participants reported denying the role of skin tone they possess, deep-rooted skin tone biases do exist. Of the 385 respondents, 58.4% were female and 41.6% male, with 34% identifying as having a brown complexion. A majority (74.1%) of being under the age of 30 were socially active as well as vulnerable, as this age group is more exposed to societal standards of beauty and success, making them particularly susceptible to the psychological impacts of colorism. While 53.8% of participants reported that skin tone does not affect social relations, a significant proportion of 23.6% recognized its effect, while another 22.6% remained neutral, demonstrating some degree of internalized colorism. Regarding employment, only 19.2% believed their skin color had a negative impact on job prospects compared to 62.6% who disagreed, and the remainder (18.2%) were uncertain—regardless, these attitudes reveal persistent undertones of colorism in society. Further analysis using the Chi-square test showed that beliefs about career-related colorism significantly correlated with efforts to reduce or alter one's skin tone, illustrating the psychological and behavioral impacts of such discrimination. **Conclusion:** The study highlights that perceptions of skin tone can influence social and interpersonal lives. It underscores the need for further research on colorism in the region to understand its implications better and promote discussion on this critical issue.

Keywords

Stratification; Skin tone; inequality; social activities; race

INTRODUCTION

Colorism/Color-based discrimination, is a type of discrimination usually based on the shades of an individual's skin color, typically within the same ethnicity or racism.^{1,2} This bias frequently leads to individuals with lighter skin tones being favored or receiving preferential treatment compared to those with darker skin tones. Multiple aspects of life can be affected by colorism including employment, education, social interactions, and media portrayal while also acknowledging that not all media roles necessitate a fair skin tone³, in which the evaluation of self-esteem and self-competence for the importance of skin color is socioeconomically constructed by gender⁴. According to a National survey of black Americans, biases based on skin tone possess a pessimistic effect on self-respect and self-confidence but the level of these domains are different in males and females.⁵

No doubt colorism can equally impact both genders^[3], but in this era of racism, its effects can be dominantly observed in Black Females.^{6,7}

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According to a study, a woman with dark skin tone, when hit with colorism stratification, this combo leads to low self-confidence in black women.^{8,9}

In South Asia, fair complexion is traditionally considered as a symbol of elite and prestige.¹⁰ Due to the region's climate, occupations such as farming and outdoor labor often result in darker skin tones. Consequently, societies in South Asia, including Pakistan and India, tend to associate pale skin with higher social status, while viewing darker skin tones as indicative of lower-class standing. Findings suggest that this discrimination often leads to the use of whitening creams or different skin-lightening procedures that could be worth of billions of dollars. In our society, the imagination of beauty is mostly associated with a fair complexion.^{11,12}

A recent study investigates the entrenched issue of colorism and its effects on African American women's life outcomes, focusing on young women's (ages 18-23) perceptions. It examines correlations between skin complexion, self-esteem, and social capital, revealing the ongoing relevance of colorism in the 21st century and its interplay with racism and classism.¹³ Furthermore, a study highlights the complexity of the Black-White wealth gap by considering both racial and skin tone appraisals. The findings reveal that wealth disparities are smallest among lighter-skinned Black individuals and largest among darker-skinned Black individuals, showing how ongoing disadvantages make it harder for darker-skinned Black people to build wealth and highlighting the detailed nature of racial inequality.⁷

Moreover, a recent study examined the impact of colorism on the self-esteem of Pakistani women, revealing that residence, education, and colorism significantly influence self-esteem. The study highlights the need for focused education in suburban areas and public health initiatives to combat colorism and promote confidence in one's skin tone.¹⁴

The current study explores the relationship of colorism with self-efficacy and self-esteem among Pakistani people. With a thorough investigation, the research tries to understand how perceptions of skin tone, whether deemed attractive, non-attractive, or inconsequential, influence self-efficacy and self-esteem. Furthermore, the study attempts to unfold the impact of skin color on social activities and job opportunities and elucidate

the strategies that Pakistani people especially women consider adopting to enhance their skin tone. This multifaceted examination aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding colorism in Pakistani society and its implications for women's self-perception and well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Current research focused on the vibrant and diverse city of Karachi, Pakistan, which highlights an estimated population of around 20 million according to the recent population census. It was quite impossible to adopt remote data collection methods due to the challenging circumstances presented by the ongoing COVID-19 situation. Due to these scenarios, the proposed study utilized Google Forms and a questionnaire to collect data from the targeted population. To advocate equal representation and diversity, for questionnaire distribution among the residents of Karachi, a snowball sampling approach was carried out. The study examined the complex dynamics of colorism stratification within this highly populous city.

