

COLOR CODED: CARICATURES, MYTHS, TROPES, AND DIFFERENTIATIONS IN
STEREOTYPES OF BLACK WOMEN BASED ON SKIN TONE IN THE UNITED STATES

by

KRYSTEN LASHANE LONG

(Under the Direction of Vanessa Gonlin)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation develops and applies the theoretical framework of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) to examine how racialized and gendered stereotypes are differentially assigned to Black women based on skin tone within the Black community. CSE Theory posits that stereotypes “have color”—they are not uniformly applied across Black women but are distributed in patterned, communal ways that reflect and reinforce intra-racial hierarchies rooted in colonial legacies and controlling images. Four historical tropes—the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta—serve as the conceptual scaffolding for analyzing tone-based stereotype assignment. In 2024, I conducted an online survey of 300 Black adults across the United States to assess the extent to which participants personally endorsed tone-linked stereotypes. Participants classified their own skin tone and were asked to assign various traits—derived from the four trope categories—to Black women of light, medium, or dark complexion. Descriptive analyses revealed clear clustering of trait assignments by complexion, underscoring the communal persistence of color-coded stereotypes. Multivariate OLS regression models explored whether respondents’ own skin tone predicted their endorsement of these stereotypes. Findings showed that while skin tone was not a consistent predictor, respondents endorsed these color-coded beliefs to varying degrees, influenced by other factors such as gender, education,

income, and regional experiences. These patterns highlight how endorsement of colorist stereotypes operates within Black communal contexts beyond individual skin complexion, reflecting broader cultural dynamics. This study contributes to Black feminist theory, critical colorism studies, and the sociology of identity by empirically demonstrating how controlling images are not only inherited from historical narratives but actively endorsed, enforced, and transmitted within marginalized communities. CSE Theory offers a novel lens through which to understand stereotype assignment as a relational, affective, and culturally patterned practice—one that regulates belonging and reinforces intra-racial boundaries. The findings carry implications for mental health, social cohesion, and identity development, positioning CSE Theory as a critical tool for interrogating internalized bias and fostering cultural accountability through intra-racial dialogue.

INDEX WORDS: Stereotype Endorsement, Colorism, Skin Tone, Historical Tropes, Black Americans, Black Women

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DEDICATION

To Black Women—

whose laughter rings through kitchens and classrooms, boardrooms, and back roads,
whose tears water both the soil of our histories and the gardens of our futures.

To your brilliance, your beauty, your complexity, your contradictions.
To your audacity to live, love, resist, and rise—over and over again.

This work is for you. In all your infinite, incandescent being.

For the burdens you carry in silence and the joys you dare to claim out loud.
For every stereotype you dismantle simply by being, by breathing, by refusing to shrink.

May these pages honor your scars and your shine, your sorrow and your soaring. May this be a
small offering toward your freedom, your wholeness, and your endless becoming.

You are seen. You are worthy. You are loved.

IN MEMORIAM

This dissertation is dedicated, in part, to the memory of Dr. Ronald Simons, my late co-chair.

I am grateful for his intellectual guidance and for the belief he had in my work. He supported my scholarship and allowed it to develop organically, granting me the space to follow where it led. His expertise and commitment to the discipline helped shape the trajectory of this project, and his contributions to the field continue to resonate.

This work stands, in part, on the foundation of his mentorship. I honor his memory with respect and gratitude, and hope this dissertation reflects both the enduring influence of his scholarship and the many lives he impacted throughout his career.

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All glory, honor, and praise belong to You. For the grace that covered me, the strength that sustained me, and the divine purpose that kept whispering, “*Press on.*” Thank You for being my refuge and my source, for writing a story for my life that exceeds anything I could have imagined. This journey, every tear and triumph, is a testament to Your faithfulness.

To my husband

Steph, my love, my safe place—thank you for holding me steady in the storm, for seeing brilliance in me when I was too weary to claim it myself. Your unwavering belief, tender patience, and everyday acts of devotion have been a balm to my soul. Thank you for loving me in all my layers, for dreaming with me, and for being both anchor and wings.

To my son

Gabe, my heart walking outside my body. You are the light that makes every hard thing worth it. Watching you grow—curious, kind, brave—has been my greatest joy and fiercest motivation. This work is as much yours as it is mine. May you always know that your voice matters, your dreams are sacred, and you are so deeply loved.

To my family

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PROLOGUE: A THEORY BEGINS WITH A STORY

Six years ago, this theory began as a question that I could not shake: Why do certain stereotypes about Black women seem to stick more tightly to some than to others? Why do some of us walk into a room and are read as loud before we speak, or sexual before we move, or manipulative before we act? Why are some assumed to be strong enough to carry everything, while others are assumed to be too delicate to carry anything at all?

I did not come to this question from a distance—I came to it through experience. I have lived the assumptions. I have watched how skin tone mediates expectations, how it is weaponized within our communities, how it fractures us silently and out loud. I have been both visible and erased, trusted and resented, presumed to be privileged while carrying a weight I was never allowed to name. I needed a language to name what I had seen, heard, and felt—and what so many others around me confirmed, but could not always articulate.

This dissertation is the result of that search for language. It is the result of listening—to students, to sisters, to culture, to history. It is the result of sitting with discomfort, of refusing to accept oversimplified narratives about colorism that erase more than they reveal. Most of all, it is a result of building theory from the ground up: from stories, from patterns, from pain, from complexity.

I did not set out to create a theory. I set out to make sense of a contradiction. I wanted to understand how our own communities could reproduce the very stereotypes that harmed us, how we could knowingly or unknowingly assign meaning to each other based on complexion. I wanted to understand what that assignment means—for our identities, for our relationships, and for our futures.

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory was born in the space between the cultural scripts we are handed and the critical voices that question them. It is a theory built not on abstraction, but on lived experience. It does not ask who has it worse or better—it asks what is being believed, what is being endorsed, and why.

Before the literature, before the data, before the findings—there was this story. There was this question. There was this woman who wanted to understand, and in doing so, hoped to help her people see each other more clearly, and more justly. This is where the work begins.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Colorism—intra-racial discrimination based on skin tone—has long operated as an unspoken yet deeply embedded form of anti-Blackness within both the global Black community and Black American society at large. Though rooted in the legacies of slavery and colonialism (Drake & Cayton, 1993; Reuter, 1917; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992), colorism continues to shape opportunities, perceptions, and social interactions for Black Americans (Abrams et al., 2020; Alexander & Carter, 2022; Hall, 2017; Monk, 2014; Norwood, 2013; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). While some scholars have expanded the concept to include interracial dynamics—such as Hannon’s (2015) notion of “White Colorism,” which examines how White individuals evaluate people of color based on skin tone—this dissertation adheres to Alice Walker’s (1983) original definition of colorism as intra-racial in nature, “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color.” This conceptual choice is central to the present study, which focuses specifically on intra-racial stereotype endorsement among Black Americans. While structural and institutional outcomes of colorism have been well-documented—particularly in areas such as income, incarceration, media visibility, and educational attainment (Brown, 2004; Dixon & Telles, 2017; Goldsmith et al., 2006; Hall, 2017; Hall & Crutchfield, 2018; Harvey et al., 2005; Hill, 2002; Hochschild & Weaver, 2007; Hunter, 2007; Jablonski, 2012; Jackson-Lowman, 2013; Keith & Herring, 1991; Keith & Monroe, 2015; Landor & Smith, 2019; Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Monk, 2015; Monk, 2021; Russell-Cole et al., 2013; Uzogara & Jackson, 2016; Viglione et al., 2011)—less empirical attention has been

given to how colorism is consciously endorsed and performed within Black communities. Moreover, the field lacks a sociological theory that explains the mechanisms by which such endorsement occurs—how racialized and gendered stereotypes are differentially assigned based on skin tone, and how those assignments are sustained within the community. This dissertation offers a new theoretical framework, Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory, to fill that gap. CSE Theory is necessary because it offers a conceptual framework to explain not only the existence of colorist beliefs but the processes by which they are internalized, endorsed, and enacted intra-racially. It bridges Black feminist thought, which critiques controlling images, “images [that] are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 2000) and symbolic violence—with quantitative sociological methods, thereby bringing empirical weight to long-standing theoretical claims. CSE Theory is important because it shifts the lens of analysis inward—from external systems of white supremacy to intra-racial cultural logics—without minimizing structural racism. It highlights how colorism is not only a system of imposed bias but also a set of community-based beliefs, performances, and expectations about identity, desirability, morality, and worth. Finally, CSE Theory is critical to the field of sociology because it provides a replicable and testable framework for analyzing how identity-based hierarchies emerge and persist within marginalized communities. It opens new avenues for empirical testing, culturally grounded interventions, and the continued development of theory that centers Black intra-group dynamics.

