Black Students Still Favor Lighter Skin, Study Finds

Contributed by {{Kai Beasley - Black College Wire}}
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Results differ from earlier research.

By Kai Beasley
Black College Wire

A majority of African American students polled at a Midwestern university say lighter complexions are more attractive than darker ones, according to a study conducted by researchers from two Louisiana schools.

The results, taken from a sample of 100 students, indicated that 96 percent of the men preferred a medium to light complexion in women while 70 percent of women

found light skin of value in men.

This latest analysis of mating preferences explored a number of probable
causes, all of which were rooted in the "colorism" prevalent
from slavery through the 1960s, where lighter skin
typically meant more privilege. The results were published in 2006 in
the journal Race, Gender and Class.

Ashraf Esmail, a sociology and criminal justice professor at Delgado Community College in New Orleans, and Jas M. Sullivan,

an assistant professor of political science and African American Studies at Louisiana State University, conducted the study.

According to Sullivan, its purpose was to test whether the color line continues to be a problem for the African

American community.

%e2%80%9cWe know that there has been a preference for lighter skin in the past as a result of racism,%e2%80%9d said Sullivan, %e2%80%9cbut we really

wanted to know whether or not that preference still exists in the 21st century.%e2%80%9d

The researchers asked 50 African American men and 50 African American women, all students at a large Midwestern university,

to participate in semi-structured interviews. The university was not named in the study and Sullivan declined to provide the

name for this story.

The students were all between 18 and 19 years old with complexions ranging from light to dark. Each subject was shown

pictures of light, medium and dark-skinned men or women from fashion magazines and asked to rate the images based on

attractiveness. In addition, each respondent was asked questions about their mating preferences in terms of skin color and

about the value of skin color in the African American community.

One reason for the difference in answers between African American men and African American women, according to the authors,

is that women tended to take more characteristics into account, such as lips, hair, eyes, height and style of dress, when

determining a man's attractiveness.

The interviews pointed to slavery and a social stigma attached to darker skin.

%e2%80%9cI think that people are valued for their light skin,%e2%80%9d said one student. %e2%80%9cYou can take this theory way back to the house

slave mentality. I think a lot of people, because that was valued, were taught to value light skin. I think it is still an

ongoing type of thing, and society really has not lost that altogether.%e2%80%9d

Both men and women cited media as a driving force in the preference for lighter skin.

%e2%80%9cWhen you talk to a guy, he thinks that he wants a perfect girl he sees on the videos. Usually, the women portrayed in the

videos are light-skinned and have long hair,%e2%80%9d said one respondent.

Still, another participant argued that African Americans don%e2%80%99t divide themselves based on light and dark complexions. Rather,

the greater issue is color prejudice in the United States as a whole.

%e2%80%9cBlack people just see all black people as black no matter if they are light or dark. If you have any black in you, the black

community considers you black.%e2%80%9d

Analysis for the Esmail-Sullivan study took place in
2000. Though it is the most recent on the subject, its results differ dramatically from an earlier study of African

American college students conducted in 1997.

Louie E. Ross, then associate professor of sociology at Fayetteville State University in Fayetteville, N.C., interviewed 149

African American men and 236 African American women for his study, "Mate Selection Preferences among African American College

Students." His research was conducted on the campuses of two historically black institutions in the Southeast; one public

and one private.

The Ross study indicated that only 16.4 percent of women would prefer to date a person of a lighter complexion and 16.8

percent of women would want to marry a person with light skin. The study showed that 33.3 percent of men preferred to date a

person of a lighter complexion and 38.3 would prefer lighter skin in a marriage partner.

Taken together, the research by Esmail and Sullivan and the earlier research by Ross indicate that colorism does have some

impact on the African American community.

Esmail and Sullivan concluded that, %e2%80%9cFurther research in this area is needed. Clearly, colorism continues to plague the

African-American community and we must first accept that claim and begin to find solutions that would ameliorate the

superiority of light skin color to dark skin color.%e2%80%9d

Sullivan said there were plans to expand the research to other schools and to include historically black colleges. One of the

issues he and Esmail plan to address is that colorism isn%e2%80%99t unique to the African American community, he said.

The New York Times

reported on May 30 that the most popular cosmetic products among modern Indian women are those that lighten the skin. Didier

Villanueva, country manager for L%e2%80%99Oreal India, said in the article that "fairness creams" account for half of India%e2%80%99s skin

care market.

In the 2005 book

"Fair Women, Dark Men: The Forgotten Roots of Color Prejudice,"
Canadian anthropologist Peter Frost reports that lighter women were preferred in medieval Japan, Aztec Mexico and Moorish

Spain, even before there was significant contact with Western ideology.

Sullivan said, %e2%80%9cWhat we sought to uncover in this study is whether or not the preference for lighter skin still exists" in

the African American community. %e2%80%9cClearly you could make the connection between the preference for lighter skin and the past,

but the deeper question, the question that needs much more observation is the why. Why does the black community self-select?

Is this preference a dormant trait, is it something psychological, or is it just that light skin is all we see in the media

and that affects our choices? These are the questions that still need answering.%e2%80%9d

Other studies published by Esmail and Sullivan include: "Black Candidates in Search of Electoral Support: Is Success

Dependent on Residential Integration and Social
Interaction?" (2003), "Interaction Patterns between Black and White College Students: For Better or Worse?" (2002), and

"From Racial Uplift to Personal Economic Security: Declining Idealism in Black Education" (2002).