Sample size Calculation

To determine the appropriate sample size for the proposed study, an open epi calculator was used, considering the estimated population of around 20 million individuals in Karachi. With a desired 5% absolute precision, a 50% variance, and a 95% confidence level, the calculated sample size was established at 385 respondents. This sample size was considered sufficient for achieving meaningful insights into the perceptions and experiences related to color-based stratification among Karachi's diverse population.

Interviewee Consent

At the starting of the questionnaire, a proper consent was obtained from participants, allowing us to use their views in the compilation of this study.

Data Collection and Variable Evaluation

The usage of Google Forms, a well-calculated sample size, and a systematic approach for obtaining consent from each participant, collectively form the base of a robust data collection methodology for this research into the impact of colorism stratification on multiple aspects of individuals' lives in Karachi, Pakistan.

a. Independent variables

The first part of the questionnaire comprises basic demographic details, including gender, age, and education.

In the second part of the questionnaire, for the principal interest, skin tone was an independent variable of this study. The Fitzpatrick scale was selected in which six different skin tones (Pale white, fair, darker white, light brown, brown, and dark brown) were mentioned and respondents were asked to choose one.¹⁵ Three questions were about their perception of their skin tone and its impact on their social activities and careers. Another question was related to the remedies they were taken to improve the skin tone.

Dependent variables: In the study, self-esteem and self-efficacy were considered as dependent variables. For the self-esteem, we opted six questions from Rosenberg's self-esteem scale¹⁶ The interviewee was asked to choose the answer from affirmative to dissented options. The negative option was coded as less valued so the positive responses could get more points. For Self-efficacy, six questions were asked, taken from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) survey.¹⁷ The positive responses were valued as 2 points while the negative responses were considered as 1 point.

RESULTS

The study included participants ranging in age from 13 to 45 years and above, with a total of 385 participants. Among these, 160 (41.6%) were male, and 225 (58.4%) were female, as illustrated in Table 1. Educational diversity was evident among the participants, with a predominant 71.4% holding a bachelor's level of education. When queried about their skin tone, respondents selected from various options provided in the questionnaire. Notably, 40.5% of participants reported having a fair complexion, while 34% had a brown skin complexion. A smaller percentage indicated pale white or dark brown/black skin tones. Figure 1 visually represents participants' responses to the inquiry about their skin tone. Despite a range of age groups participating in the online questionnaire, individuals aged 20 to 30 years constituted the majority at 74.5%. Only a minimal fraction ($n = 12$) fell into the 45 years and above age group, as detailed in Table 1.

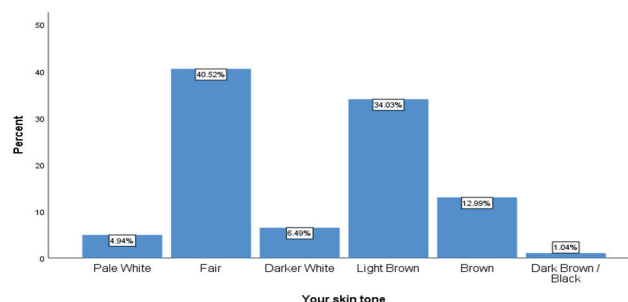


Figure 1: Percentage Breakdown of Different Skin Tones Among Participants

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Breakdown of the surveyed Participants

Characteristic	n (%)
Gender	
Male	160 (41.6%)
Female	225 (58.4%)
Age (Years)	
13 – 19	47 (12.21%)
20 – 30	287 (74.5%)
31 – 45	39 (10.12%)
Above 45	12 (3.12%)
Education	
Primary (Class 1 – 5)	0 (0%)
Secondary (Matriculation)	5 (1.3%)
Intermediate	52 (13.5%)
Bachelors	275 (71.4%)
Masters	51 (13.2%)
PhD	2 (0.5%)
Skin Tone	
Pale White	19 (4.9%)
Fair	156 (40.5%)
Darker White	25 (6.5%)
Light Brown	131 (34%)
Brown	50 (13%)
Dark Brown / Black	4 (1%)

When inquired about their skin color perception, 51.95% of participants expressed that they perceive

their skin tone as attractive. In contrast, a minor fraction (8.83%) of respondents indicated perceiving their skin complexion as unattractive, as depicted in figure 2.