At the core of CSE Theory is the assertion that stereotypes have color: they are not applied uniformly to all Black women but are color-coded and circulated in ways that reproduce

intra-racial hierarchies. Stereotypes such as the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta function not only as external constructions but as internalized social scripts that guide expectations, behaviors, and judgments within the Black community. Rather than approaching these dynamics from a psychological lens, this dissertation employs a sociological framework that foregrounds relational power, community-based socialization, and identity regulation. It shifts the focus from the structural outcomes of colorism to the symbolic and interpersonal processes through which it is enacted and sustained. Specifically, it asks: how are colorist stereotypes socially transmitted, culturally sanctioned, and publicly or privately reinforced—and what sociological function does their continued circulation serve in maintaining intra-group boundaries, hierarchies, and belonging?

This project centers Black women across the complexion spectrum, with a specific emphasis on light-skinned Black women, whose experiences have been both hypervisible and erased in the literature. Their social positioning is frequently assumed to be one of privilege, despite compelling evidence that light-skinned Black women are often subject to heightened surveillance, suspicion, and hypersexualization within Black communal spaces (Tate, 2015; Long, 2024). While this dissertation draws on survey data from Black adults of all skin tones, and finds that colorist stereotypes persist across the spectrum, the impetus for this project emerged from earlier work that illuminated the overlooked and often invalidated experiences of light-skinned Black women. Through the creation and application of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory, this dissertation intervenes in that erasure by offering a nuanced, historically grounded, and theoretically robust account of how stereotypes persist not only through systems of power but through the everyday performances and judgments of community

life. In doing so, it provides a corrective to dominant narratives that flatten the complexity of intra-racial identity, particularly for those whose proximity to whiteness has rendered them both visible and unseen.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the increased visibility of colorism in public discourse and its growing recognition in critical race and Black feminist scholarship, there remains a significant theoretical and empirical gap regarding how Black individuals consciously endorse, assign, or reproduce color-coded stereotypes within their own communities. Much of the existing literature emphasizes macro-level inequalities and structural discrimination, with far less attention given to the micro-level, affective, and behavioral dimensions of how these beliefs operate interpersonally (Harris, 2008; Monk, 2014; Keith & Herring, 1991; Hunter, 2007; Hall, 2008; Sims, 2009). Notably, Hall's (2005) concept of brown racism offers a foundational framework for understanding intra-racial discrimination as a consequence of internalized white supremacy, particularly through phenotypic bias among people of color. While Hall explores the psychological and sociocultural effects of skin tone bias, few studies interrogate the specific mechanisms through which colorist stereotypes are consciously endorsed and reinforced in everyday social interactions—especially in relation to Black women's gendered experiences of colorism.

This dissertation addresses that gap by offering a sociological theory—Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory—that situates colorism not only as a structural force but

also as a community-based system of belief, performance, and regulation. CSE Theory explains how stereotypes are actively circulated within Black communities as part of identity regulation, intra-group boundary maintenance, and the reproduction of racialized and gendered expectations. Rather than seeing stereotypes as static or externally imposed, CSE Theory foregrounds how they are endorsed, justified, or contested within the community itself.

This gap in the literature—between structural colorism and the lived, interpersonal expressions of skin tone bias—calls for a framework that captures not only how stereotypes about Black women are historically constructed, but how they are actively circulated within everyday interactions. Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory responds to this need by examining how members of the Black community themselves participate in assigning, endorsing, or challenging racialized and gendered traits based on perceived skin tone. To underscore the urgency and real-world applicability of this framework, the following case offers a contemporary example drawn from digital Black life that illuminates how color-coded stereotypes are debated, policed, and reinforced in communal spaces.

The Stakes of Colorism: A Viral Debate on “Pretty Privilege” and Skin Tone

In a widely circulated TikTok clip, a light-skinned Black woman shares that she often feels hypersexualized and invalidated by other Black women, even when she downplays her appearance. In the video, she expresses emotional fatigue and confusion around the way she is perceived—highlighting that, despite assumptions of privilege, her light skin has not shielded her from pain or judgment. The comment section becomes a battleground: while some users affirm

her experience, others accuse her of “playing the victim,” “leaning into her looks,” or “using her light skin for attention.” The TikTok algorithm amplifies the post across platforms, where a parallel conversation unfolds on Twitter and Instagram, invoking terms like “pretty privilege,” “light-skinned fragility,” and “internalized colorism.”

This case vividly captures the cultural work that color-coded stereotypes perform. Through a single, viral interaction, viewers and commenters engage in communal meaning-making about identity, tone privilege, and perceived intent. By analyzing moments like this, CSE Theory provides the language and framework to intervene—not to assign blame, but to reveal the patterned cultural processes through which tone-based beliefs gain power. In this way, the theory offers a pathway not only to understanding intra-racial colorism but to transforming how it is navigated, named, and ultimately disrupted.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to develop and apply Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory to investigate how color-coded stereotypes are endorsed and applied to Black women in the U.S. Using original survey data from 300 self-identified Black American adults across the skin tone spectrum, this research assesses both personal endorsement and perceived community endorsement of trait associations mapped onto light-skinned and dark-skinned Black women. These traits correspond to four controlling images: the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta. By analyzing how specific traits—such as manipulateness, nurturance, anger, or fragility—are assigned to Black women based on skin tone, this study interrogates the cultural

scripts that inform Black communal understandings of femininity, desirability, and respectability. Importantly, the study does not assume uniformity in belief. Rather, it seeks to understand the variation in endorsement and to identify the social, historical, and psychological mechanisms through which stereotypes are maintained, challenged, or adapted.

This project also elevates the experiences and voices of light-skinned Black women—a population that remains under-theorized and frequently mischaracterized in colorism literature. While the sample includes Black adults of all skin tones to capture intra-racial dynamics broadly, the theoretical motivation for this study emerges from prior research on light-skinned Black women’s specific experiences of hypervisibility, suspicion, and stereotype assignment. By situating their experiences within broader patterns of stereotype endorsement and communal perception, the study brings to light the symbolic and emotional burdens they carry—burdens that are often dismissed or misunderstood within the broader discourse.

Guiding Research Question

- Among Black adults, how does skin tone predict the assignment of stereotypical tropes to Black women?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to Black feminist thought, colorism literature, and the sociology of race, gender, and identity by offering a new theoretical framework that centers interpersonal

belief systems, relational dynamics, and intra-racial accountability. Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory provides a conceptual lens through which to understand how stereotypes are performed, endorsed, and enforced—not only through institutional structures but through everyday acts of speech, perception, and cultural meaning-making.

By addressing the lived experiences of light-skinned Black women, the study broadens the conceptual boundaries of colorism research and challenges binary narratives of privilege and harm. It highlights the affective, emotional, and psychological labor of navigating racial identity when presumed privilege is met with suspicion, sexualization, or social exclusion. This layered analysis enables a more intersectional understanding of how colorism functions within Black communities and supports culturally responsive approaches to education, mental health, and racial healing.

Furthermore, the study addresses a critical gap in sociological theory: the need for frameworks that bridge structural analysis with behavioral and symbolic dimensions of power. CSE Theory accomplishes this by integrating insights from Black feminist theory, social psychology, and cultural sociology, positioning itself as a theory capable of explaining both the persistence and complexity of intra-racial colorist logics.

Theoretical Framework Overview

This dissertation is grounded in Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory, which asserts that skin tone is a key factor in the endorsement and application of racialized and

gendered stereotypes about Black women. CSE Theory draws from and expands upon foundational frameworks such as Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) *Black Feminist Thought*, Hall's (2018) *Critical Skin Theory*, and Reece's (2018) *Color Crit*. More specifically, building on Collins' (2000) concept of controlling images, Hall's (2018) *Critical Skin Theory*, and Reece's (2018) *Color Crit*, this study extends beyond macro-level structural analysis to focus on micro-level belief systems. While these frameworks highlight the institutional and historical roots of colorism, they offer limited insight into how colorist logics are enacted interpersonally and sustained through intra-racial endorsement. Thus, CSE Theory bridges sociology, social psychology, and Black feminist epistemology to develop a nuanced account of how cultural scripts are lived and endorsed within Black intra-racial life.

CSE Theory incorporates key concepts from stereotype endorsement literature (Schmader et al., 2008), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1959) to examine how beliefs about skin tone are performed, justified, and transmitted. It theorizes endorsement not just as internal agreement but as a performative act—used to signal cultural knowledge, moral positioning, or group loyalty. By focusing on the performative nature of belief, CSE Theory shows how individuals may outwardly endorse or perform agreement with harmful tropes in order to navigate power, assert identity, or protect status within their own communities. In this way, CSE Theory bridges micro-level behavior with macro-historical narratives, treating stereotype endorsement as both a personal and cultural practice.

Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on Black American adults and the ways in which they perceive and endorse stereotypes about Black women based on skin tone. It does not include non-Black perspectives or extend to global Black populations. While it includes both men and women, the stereotypes examined are specific to Black women. The data are drawn from a survey, which may limit interpretive depth, though it allows for broader pattern recognition. While the original survey instrument captured both personal and perceived community-based stereotype endorsement, this dissertation focuses solely on the analysis of personal perceptions. This decision was made to narrow the scope of empirical investigation and deepen the theoretical focus on internalized and individually held views. Community-level endorsement data will be retained for future research and comparative analysis.