Kai Beasley is a May graduate of Emory University. To comment, e-mail
Black College Wire.
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I'm Light-Skinned But Prefer Darker Women

I read your article about the preference of lighter-skinned individuals and I totally disagree. Since the '80s, darker men have been the choice of women, and that includes white women. A lot of comedians joke about it, but it's very much true. I am a lighter-skinned male, and lighter-skinned women don't find me very attractive. I guess it's the individuals of the opposite skin color who have that curiosity about the other. I would much rather have a darker-skinned woman, because they are not as materialistic. I may like a darker-skinned lady as a lover, but not as my wife. It all changes as the wind blows.

Gordon Spencer

Killeen, Texas

June 14, 2007

A Lot of Black Women Discriminate

I can tell you from firsthand experience that the color code that has existed within the black community is still alive and well in the 21st century.

I have had a number of black women tell me to my face that the interest was there but that I was too dark. Because I have always been secure from childhood about my smooth, milk-chocolate complexion, I did not internalize it or allow such comments to negatively affect how I view myself.

I have to thank an aunt (one of mom's sisters) for always complimenting me as a child about my handsome looks and beautiful black skin: "You are your mom's best-looking child with your black self." I knew that she loved me and that she was not being mean or cruel. I also dated a woman whose previous relationship was with a white man, and her mother told her that she went from one extreme to the other. Go figure. No one defines me but me.

A lot of black women want to curse black men when they date outside the race, but they discriminate all too often against dark-skinned brothers like me who have extra melanin. It's sad, sick and ironic, but it is what it is and life goes on.

Curtis J. Hankerson

Miramar, Fla.

June 14, 2007

"Black" Skin, Kinky Hair Are Natural

Unfortunately, your discussion really ignores the fundamental truth that African-Americans in general accept white supremacy and hate their own blackness. Europeans have won the color wars. They have Black people convinced that the whiter you are, the closer you are to beauty and perfection. Conversely, the darker one is, the closer to what's ugly, evil, subhuman. Whiteness is better than Blackness. That's what African-Americans have internalized.

Whiter people in the U.S., Latin America and elsewhere have convinced African-Americans and other African descendants that there is something "wrong" or unattractive about "black" skin, dark skin or kinky hair. Guess what? That is what is natural for black people with kinky hair. Call it God's will or whatever.

Self-rejection and self-hatred, as the doll experiment shows, is really at the core of African-Americans' psyche. The self-hatred problem damages every aspect of their life dating, education, marriage, the workplace, friendships, choosing a good mate, raising a family and even parent/child relations. African-Americans are their own worst enemy in this regard. You can't raise intelligent, self-confident, healthy-minded children when you communicate to them (verbally and non-verbally) that they are lesser beings.

And lastly, although many people find love across racial and color lines, black women are being shoved in that direction. It may be because their mothers and others fill their heads with stories of all that's wrong with black men. Young black women start thinking they can do better with someone else a man who's not going to be denied the best jobs, who has a lower chance of ending up in jail, and by the way who can give their babies light skin and "good "hair.

As for dark-skinned people attracting mates and lovers, not to worry. Plenty of people (black and white) have an appreciation of Black. For every Seal, there are plenty of Heidi Klums out there open to the pleasure of his company and having his babies. Didn't Tonya Pinkins, and a Pointer sister have similar matchups? Sidney Poitier and Rod Carew, too ? And how about Roberto Clemente? There will always be somebody, even for those who are considered less desirable by their own kind for one foolish reason or the other.

Take heart, though. It's not only African-Americans with these unfortunate perspectives on color. They may, however, be the most heavily impacted and the most obvious victims of the color wars. "Whiteness" means superiority across the spectrum of South Asian color types and like I said, all over Latin America. Not to worry. They wouldn't dare bring those color prejudices here to our happy melting pot. Yeah, you keep dreaming.

Lawrence Aaron

Columnist, The Record

Hackensack, N.J.

June 22, 2007

Re: "I'm Light-Skinned But Prefer Darker Women"

Though you may feel you are disagreeing with the article's point that people prefer lighter skin in mates, you actually

aren't.

The fact that you prefer darker women because they are not materialistic is as unintelligent a statement as "I prefer

light-skinned men because they aren't as masculine or aggressive." The complexion of someone's skin can't possibly be a

factor for a trait such as being materialistic. In a way, you are saying that because these women are dark-skinned, they

don't value what most Americans do regardless of race, money, clothes, cars, etc. Furthermore, to say you prefer a darker

woman as a lover but not a wife is further evidence of your own slave mentality.

Please keep in mind the reason you have

light skin is because some slavemaster said your ancestor was good enough to "love" while he was married to a white and

definitely lighter woman. To group people based on lightness and darkness for the purposes of selecting partners shows little

experience in the real world.

Saying light-skinned women are materialistic or that dark-skinned women are good for sex but not marriage is equal to what

whites say about blacks as whole. Only now, we do the degrading and devaluing for them. Job well done.

Na Nisa-Noel T. Batiste

Los Angeles

Aug. 28, 2007