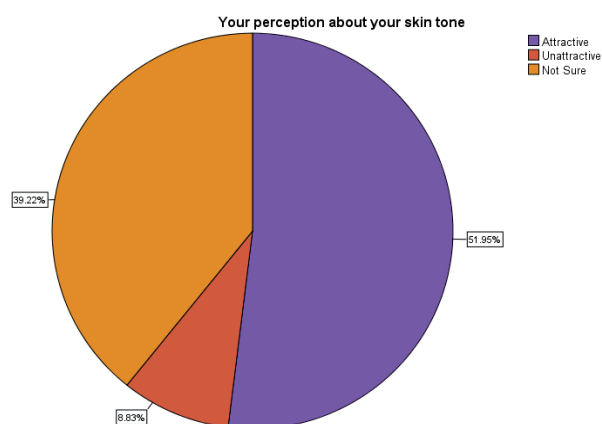


Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of Self-Perceived Skin Tone among Participants

Diverse individuals hold varied perspectives regarding the impact of skin color on multiple aspects of life. A notable 53.8% of participants denied the notion that skin tone plays a role in social activities, while only 23.6% believed in having an impact. Similarly, when it comes to job opportunities, 19.2% of participants believed that skin color affects them, while a contrasting 62.6% denied such an influence. About half of the remaining participants in both perception categories either affirmed the impact of skin color on social activities or expressed uncertainty about the influence of skin complexion on social interactions, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Perception About Impact of Skin Color

Parameters	Yes	No	Maybe
	n (%)		
Social Activities	91 (23.6%)	207 (53.8%)	87 (22.6%)
Job Approaches	74 (19.2%)	241 (62.6%)	70 (18.2%)

Usually, various methods are being used to enhance skin color, and among the surveyed population, 44.67% (172 participants) acknowledged adopting such means. A significant portion of participants opted for herbal or home remedies, constituting a substantial fraction (29.4%). In contrast, 13.5% utilized market products, while a smaller

proportion, 1.8%, turned to medicines available in the market to enhance their skin tone (Table 3).

Table 3: Strategies Adopted to Enhance Skin Color

Methods To Enhance Skin Tone	n (%)
Herbal / Home Remedies	113 (29.4%)
Available Market Products	52 (13.5%)
Medicine	7 (1.8%)
Total	172 (44.67%)

The comparison between the “perception regarding the impact of skin tone on job approaches” and the “methods to enhance skin tone,” coupled with the application of the Chi-square method, unveiled a noteworthy association between these two parameters. Crosstabs analysis demonstrated that 37.4% of participants believed there is no impact of skin tone on job approaches, and interestingly, these participants also refrained from using available market products to enhance their skin complexion. Surprisingly, 16.4% of participants, despite denying the notion that job approaches are influenced by skin tone, opted for herbal/home remedies for skin color improvement, as outlined in Table 4.

A further examination of the “perception regarding the impact of skin tone on social activities” was conducted in conjunction with the “methods to enhance skin tone.” Utilizing the Chi-square test, a significant relationship between these two parameters was established. Crosstab analysis indicated a substantial portion of the sample population who neither believe in the impact of skin tone on social activities nor see a need to enhance their skin tone. The crosstab data further reveals that 29.4% of participants resort to herbal therapies or home remedies for skin tone improvement. Within this group, a small fraction, 9.4%, believes that social activities are influenced by skin tone, while a significant 60% do not consider skin tone as a determining factor for social activities. The remaining 4.4% expressed uncertainty about the effect of skin complexion on social activities, as outlined in Table 5.

Table 4: Comparison Between Methods to Enhance Skin Tone & Impact of Skin Tone on Job Approaches

Impact of Skin Color on Job Approaches	Methods to Enhance Skin Tone				Chi-Square (Significance)
	Herbal/ Home Remedies	Available Market Products	Medicine	No Need for Skin Enhancement	
Yes	33 (8.6%)	14 (3.6%)	3 (0.8%)	24 (6.2%)	0.001
No	63 (16.4%)	30 (7.8%)	4 (1%)	144 (37.4%)	
Maybe	17 (4.4%)	8 (2.1%)	0 (0%)	45 (11.7%)	
Note: p < 0.005					

Table 5: Comparison Between Methods to Enhance Skin Tone & Impact of Skin Tone on Social Activities

Impact of Skin Color on Social Activities	Methods to Enhance Skin Tone				Chi-Square (Significance)
	Herbal/ Home Remedies	Available Market Products	Medicine	No Need for Skin Enhancement	
Yes	36 (9.4%)	14 (3.6%)	3 (0.8%)	25 (6.5%)	0.001
No	60 (15.6%)	30 (7.8%)	4 (1%)	143 (37.1%)	
Maybe	17 (4.4%)	8 (2.1%)	0 (0%)	45 (11.7%)	
Note: P < 0.005					

DISCUSSION

Colorism, as a form of discrimination based on skin tone, highlights the shades of inequality prevalent in society. It has a profound affect with far-reaching consequences on individuals' social, educational, personal, and career aspects. This phenomenon holds significant importance as it underscores how perceptions of beauty and attractiveness intersect with job opportunities and social activities, ultimately shaping individuals' experiences and access to resources. The proposed study surveyed 385 individuals aged 13 to 45+ to explore the impact of colorism on job opportunities and social activities, as well as the methods used to achieve fairer skin.