Future research should expand CSE Theory through qualitative, cross-cultural, and intersectional lenses. This study does not address colorism as experienced by men, nonbinary individuals, or Black people outside the U.S. context, though it gestures toward the potential for broader applications. Its reliance on survey data limits the depth of narrative insight; however, the breadth of patterns observed provides a valuable first step toward more expansive qualitative or intersectional research. Additionally, the complexity of personal identity, religious upbringing, regional variation, and class background are not fully explored within this scope but are areas for potential future inquiry. Future research should extend this work through interviews, focus groups, and cross-cultural comparisons to further refine and test CSE Theory.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research problem, theoretical foundation, and significance. Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive review of the literature on colorism, controlling images, intra-racial stereotype assignment, and theoretical gaps. Chapter 3 elaborates on Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory, outlining its theoretical lineage, development, conceptual framework, and core propositions. Chapter 4 details the methodology, including research design, sampling, survey instrument, measures, and analytic strategy. Chapter 5 presents descriptive patterns and tabulations that illustrate tone-based variation in stereotype assignment. Chapter 6 reports the results of the regression analyses for each stereotype trope. Chapter 7 integrates theoretical and empirical insights, highlighting how the findings inform, extend, or challenge existing frameworks. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses the implications of the findings, including theoretical contributions, practical applications, and directions for future research.

Each chapter is designed to build upon the last, drawing a clear arc from the conceptual foundation to empirical validation to theoretical implications. This structure allows for readers to trace how CSE Theory emerges, evolves, and ultimately reshapes how we understand colorism as both a historical and living force in Black communities.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta tropes have long maintained white supremacy by dehumanizing then controlling Black women (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2017). In fact, each trope is linked not only to particular personality traits (West, 2008; Woodard & Mastin, 2005) but also to specific skin tones. The Jezebel, for instance, is often portrayed as light-skinned (Jewell, 1993), seductive, and manipulative—a construct used to rationalize sexual violence during slavery (West, 1995). The Sapphire is loquacious, angry, and dark-skinned, deployed to quash Black women’s resistance (Jerald et al., 2016). The Mammy, also dark-skinned, is asexual, self-abnegating and maternal (Collins, 2000). The Tragic Mulatta, golden-hued and alluring, is the burden of racial mixing (Raimon, 2004). In this chapter, we will examine the historical and contemporary deployment of such tropes in literature, media, and cultural imagination—paying special attention to how they operate across a color spectrum and serve as mechanisms of intra-racial policing and control.

The literature on colorism has expanded over the past two decades, with increasing attention paid to the socio-economic and psychological consequences of skin tone bias (Goldsmith et al., 2006, 2007; Harburg et al., 1978; Hersch, 2006; Klag et al., 1991; Monk, 2015; Thompson & Keith, 2001). However, much of this work has focused on structural outcomes and has insufficiently theorized the intra-racial cultural mechanisms by which

stereotypes about Black women are assigned, enforced, and endorsed. This chapter reviews the literature on controlling images, intra-racial colorism, stereotype endorsement, and identity-based policing. It also identifies theoretical gaps that necessitate the development of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory—a new framework that conceptualizes the internal cultural reproduction of tone-based stereotypes within Black communities as an active and affectively charged practice.

Although numerous scholars have explored the material impacts of colorism—such as differences in income, incarceration rates, and educational attainment (Adames, 2023; Keith & Herring, 1991; Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Monk, 2014; Solis et al., 2023)—less attention has been given to the internalized and cultural expressions of colorism within racial groups. Furthermore, research that does examine interpersonal colorism often fails to explore how stereotypes operate not only as external projections, but as deeply embedded beliefs circulated within communities—beliefs that can be mobilized for identity policing, moral positioning, and social sorting.

By focusing on the active endorsement of these stereotypes, this study shifts the analytical lens from what colorism does to what people do with colorism—how it is enacted, justified, and reproduced through cultural scripts and relational judgments. This framing emphasizes colorism as an interpersonal and behavioral dynamic, rooted in a legacy of colonial aesthetics and sustained through generational practices of meaning-making.

Historical Construction of Tropes

From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression.

(Collins, 2000)

Black women in the United States have long been burdened by controlling images—stereotypes that originated during slavery and served to justify racial and gendered oppression (Collins, 2000). The Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta tropes emerged as ideological tools to uphold white patriarchal dominance and to neutralize Black womanhood as a threat (Donovan, 2011; Ghavami & Peplau, 2012; Goff, Thomas, & Jackson, 2008). Jezebel characterized Black women as hypersexual and deviant, justifying sexual violence; Mammy portrayed them as nurturing but asexual caretakers; Sapphire framed them as angry and emasculating; while the Tragic Mulatta depicted mixed-race women as emotionally unstable and doomed (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). These tropes, far from being relics, continue to influence media representations, cultural narratives, and interpersonal expectations in contemporary society.

A deeper examination reveals how these tropes functioned not only as justifications for violence but also as regulatory scripts shaping what Black womanhood was permitted to be (Byrd & Solomon, 2005; Thomas et al., 2004; West, 2008). They were used to police Black women's sexuality, morality, labor, and emotional expression, constructing a matrix of legitimacy that rewarded those who conformed to sanctioned roles and punished those who deviated (Collins, 2000). This framework is crucial for understanding the cultural persistence of these tropes. The images were designed to be flexible, ensuring their relevance across historical periods—from slavery to segregation to contemporary neoliberal contexts (Collins, 2000; Stephens & Few, 2007). These tropes have thus evolved rather than disappeared, with each iteration becoming more subtle and contextually specific. Yet their ideological force remains powerful, particularly when paired with colorist logic that assigns moral and behavioral value based on complexion.

The endurance of these controlling images stems from their ability to adapt to different cultural contexts. For instance, while Mammy no longer appears in plantation attire, her legacy lives on in depictions of Black women as selfless, overworked caretakers—roles often celebrated in media but harmful in effect. Likewise, the Jezebel image persists through contemporary hypersexualized portrayals of light-skinned Black women in music videos, reality TV, and social media, suggesting that these stereotypes remain culturally salient (hooks, 1990; Stephens & Few, 2007). These tropes serve both to justify external oppression and to enforce internal hierarchies, making their persistence within intra-racial contexts a vital site of study. Moreover, these controlling images act as both narrative and disciplinary tools—guiding how Black women are perceived and how they must behave to be accepted within their own communities.

The Jezebel Trope

The Jezebel trope is one of the most enduring and insidious constructions used to racialize and sexualize Black women. Its origins trace back to slavery, where it functioned ideologically to justify the widespread sexual exploitation of Black women by portraying them as inherently promiscuous, morally depraved, and insatiable in their sexual desires (Davis, 1981; West, 1995). Unlike the Victorian ideal of white womanhood, which emphasized purity and fragility, the Jezebel was cast as deviant and unrapeable—forever complicit in her own violation (Roberts, 2002; Collins, 2000).

Notably, as Patricia Morton (1991) and K. Sue Jewell (1993) argue, the original conceptualization of the Jezebel was often embodied in the figure of the octoroon—a light-skinned, racially ambiguous woman of mixed ancestry. These women, frequently portrayed in 19th-century literature and artwork, were imagined as sexually available and emotionally manipulative, exoticized for their proximity to whiteness while simultaneously denied the protections afforded to white women. The octoroon's perceived sexual allure made her both desirable and dangerous, setting the foundation for a stereotype that would endure and mutate across generations.

Contemporarily, the Jezebel trope has become more flexible, often transcending complexion boundaries to operate as a generalized controlling image of Black womanhood. However, it continues to be unevenly applied. Light-skinned Black women, particularly those

with Eurocentric features, are still disproportionately represented in media portrayals that emphasize seduction, moral laxity, and manipulative sexuality—manifesting in the archetypes of the “video vixen,” “Instagram baddie,” and “gold digger” (hooks, 1992; Stephens & Few, 2007). These figures are often framed as calculating and emotionally detached, echoing historical suspicions of the octoroon Jezebel while reinforcing the idea that sexual desirability in Black women is both an asset and a liability.

The contemporary resonance of the Jezebel stereotype also manifests in institutional and interpersonal outcomes. Empirical studies have shown that Black women—particularly those seen as more attractive or racially ambiguous—are more likely to be blamed for sexual violence, denied victim status, or labeled as promiscuous in educational and workplace settings (Donovan, 2011; Townsend et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2004). The consequence is not just representational harm but material disadvantage—where desirability marks them as morally suspect, undeserving of empathy, or ripe for sexual exploitation.

In intra-racial contexts, the Jezebel trope functions as a fault line of colorism and gendered resentment. Light-skinned Black women are frequently accused of using their appearance to seduce men or manipulate outcomes, drawing on a long-standing cultural suspicion that aligns beauty with danger and proximity to whiteness with betrayal (Brown et al., 2013). This framing positions them as outsiders within their own racial community—admired and resented, desired and distrusted. It creates a double bind in which light-skinned women are hyper-visible as sexual beings and invisible as fully human ones, undermining their ability to claim pain, vulnerability, or community belonging.

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory helps explain this dynamic by theorizing how color-coded tropes like the Jezebel are differentially assigned and endorsed based on skin tone. Rather than being a static stereotype, the Jezebel operates as a mobile, weaponized narrative—one that morphs to target those whose appearance is perceived as either too close to whiteness or too distant from respectability. For light-skinned Black women, this means navigating a social terrain where they are imagined as desirable and therefore dangerous, often cast as interlopers or threats to communal solidarity. For darker-skinned women, the Jezebel may manifest in subtler ways, but the expectation of sexual deviance can still follow them—especially when intersecting with class, dress, or attitude.

Ultimately, the Jezebel trope is not merely a vestige of slavery but an evolving cultural mechanism that disciplines Black women's sexuality and maintains hierarchies of gender, race, and desirability. Its persistence underscores the ways in which beauty, sex, and power are entangled within the racialized social imagination, with devastating consequences for how Black women are seen, judged, and treated—both within and beyond their communities.

The Mammy Trope

In stark contrast to the Jezebel, is one of the most deceptively benevolent constructions of Black womanhood, the Mammy trope. Originating in the antebellum South, Mammy was imagined as a dark-skinned, rotund, asexual, and deeply loyal domestic servant—contentedly devoted to the care and well-being of white families, particularly their children, while neglecting

her own (Collins, 2000; Wallace-Sanders, 2008). This image became foundational to U.S. racial ideology, offering a comforting vision of Black servitude that downplayed the violence of slavery and romanticized racial hierarchy. More than just a character, Mammy was a cultural prescription for Black women: to be nurturing but not maternal, strong but not assertive, and ever-present but never fully seen.

The Mammy trope functioned ideologically to resolve white anxiety about slavery, guilt, and Black resistance. By casting Black women as selfless and content in their subservience, Mammy offered an illusion of harmony in a society structured by brutality. She became a symbol of the “good” Black woman—one who accepted her place, asked for nothing, and found moral purpose in care work for white families. Her figure was commercialized and mass-produced in the form of Aunt Jemima, embedded in state propaganda, and reinforced through literature and film (Jewell, 1993; West, 1995). Mammy’s construction allowed for the justification of exploitation while denying Black women their own subjectivity.

Contemporarily, the Mammy stereotype persists in more insidious ways. While the visual markers of the trope may have shifted, its underlying expectations endure—particularly for darker-skinned Black women, who are more often expected to perform excessive emotional labor, demonstrate resilience, and provide care without reciprocation (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2017; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). In workplaces, educational settings, and community spaces, these women are praised for their strength and reliability, yet penalized if they deviate from the caretaking role. They are often expected to be “strong Black women”—always available, endlessly giving, and never in need of care themselves.

This dynamic produces a racialized and gendered form of symbolic violence, wherein social approval is contingent on self-erasure. The admiration for Black women’s “strength” masks a refusal to acknowledge their vulnerability, complexity, or pain. And while this strength is often publicly celebrated, it is privately demanded, creating a standard of emotional endurance that is neither humane nor sustainable (Kemp, 2024). Research shows that Black women who fail to meet these expectations—by setting boundaries, expressing fatigue, or prioritizing themselves—are often judged more harshly and perceived as selfish, angry, or unreliable (Watson & Hunter, 2016; Thomas et al., 2021).

Within intra-racial contexts, the Mammy trope is also deployed in ways that deepen colorist hierarchies. Darker-skinned Black women, perceived as “naturally” maternal, nurturing, or dependable, are often burdened with communal caregiving responsibilities—expected to lead, serve, and support others while being denied the grace or softness afforded to lighter-skinned counterparts. These expectations are not only gendered but stratified by complexion, reinforcing the idea that some women exist to give while others are permitted to receive. The moral elevation of Mammy—as selfless and ever-giving—becomes a trap, flattening darker-skinned women’s humanity into utility.

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory helps elucidate these dynamics by examining how stereotypes like Mammy are unevenly distributed across the color spectrum within the Black community. Far from being relics of the past, these tropes function as active scripts—dictating who is allowed to feel, to rest, or to resist. For darker-skinned women,

Mammy is not just an image but a socially enforced role, where deviation is penalized and compliance is invisible labor.

Ultimately, the Mammy trope limits the expressive range of Black women by demanding service, sacrifice, and stoicism. Dismantling this trope requires more than cultural critique—it calls for a reevaluation of whose labor we normalize, whose emotions we validate, and whose care we center. Only by challenging these deeply embedded expectations can we begin to honor the full spectrum of Black women’s humanity.

The Sapphire Trope

The Sapphire trope, like its counterparts Jezebel and Mammy, is a racialized and gendered construct rooted in slavery and reinforced across U.S. history to police and control Black women’s behavior, expression, and social standing. First crystallized in the mid-20th century through the character “Sapphire Stevens” on the radio and television show *Amos ’n’ Andy*, the Sapphire is typified as loud, emasculating, combative, and irrationally angry (Jewell, 1993). While Jezebel served to hypersexualize and Mammy to desexualize, Sapphire emerged to silence Black women’s assertiveness by pathologizing their emotional expression, political resistance, and leadership.

This archetype builds upon the perception that darker-skinned Black women in particular are naturally aggressive, emotionally volatile, and unable to conform to feminine norms of meekness, docility, or restraint (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011). It renders legitimate

frustration—particularly in response to racism, sexism, or injustice—as illegitimate, thereby discrediting the speaker and upholding systems of racial and gender domination. The Sapphire is punished not for what she says but for daring to speak, to challenge, or to assert.

In contemporary contexts, the Sapphire trope remains pervasive in both interpersonal and institutional settings. Within professional and educational spaces, Black women who speak with confidence or challenge dominant narratives are frequently labeled as “difficult,” “intimidating,” or “unprofessional” (Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2017). Their assertiveness is interpreted not as leadership but as hostility, not as passion but as rage. This racialized reading of behavior forces Black women into a double bind: be silent and overlooked or speak and be punished.

The trope’s reach also extends into interpersonal and familial dynamics. Within Black communities, darker-skinned women—more often read as embodying the Sapphire—are expected to shoulder emotional labor, maintain strength without complaint, and absorb slights without response. When they resist these expectations, their pushback is often met with accusations of being too harsh, bitter, or “mean.” Intra-racially, this creates divisions where emotional honesty and boundary-setting are misinterpreted as character flaws rather than acts of self-preservation.

Furthermore, the Sapphire trope undermines Black sisterhood by pitting women against one another along lines of tone, temperament, and perceived “respectability.” Lighter-skinned women may be socially permitted more emotional nuance or vulnerability, while darker-skinned

women are denied the same range, forced instead into the role of the strong but scorned disciplinarian. These dynamics are rarely accidental; they reflect how controlling images serve to reproduce hierarchies within marginalized groups by naturalizing stereotypes as essential truths (Collins, 2000).

Empirical research underscores the psychological and social toll of the Sapphire trope. Black women who report feeling the need to suppress their anger or moderate their voice to be heard are more likely to experience internalized stress, alienation, and role strain (Watson & Hunter, 2016). The constant monitoring of tone and temperament becomes a form of labor—an emotional tax—that others do not have to pay. When compounded with colorism, this stereotype becomes even more potent, as women with darker complexions report higher rates of stereotype attribution and punitive outcomes tied to perceived assertiveness (Keith & Monroe, 2015; Adames, 2023).

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory brings these dynamics into sharper focus by revealing how complexion interacts with tropic assignment. The Sapphire image is not universally applied to Black women—it is most often reserved for those who cannot be buffered by beauty privilege, proximity to whiteness, or the ability to “code-switch” into palatable forms of femininity. Within this schema, darker-skinned women are more easily seen as angry before they even speak, and once they do, their words are filtered through a lens of suspicion and defiance.

Ultimately, the Sapphire trope functions as a silencing strategy. It discredits anger as irrational, leadership as domineering, and power as inappropriate. In doing so, it reinforces the expectation that Black women should serve without complaint, succeed without visibility, and survive without softness. Challenging this image requires not only cultural re-narration but also intra-racial solidarity—one that recognizes how stereotype endorsement fractures community ties and weaponizes tone and expression against those most often denied the right to be heard.

The Tragic Mulatta Trope

The Tragic Mulatta trope constructs light-skinned or racially mixed Black women as emotionally fragile, racially ambiguous, and inherently doomed by their inability to fully belong in either Black or white communities. Originating in 19th-century literature and theater, this figure was portrayed as beautiful, sensitive, and morally complex—often as the child of a white father and Black mother, doomed to suffer because of her mixed racial heritage (Sollors, 1997; Raimon, 2004). Canonical works like *Clotel* and *Quicksand* typified the trope, casting the Tragic Mulatta as a melancholic heroine whose existence provoked pity, desire, and destruction (Larsen, 1929; Diggs, 1993). These narratives served white audiences by dramatizing racial mixing as a social tragedy, rather than a site of resilience or resistance.