Considering colorism's impact on job opportunities, it's important to recognize the different scenarios that individuals encounter in the workplace. Some positions, such as customer-facing positions i.e. receptionist, air hostess, and marketing individuals often prioritize beauty and physical appearance. On the other hand, other roles such as doctors, pharmacists, nurses, and engineers prioritize skills, experience, and qualifications over physical appearance. This contrast reflects the

subtle nature of colorism and its diverse impacts across different job roles.

In our survey-based study, conducted in Karachi, Pakistan, sheds light on the influence of colorism, we found that a small fraction of participants (19.2%) acknowledged the impact of skin tone on job opportunities, while a considerable majority (62.6%) did not agree. This finding underlines the divergence in perceptions regarding the role of skin tone in accessing job opportunities. From the findings, it is observed that some individuals recognize the influence of colorism, while others deny its existence altogether.

However, it's important to acknowledge the limitations of our study. One notable limitation is the absence of a parameter indicating the specific job sectors in which participants are employed. It's probable that participants working in job sectors where beauty and physical appearance are prioritized may constitute a significant portion of the population that acknowledges the impact of skin tone on job opportunities. Thus, the lack of this contextual information may have influenced the study's findings and limited our ability to draw thorough assessment.

Furthermore, colorism may also be experienced by individuals in social activities in subtle yet impactful ways, such as networking events, social gatherings, or even everyday interactions. For example, lighter-skinned individuals are usually perceived as more desirable or attractive within social circles, leading to preferential treatment in social activities. In contrast, darker-skinned individuals encounter exclusion, affecting their ability to network, form connections, or access social resources.^{18, 19}

Moreover, colorism may influence interpersonal preferences and relationships, with societal beauty norms often prioritizing lighter skin tones. This preference may influence dating preferences, marriage proposals, and even social acceptance within personal relationships, perpetuating inequalities rooted in skin color.²⁰

Analysis of this survey indicates that 23.6% of participants recognized the influence of skin color on social interactions while 53.8% of individuals denied its impact and 22.6% remained uncertain.

Furthermore, our study explored the methods individuals employ to enhance their skin tone. Among the surveyed population, a notable 44.67% (172 participants) acknowledged adopting such means. Interestingly, a significant portion of participants opted for herbal or home remedies, constituting a substantial fraction (29.4%). This preference for natural solutions underscores the cultural significance and traditional practices surrounding skin tone enhancement within the community.

On the other hand, a smaller percentage of participants, 13.5%, reported using market products, while an even smaller proportion, 1.8%, turned to medicines available in the market to alter their skin tone. These findings highlight the diversity of approaches individuals adopt to modify their skin tone and reflecting the interaction between societal norms, cultural practices, and individual preferences regarding beauty norms.

The comparison between perceptions of skin tone's impact on job approaches and methods to enhance skin tone, analyzed using the Chi-square method, revealed a noteworthy association. Notably, participants who denied skin tone's influence on job approaches were less likely to use market products for skin tone enhancement. Similarly, a considerable portion of participants (60%) who did not believe in skin tone's impact on social

activities tended to refrain from enhancing their skin tone and do not consider skin tone as a determining factor for social activities.

In the future, when addressing colorism requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses education, awareness-building, and policy reform. By challenging societal norms and promoting inclusivity in hiring practices, we can aspire to create environments where individuals are valued for their skills, qualifications, and contributions rather than their physical appearance. Moreover, the aim of future research should be to explore the links of colorism with other forms of discrimination and its implications for marginalized communities.

While opinions may vary, it's important to recognize the widespread influence of colorism and work towards encouraging environments that promote equality and inclusivity for all individuals, regardless of their skin tone.

CONCLUSION

By this study, it is a noteworthy observation that a majority of participants denied the negative impact of skin tone on job or career opportunities. This difference between what people believe and what might be happening suggests there's a gap between perception and reality when it comes to the impact of skin tone on opportunities. Colorism is a complex and deeply ingrained form of discrimination that continues to affect individuals and communities worldwide. By acknowledging its existence, understanding its underlying causes, and taking concrete actions to address it, we can move towards a future where skin color no longer determines one's opportunities or worth.

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Author's contribution

Idea owner of this study: Faiza Akhtar and Somia Gul

Study design: Faiza Akhtar and Somia Gul

Data gathering: Faiza Akhtar and Saba Razzak

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Writing and submitting manuscript: Faiza Akhtar, Saba Razzak and Somia Gul

Editing and approval of final draft: Somia Gul

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