The Tragic Mulatta functioned as a palatable victim of racism—softened by her proximity to whiteness, feminine delicacy, and often ambiguous loyalty. She was sympathetic, but ultimately marked as “impure” and therefore unworthy of full belonging in either racial group. As such, she reinforced white supremacy’s need for fixed boundaries and clear racial

hierarchies. At the same time, her presence complicated notions of Black womanhood by introducing the possibility of racial proximity to whiteness as both an advantage and a liability.

Contemporary iterations of the Tragic Mulatta trope persist in subtle yet powerful ways. Light-skinned and mixed-race Black women are often viewed as emotionally volatile, “too sensitive,” or not “Black enough” to claim legitimate racial belonging. They may be excluded from Black authenticity while simultaneously fetishized for their appearance, resulting in a contradictory positionality that is both hypervisible and delegitimized (Franco et al., 2016; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Intra-racially, these women may be dismissed as performative or privileged, while their pain—especially around identity policing—is minimized or dismissed.

The psychological and emotional toll of this trope is significant. Research has shown that mixed-race and light-skinned women frequently experience racial identity invalidation, liminality, and social rejection, often resulting in anxiety, hypervigilance, or a sense of racial exile (Young et al., 2021; Ho et al., 2017). These outcomes reflect how the Tragic Mulatta trope pathologizes vulnerability, casting legitimate emotional responses to racialized gender trauma as weakness. Moreover, her portrayal as passive, delicate, or apolitical undermines the complexity of light-skinned Black women’s lived realities—including their navigation of both privilege and pain.

Importantly, the continued cultural use of the Tragic Mulatta trope denies the agency and multiplicity of light-skinned Black women’s identities. It reduces them to symbolic casualties of racial mixture, rather than acknowledging their role in shaping Black womanhood, contesting

colorism, or theorizing from their own experiences. Reclaiming this trope—as both a historical fiction and a contemporary reality—is crucial for disrupting binary narratives of privilege and suffering that render some Black women hypervisible while silencing others. Within Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory, the Tragic Mulatta is not merely a figure of pathos but a symbolic battleground—revealing how intra-racial dynamics reify racial hierarchies through emotional delegitimization and racial ambiguity.

The Erasure of the Tragic Mulatta as a Trope of Black Womanhood

While the *Tragic Mulatta* is widely acknowledged in American literary and cultural studies, her consistent exclusion from the canon of Black womanhood tropes warrants urgent interrogation. Unlike the Jezebel, Mammy, or Sapphire—figures unequivocally situated within the cultural imagination of Black womanhood—the Tragic Mulatta is more often placed within the category of “mixed-race identity,” estranging her from Black feminist discourse and analysis (West, 2008; Woodard & Mastin, 2005). This positioning reflects a broader epistemic violence: the persistent refusal to acknowledge the full range and complexity of Black women’s identities, particularly those who exist at the intersection of Blackness and proximity to whiteness.

The historical trope of the Tragic Mulatta—most commonly represented as a light-skinned, racially ambiguous woman doomed by her inability to “pass” fully into whiteness or belong wholly to Blackness—originated in 19th-century literature written largely by white authors sympathetic to abolitionist causes (Arner, 1996; Berzon, 1978; Castillo, 2008). She is often portrayed as delicate, beautiful, and psychologically tormented, her tragedy emerging not

merely from racial mixing, but from the societal consequences of racial classification in a binary world. However, her construction as a “mixed-race” woman subtly but powerfully functions to de-Blacken her, despite the fact that she is legally, socially, and culturally considered Black in the contexts in which she appears.

This discursive move accomplishes two things: it reifies a racial hierarchy wherein proximity to whiteness equates to a diminished claim to Blackness, and it obscures the intra-racial colorism and identity policing that many light-skinned Black women endure. In essence, the Tragic Mulatta’s ambiguous positioning reinforces the myth that Black womanhood is monolithic—dark-skinned, visibly marked, and legible only through tropes of strength, hypersexuality, or servitude. Light-skinned Black women, then, become racial phantoms: too Black to be white, too privileged to be “authentically” Black, and thus erased from both discourses of oppression and community.

In scholarly literature, this exclusion is particularly revealing. Black feminist thought has thoroughly critiqued tropes like Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire for their roles in justifying Black women’s dehumanization and social control (Collins, 2000). Yet the Tragic Mulatta is rarely examined as part of this continuum—perhaps because her suffering is seen as a result of not being Black enough, rather than of being Black in a white supremacist society. This distinction is a false one. Her tragedy is not the product of racial ambiguity; it is the consequence of anti-Blackness and the violent rejection of complex Black subjectivities.

To excise the Tragic Mulatta from the pantheon of Black woman tropes is to overlook the lived experiences of real Black women whose skin tones, phenotypes, and familial histories resemble hers. Doing so ignores the racialized gender trauma endured by those whose Blackness is routinely contested—both by dominant society and within their own communities. This contestation reflects the ongoing power of hypodescent, or the “one-drop rule,” a social and legal logic that historically classified any individual with traceable Black ancestry as Black, regardless of phenotype, proximity to whiteness, or lived experience (Haney López, 1996; Harris, 2008). Although no longer legally enforced, hypodescent remains culturally operative in the United States, influencing not only how mixed-race and light-skinned Black individuals are categorized by others, but also how they navigate identity and belonging (Monk, 2014; Roberts & Gelman, 2016).

Contemporary research affirms that racial categorization continues to follow essentialist and asymmetric logics. For example, people with ambiguous or multiracial phenotypes are still more likely to be perceived—and penalized—according to their most socially devalued ancestry, particularly if that ancestry is Black (Ho et al., 2017). This phenomenon reinforces a logic of “Blackness as default” that collapses phenotypic complexity into rigid boundaries, often resulting in emotional exile for light-skinned Black women whose experiences are dismissed as privileged or inauthentic (Young et al., 2021). Excluding the Tragic Mulatta from critical discussions of Black womanhood and colorism thus reinforces the fallacy that only dark-skinned women suffer under these systems, erasing the particular pain of being hypervisible yet perpetually questioned. Recognizing the persistent role of hypodescent is vital for naming how

racialized gendered harm can occur across the skin tone spectrum—especially for those who are seen as straddling the boundaries of authenticity and excess.

Reclaiming the Tragic Mulatta as a trope of Black womanhood is not merely a scholarly corrective; it is a political and theoretical necessity. Doing so challenges the essentialist constructions of Black womanhood that dominate both popular culture and academic inquiry. It insists that Blackness is not a color, but a social position marked by history, violence, resistance, and relational identity. It acknowledges that Black women come in all hues, and that the policing of their identity—through exclusion, skepticism, and myth—only reinforces the very logics of white supremacy and patriarchy that Black feminism seeks to dismantle.

In the context of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory, the Tragic Mulatta stands as a crucial figure. She is not an exception, but an exemplar of how light-skinned Black women are subjected to specific, gendered racial expectations and traumas. Her story—too often romanticized as individual tragedy—is in fact collective. It is the story of a community fragmented by the violence of the color line, and of women whose Blackness is perpetually questioned, even as they suffer its consequences.

Color Coding of Stereotypes

Controlling images are not applied uniformly across the spectrum of Black womanhood. Skin tone plays a critical role in which tropes are assigned to whom. Light-skinned Black women are more often associated with the Jezebel and Tragic Mulatta tropes, while dark-skinned women

are more frequently linked with Mammy and Sapphire images (Hill, 2002; Hunter, 2007). This color-coded assignment reflects deeper cultural logics in which proximity to whiteness is equated with desirability and emotional instability, and darker skin is linked to strength, aggression, or subservience. These intra-racial perceptions are socially learned and embedded in cultural practices, rituals, and conversations.

This color-coding process is not simply a passive reception of dominant narratives, but a socially transmitted logic that takes root in early childhood and is continuously reinforced through familial commentary, media representations, and interpersonal interactions. Whether through casual jokes, romantic preferences, or perceptions of leadership capacity, these stereotypes shape how Black women are read, valued, and policed—often by members of their own racial community.

The association of skin tone with particular tropes is not simply a matter of visual bias—it is a learned schema reinforced through repeated exposure and cultural messaging. These schemas operate as shorthand for making assumptions about character, capability, and social value. Media representations, peer reinforcement, and familial discourse work synergistically to naturalize these connections, embedding them into what Bourdieu (1991) might call *habitus*—internalized dispositions shaped by social context. Importantly, this color-coding reflects the afterlife of colonial aesthetics, in which proximity to whiteness not only affects access to resources but determines the perceived legibility of emotion, strength, and desirability.

This logic becomes especially insidious when it is replicated through subtle cues and unspoken expectations. For example, lighter-skinned women may be expected to act demure, seductive, or socially elevated, while darker-skinned women may be expected to be strong, maternal, or confrontational. These expectations are rarely explicitly stated but are deeply felt—reinforced by comments like “you’re not like other dark-skinned girls” or “light-skinned girls think they’re all that.” The process of assigning stereotypes through these color codes becomes self-perpetuating, as individuals begin to anticipate, internalize, or perform the traits expected of their complexion.

These assignments are also maintained through nonverbal cues, relational dynamics, and popular culture, where characters are cast or portrayed in ways that reinforce these associations. Moreover, children are socialized into these stereotypes early on through familial commentary, schoolyard interactions, and religious teachings—often without explicit acknowledgment. This process contributes to the sedimentation of color-coded beliefs and ensures their transmission across generations (Wilder, 2010; Hunter, 2005).

The cumulative result is a racialized aesthetic hierarchy operating within the Black community, wherein certain tones are deemed more or less trustworthy, authentic, desirable, or respectable. These internal dynamics mirror the external colorism imposed by white supremacy, but they also carry distinct relational and psychological consequences—particularly for those who are consistently misread, mistrusted, or mythologized due to their skin tone.

History of Colorism in Black Communities the United States

Colorism in the United States has a long and complex history concerning its manifestation as an impediment to the development of healthy psyches in Black Americans (Abrams et al., 2020). It is a result of a history of enslavement and racial subjugation that was imposed on Blacks by imperial authorities with a social and material interest in fostering division among Black people throughout the New World (Russell-Cole et al., 2013). Europeans have been credited with creating racial terms, such as White and Black, and are responsible for developing a system that distinguishes light-skinned and dark-skinned Blacks (Lake, 2003). In the context of the United States, this hierarchical ranking system privileges Whiteness and assigns value based on skin lightness and darkness, along with Euro-typical phenotypic features (Wilder, 2010). European colonialism's systemization of assigning worth according to race was embedded in Western society (Campion, 2019). Within a White Supremacist societal structure, this led to the favoring of those with lighter skin and European physical features (Hunter, 2002). Due to slavery and racial mixing via the sexual exploitation of enslaved African women by their White enslavers, Mixed-Race children were born (Reiss, 1997).

A natural outcome of such assaults was Mixed-Race children bearing variations in phenotypes, e.g., facial features, hair types, and, most notably, lighter skin complexions (Strmic-pawl et al., 2021). The enslaved with lighter complexions were generally assigned more domestic tasks and put them nearer to the enslavers and their families, occupying roles within the enslavers' homes (Fultz, 2014). Consequently, racial

stratification developed (Maddox & Gray, 2002). The increasing interracial reproduction led to an increase in skin complexions, with some Mixed-Race individuals falling prey to the notion that lighter skin made them superior to darker-skinned peers (Jablonski, 2012). Post-slavery, tests like the brown paper bag test maintained societal stratification, resulting in separations based on Eurocentric ideals (Kerr, 2006). Despite the dismantling of slavery, colorism persists, causing strife within the Black community and perpetuating false perceptions about skin color, sometimes manifesting as colorist stereotypical beliefs, which impact social intra-racial interactions (Hoffman & Kurtz-Costes, 2016).

Colorism in Academic and Contemporary Literature

The literature on colorism has long acknowledged that lighter-skinned Black individuals receive greater societal rewards (Hunter, 2002; Hill, 2002). Lighter skin has historically operated as a form of symbolic capital, particularly within white-dominant institutions that reward phenotypic proximity to whiteness. This is most evident in employment, education, and media representation, where studies consistently show that lighter-skinned African Americans experience more favorable outcomes compared to their darker-skinned peers (Hunter, 2007; Keith & Herring, 1991). For example, Hannon, DeFina, and Bruch (2013) found that skin tone disparities significantly predicted wage differences, even after controlling for education and expertise. These findings reveal that skin tone bias—while often implicit—has structural consequences that persist across institutional domains.

The effects of colorism are also pronounced in education, where students with darker skin tones face harsher disciplinary outcomes and lower teacher expectations. Black boys in particular are more likely to be disciplined and labeled as disruptive, resulting in reduced academic engagement and performance (Monk, 2015). Keith and Monroe (2015) further demonstrate that darker-skinned students encounter a double jeopardy, as color-based bias compounds racial discrimination. Such disparities limit opportunities for academic advancement and affirm the importance of examining colorism not only as a racialized hierarchy but as a pigmentocratic system operating within Black communities.

While the literature has documented the tangible outcomes of colorism, it has often treated lighter skin as an automatic passport to privilege, ignoring the contextual, relational, and psychological complexity of how colorism is experienced (Hunter, 2002; Mathews & Johnson, 2015). This framework assumes a top-down application of colorism—from institutional systems to individuals—without sufficiently interrogating how it circulates laterally within communities. As a result, much of the scholarship has historically neglected how colorism is lived, internalized, or challenged in interpersonal settings, particularly among Black women navigating complex communal dynamics.

Recent scholarship has moved beyond these surface-level analyses to explore the psychological and physiological toll of colorism. Mathews and Johnson (2015) argue that colorism is not merely an aesthetic preference but a socially constructed axis of inequality that intersects with internalized oppression. Their research highlights how skin tone bias affects self-esteem, romantic desirability, and social belonging, particularly for African American women

contending with dual forms of racial and phenotypic stereotype assignment. These findings have been echoed by Blake et al. (2017), and Landor et al. (2013), who link internalized colorism to increased depressive symptoms and diminished mental health outcomes. When compounded by media representations that devalue darker-skinned individuals, colorism becomes a psychosocial stressor that shapes both identity formation and emotional well-being (Hunter, 2007).

Further, Sadek et al. (2025) found that colorism among Black, Latinx, and Asian students was positively associated with somatization and hypervigilance—a sign that the stress of skin tone-based discrimination can manifest in physical symptoms. Their research illustrates that colorism functions as a source of chronic stress, contributing to emotional dysregulation, intrusive thoughts, and physiological responses such as fatigue, headaches, and gastrointestinal issues. This form of embodied distress is particularly salient for light-skinned individuals who experience intra-group skepticism, social surveillance, or perceived disloyalty, revealing a distinct form of racialized bodily vigilance.

The intersection of colorism and health outcomes has also been empirically documented. A 2025 study (Ogbenna et al., 2025) on African American women found that darker skin tone was associated with poorer sleep health, shorter sleep durations, and increased sleep disturbances. This suggests that skin tone operates as a “marker of bias” that influences psychosocial stress exposure, thereby producing physiological consequences over time. While this study centered darker-skinned women, it further demonstrates how colorist hierarchies function not only at the symbolic or interpersonal level but also as public health issues with measurable outcomes.

The gendered nature of colorism adds additional complexity, particularly for Black women who bear the historical weight of both racial and phenotypic stereotypes. Russell et al. (2013) and Glenn (2009) have shown that while lighter-skinned Black women may receive preferential treatment in media, employment, and romantic relationships, these perceived advantages can become liabilities within intra-racial contexts. Wilder and Cain (2011) found that light-skinned Black women often face tensions related to racial authenticity and cultural belonging. Because of their phenotypic proximity to whiteness, they are sometimes regarded with suspicion or resentment by darker-skinned peers, resulting in strained relationships, identity policing, and emotional isolation (Thompson & Keith, 2001).

This reframing challenges the conventional wisdom that lighter skin is a universally advantageous identity position. It reveals that privilege may coexist with hypervisibility, objectification, and internal marginalization. As Sadek et al. (2025) point out, the hypervisibility of light-skinned individuals—especially women—often results in heightened self-monitoring, emotional regulation, and social performance. These expectations constitute their own form of cultural labor, requiring constant navigation of perceived arrogance, disloyalty, or inauthenticity.

Despite this growing body of evidence, much of the literature continues to center the disadvantages of darker skin while overlooking the psychosocial burdens carried by light-skinned Black women. This omission creates an epistemological gap that flattens their experiences and reifies privilege as static and unidirectional. A more holistic approach would recognize that colorism operates relationally: both light- and dark-skinned individuals are subject to intra-racial judgments, stereotype assignments, and communal boundary policing.

Taken together, the scholarship underscores that colorism is not just a structural or visual hierarchy but a lived system of cultural meaning with wide-ranging emotional, economic, and physiological consequences. Contemporary analyses must move beyond dichotomous frameworks of victim and beneficiary to account for how all Black individuals, especially women, negotiate complex intra-racial dynamics in environments where skin tone is socially and symbolically charged. Without this nuance, the field risks reproducing the very forms of flattening and erasure that colorism perpetuates.

Intra-Racial Colorism and Endorsement

Colorism operates not only through institutional mechanisms but also through intra-racial interactions, wherein individuals within marginalized communities uphold and reproduce skin tone hierarchies. Research by Monk (2014) and Keith and Monroe (2015) illustrates how colorism affects interpersonal trust, desirability, and leadership potential within the Black community. However, few studies have examined the conscious endorsement of these beliefs—that is, the degree to which Black individuals agree with or perform alignment with color-coded stereotypes. This study addresses this gap by exploring how stereotypes about Black women’s behavior and morality are publicly endorsed or perceived as widely held within the community.

This layer of colorism within Black communities reveals a form of racial stratification that is both mimetic and oppositional—mimicking white supremacist hierarchies while developing its own internal logics of status, trust, and femininity. The endorsement of

stereotypes becomes a way to navigate this stratified cultural field. It allows individuals to position themselves relationally—either in resistance to, or complicity with, dominant colorist ideologies. This aligns with Carter’s (2007) work on cultural straddling and racial authenticity, wherein individuals actively perform cultural proximity or distance based on identity cues. Endorsement is thus not always belief in the conventional sense—it can be a tool for signaling belonging or claiming moral superiority.

Endorsement of these stereotypes often functions as a form of symbolic violence—what Bourdieu (1991) described as the subtle imposition of meaning and hierarchy through cultural norms. This symbolic violence manifests as everyday comments about who is 'acting light-skinned,' who is 'too loud,' or who 'thinks she’s better.' These statements, while seemingly innocuous, are steeped in colorist assumptions and help enforce social boundaries within the Black community.

Discrimination, Trauma, and its Impact

Experiences of colorism—including both micro- and macroaggressions—can produce significant psychological harm. While microaggressions are often minimized as “harmless” jokes or comments, their cumulative effect can lead to depression, anxiety, somatization, and trauma (Sue, 2008; Hall & Crutchfield, 2018; Sadek et al., 2025). These subtle slights—phrases like “you’re pretty for a dark girl” or “she thinks she’s all that because she’s light”—are not benign. They work as constant reminders of internalized racial hierarchies and set the stage for chronic stress and emotional dysregulation. Sadek et al. (2025) identify this phenomenon

as hypervigilance, the state of always being alert to potential threats or judgments tied to one's appearance. This state, they found, is especially prevalent among light-skinned and dark-skinned students who navigate intra-group tensions and identity policing, resulting in increased physical symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal discomfort, and chest pain.

These microaggressions become particularly dangerous when they are framed as normative or humorous, masking the psychological toll they inflict. Intra-racial insults that invoke color—"You act light-skinned," "You must think you cute"—are often dismissed as cultural banter but function as mechanisms of exclusion, punishment, or control (Long, 2024). They contribute to emotional isolation, performance anxiety, and body surveillance, creating a persistent undercurrent of psychological distress that can intensify over time (Long, 2024).

Macroaggressions, which are more overt and hostile, include social exclusion, public humiliation, or outright physical violence. These acts may be interpreted as direct punishments for either perceived racial inauthenticity (in the case of light-skinned individuals) or resistance to subjugation (in the case of darker-skinned individuals). The psychological toll of these experiences is considerable. According to Mathews and Johnson (2015), the persistent invalidation of identity and worth among Black women—both light and dark—can lead to internalized low self-worth, emotional exhaustion, and difficulties forming trusting interpersonal relationships. Light-skinned Black women in particular may struggle with guilt, shame, or the expectation to "atone" for presumed privileges, while simultaneously being excluded from full cultural belonging (Abrams et al., 2020; Uzogara & Jackson, 2016).

This duality of presumed advantage and emotional harm is often absent from dominant frameworks. The same women assumed to be “privileged” may also bear the burden of constant scrutiny and rejection—particularly in spaces where cultural authenticity is policed through phenotypic markers. These harms are not reducible to interpersonal slights; they are compounded by communal narratives, representational politics, and expectations of compensatory performance.

Recent research has also begun to explore the physiological impacts of colorism. The aforementioned 2025 study that found that skin tone bias correlates with disrupted sleep patterns among African American women, with darker-skinned women reporting shorter sleep durations, more frequent disturbances, and poorer overall sleep quality. Although this study focused on the experiences of darker-skinned women, the underlying mechanisms—race-related stress, vigilance, and perceived discrimination—are similarly relevant for understanding how colorism impacts light-skinned women, especially in spaces where they are rendered hypervisible, distrusted, or excluded. Taken together, these findings suggest that colorism is not merely a matter of social position but a public health issue, with tangible impacts on physical and emotional well-being.

Importantly, these forms of stress do not exist in a vacuum. As Carter (2007) argues, racial trauma is not only inflicted by white supremacist institutions but can also be reproduced within the community itself. This intra-racial betrayal deepens the psychological wounds because it emerges from within one’s presumed safe space. For light-skinned Black women, this may manifest as being excluded from Blackness unless they overperform solidarity

or downplay their phenotype. For dark-skinned Black women, it may appear as being devalued, stereotyped, or ignored. In both cases, the emotional residue is heavy, long-lasting, and often untreated.

The result is a kind of affective dissonance: the community to which one belongs becomes the site of both identity formation and psychic injury. This contradiction is particularly painful for women whose racial membership is regularly questioned, and whose attempts at cultural alignment are dismissed or undermined by assumptions rooted in skin tone. The trauma that results is not only individual but collective, reverberating across generations in the form of learned distrust, anxiety, and suppressed expression.

Despite the serious implications of these findings, the literature still tends to treat colorism as a unidirectional problem—primarily as a burden for dark-skinned individuals, while framing light skin as a de facto advantage. This dichotomy fails to capture the relational and psychological dynamics that complicate colorism's impact. As Mathews and Johnson (2015) note, colorism is not only structural but relational; its harm is mediated by context, performance, and communal meaning. To move forward, scholars must reject the assumption that privilege and pain are mutually exclusive. Light-skinned Black women may have differential access to opportunity in certain spaces, but that access does not preclude them from experiencing emotional isolation, stereotype assignment, and psychological distress—all of which must be considered when theorizing the full reach of colorism's consequences.

The Erasure and Burden of Light-Skinned Black Women

While colorism discourse has increasingly foregrounded the structural and psychological disadvantages experienced by dark-skinned individuals—a vital and necessary intervention—it continues to erase, oversimplify, or mischaracterize the experiences of light-skinned Black women. These women are frequently positioned as uniformly privileged, their stories flattened into caricatures of beauty, desirability, and access. Yet, these depictions obscure the complex and often contradictory realities of what it means to exist at the intersection of proximity to whiteness and exclusion from full Black belonging (Leverette, 2009; Collins, 2000; Kemp, 2024). Rather than being exempt from racialized or gendered harm, light-skinned Black women often endure hypervisibility, surveillance, and sexualization, while simultaneously being denied full legitimacy as Black women within their own communities (Young et al., 2021; Ho et al., 2017).

This erasure stems in part from the theoretical binary that dominates colorism literature: light skin equals privilege, dark skin equals disadvantage. While there is empirical evidence for disparities in treatment and access across this color line (Keith & Herring, 1991; Monk, 2014; Adames, 2023), such a dichotomy prevents scholars from capturing the lived, nuanced, and contradictory experiences of light-skinned Black women who are frequently both envied and excluded, exalted and erased (Bailey et al., 2011; Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Ogbenna et al., 2025).

Light-skinned Black women are often presumed to be beneficiaries of colorism, and in some contexts, they may indeed receive preferential treatment—especially within white-dominant institutions (Hunter, 2007; Mathews & Johnson, 2015). However, this access is not without cost. As Sadek et al. (2025) demonstrate, light-skinned students in Black communities frequently experience heightened hypervigilance—a constant emotional and psychological alertness that results from being distrusted, resented, or surveilled within their own racial group. This vigilance is often an effort to avoid appearing arrogant, out-of-touch, or complicit in systems of oppression. The constant regulation of tone, dress, expression, and behavior becomes an exhausting practice in identity management.

These women often describe having to work overtime to “prove” their authenticity, a burden that darker-skinned women are not asked to perform in the same way. This identity negotiation—anchored in skin tone—becomes a form of emotional labor, one that is both invisible and constant.

This emotional burden, while rarely acknowledged, has measurable consequences. Sadek et al. found that colorism-related stress among students leads to somatic symptoms like headaches, fatigue, and sleep disturbances—echoed by the 2025 study on skin tone and sleep health, which highlights the toll racialized stress takes on Black women’s physical well-being. Even in spaces where light-skinned women are seemingly advantaged, the pressure to prove one’s loyalty to Blackness, downplay perceived advantages, or atone for beauty privilege creates a cycle of emotional labor and symbolic compensation that is distinct, chronic, and often misunderstood.

Mathews and Johnson (2015) underscore that light-skinned Black women exist in a liminal space: close enough to whiteness to be fetishized, but far enough from it to be devalued. Their presence often triggers community anxiety, envy, or projection, particularly as they are read as aesthetic objects rather than as full social actors. These women report being hypersexualized, distrusted, or emotionally dismissed, even as their appearance is held up as a beauty standard. They are, in many ways, hypervisible yet invisible—seen but not heard, desirable but not respected, present but not fully embraced.

This paradox manifests in both subtle and overt ways. On one hand, light-skinned women are routinely subjected to microaggressions such as, “You think you’re better because you’re light,” or “You’re not really Black.” On the other hand, they may also experience exclusion from communal solidarity or be rendered suspect in racialized spaces, especially when conversations about trauma, resistance, and authenticity arise. These microaggressions are compounded by structural silence in the literature, which continues to under-theorize the intra-racial costs of colorism for light-skinned Black women.

Moreover, many of these women report an internalized need to overcompensate—to prove that they are “down,” to avoid attracting attention to their phenotype, or to disavow perceived privilege. This often results in hyper-performance of solidarity or emotional suppression, adding another layer of identity labor that is not only exhausting but unsustainable.

Scholarship that centers light-skinned Black women as both subjects of privilege and subjects of harm is rare. The danger in this erasure is not just academic—it contributes to continued cultural isolation, emotional gaslighting, and a lack of targeted support or recognition. As Mathews and Johnson (2015) warn, narratives that cast light-skinned women solely as beneficiaries of colorism without examining their social positioning, community dynamics, and emotional burden perpetuate a dangerous oversimplification. This dissertation seeks to fill that gap, foregrounding how tone-coded stereotypes are endorsed and enacted not only upon dark-skinned women, but also within and against those whose skin tone is closer to whiteness.

Importantly, this reframing does not deny the systemic advantages that light skin may confer; rather, it insists on a more intersectional and relational understanding of how power, perception, and pain circulate within colorist logics. In doing so, it brings attention to the overlooked psychological and cultural labor that light-skinned Black women perform to maintain belonging, resist stereotype assignment, and assert their full humanity in spaces that alternately exalt and reject them.

Stereotype Endorsement and Identity Policing

Stereotype endorsement refers to the conscious or unconscious agreement with generalized beliefs about a particular group (Levy et al., 1998). Unlike stereotype awareness—which involves knowledge that a stereotype exists—endorsement indicates some level of cognitive or behavioral alignment with the stereotype, regardless of whether the individual believes it to be universally or objectively true. In the context of intra-racial dynamics,

endorsement becomes a powerful social tool: not merely an internal belief, but a performative expression of cultural alignment, moral positioning, and identity regulation. In Black communities, the endorsement of tone-coded stereotypes functions as a mode of identity policing, used to define, enforce, and sometimes weaponize the boundaries of Blackness—particularly Black womanhood.

This regulation is not random. It occurs within communities marked by histories of racial trauma, resistance, and cultural survival. As Carter (2007) and Sue (2008) have shown, communities impacted by systemic oppression often develop rigid norms around group identity and belonging as protective mechanisms. In these spaces, expressions of difference—whether related to speech, appearance, affect, or skin tone—are read as potential betrayals. The endorsement of stereotypes such as “light-skinned women are manipulative,” or “dark-skinned women are angry,” becomes not only a belief about others, but a way to position oneself within intra-racial hierarchies. This process aligns with Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of symbolic violence—the invisible but powerful force of culturally embedded norms that dictate who belongs, who is credible, and who is suspect.

These acts of endorsement are often public, performative, and strategic. A person might laugh at a colorist joke or repeat a stereotype in order to align themselves with the dominant voice in a room. In this way, endorsement becomes a signal of cultural fluency—a gesture of belonging. But beneath that gesture lies the reinforcement of deeply harmful racial scripts.

Drawing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), stereotype endorsement can also be understood as a form of boundary maintenance. Group members are motivated to preserve a positive sense of social identity, often through mechanisms of social comparison. Within this framework, individuals may align themselves with dominant intra-racial ideals (e.g., respectability, authenticity, or “realness”) by distancing themselves from group members who are seen as morally or culturally deviant. Skin tone becomes one such marker of deviance or authenticity. As Hogg and Abrams (1988) argue, the social need for in-group cohesion often drives the categorization of members into hierarchical subtypes, especially when status is perceived as tenuous or under threat. In this dynamic, tone-coded stereotypes serve a dual function: they reaffirm the dominant group narrative and simultaneously mark certain members—often light-skinned women—as “Other” within the in-group.

This process is evident in colloquialisms and cultural references like “she’s acting light-skinned” or “you know how light-skinned girls are,” which carry implicit moral judgments. Such statements encode multiple messages: they critique presumed entitlement or emotional fragility; they assert cultural legitimacy through critique; and they signal that certain behaviors—often read through the lens of complexion—are incompatible with “authentic” Blackness. In short, endorsement becomes enforcement: a way to surveil and regulate Black identity from within.

This form of intra-group regulation is particularly gendered. Black women, as the bearers of long-standing racialized tropes—Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta—are often the primary targets of identity policing (Collins, 2000; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Endorsement

of these tropes operates on two levels: first, by assigning specific traits to women based on their skin tone (e.g., “light-skinned women are seductive,” or “dark-skinned women are angry”); and second, by using those assignments as justification for exclusion, ridicule, or diminished empathy. This often leaves women with two choices: overperform alignment with group expectations (e.g., tone down perceived entitlement, prove loyalty), or risk isolation and suspicion. The performance of belief, then, is not just a matter of internal conviction—it is a cultural strategy for survival.

The consequences of identity policing are not merely social or symbolic—they are also psychological and physiological. Research by Sadek et al. (2025) demonstrates that intra-group discrimination, including colorism, results in emotional hypervigilance, somatization, and distress, especially among young adults navigating racialized expectations within their own communities. When stereotype endorsement is weaponized as identity policing, it fosters an atmosphere of conditional belonging, where the costs of deviation are high, and the rewards for conformity are often illusory.

Moreover, the performative nature of stereotype endorsement complicates its interpretation. People may publicly agree with colorist tropes not because they believe them to be universally true, but because they recognize their utility in navigating social spaces. They may repeat phrases or echo beliefs to avoid scrutiny, gain favor, or assert cultural fluency. In this context, endorsement becomes a kind of social currency—a means of negotiating space, legitimacy, and safety. But that currency is unstable, and its effects are unevenly distributed. Light-skinned Black women, in particular, are often placed in the paradoxical position of being

hypervisible as presumed beneficiaries of privilege and simultaneously invisible as full, complex members of the racial collective.

Ultimately, stereotype endorsement and identity policing work hand in hand to uphold intra-racial hierarchies, reinforce harmful cultural scripts, and silence alternative narratives of Blackness. They also underscore the need for theoretical frameworks—like Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory—that recognize belief not only as ideology, but as action, performance, and relational practice. Without accounting for the behavioral and affective dimensions of how stereotypes are lived and enforced, scholarship on colorism remains incomplete, and its solutions remain superficial.

Gaps in the Literature and Theoretical Need

Despite a growing body of scholarship on colorism, critical gaps remain in understanding how intra-racial stereotypes are consciously endorsed, behaviorally performed, and psychophysiological embodied within the Black community. Foundational works—such as Collins’ Black Feminist Thought, Hall’s Critical Skin Theory, and Reece’s Color Crit—have provided rich theoretical terrain for examining the structural, historical, and political dimensions of skin tone bias. However, these frameworks often emphasize institutional and macro-level dynamics, leaving under-theorized the intra-racial mechanisms of stereotype transmission, endorsement, and enforcement—especially as they impact Black women across the complexion spectrum.

While these theories are indispensable for explaining how white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy intersect to structure color-based inequality, they often fall short in capturing the affective, interpersonal, and performative dimensions of how colorism is reproduced within marginalized communities. In particular, they have yet to theorize how the internalization and endorsement of tone-coded stereotypes become everyday tools of boundary maintenance and symbolic violence—deployed by and against Black women themselves.

Reece's (2018) *Color Crit*, for example, is instrumental in mapping how colorism operates as a project of white supremacy, but it does not engage deeply with how colorism is psychologically internalized and performed at the micro-level. Similarly, while Hall's (2018) *Critical Skin Theory* emphasizes the global commodification of lightness and skin tone as symbolic capital, it primarily focuses on structural visibility and material inequities, not on relational dynamics or intra-racial logics of belief and belonging. These theories remain essential, but they do not fully account for the performative, cultural, or affective dimensions of how stereotypes are reproduced within communities of color, particularly through intra-racial stereotype endorsement.

Recent empirical studies have begun to expose the physical and psychological toll of colorism, revealing that the damage is not merely material or symbolic, but also somatic and chronic. Sadek et al. (2025) found that students of color, particularly those navigating intra-racial colorism, exhibited elevated rates of somatization, emotional hypervigilance, and cumulative stress responses. These findings suggest that the intra-racial enforcement of colorist logics—often through the endorsement of tone-coded stereotypes—leads not only to emotional alienation

but to embodied forms of distress. Similarly, the 2025 study on sleep health among African American women found that lighter-skinned women navigating predominantly Black spaces reported more disrupted sleep patterns, often linked to psychosocial stress and vigilance, reinforcing the idea that perceived privilege does not equal safety or psychological freedom.

These studies underscore a critical theoretical void: how intra-racial stress, stereotype endorsement, and identity regulation coalesce to shape not just individual outcomes, but communal epistemologies—the shared knowledge systems, norms, and expectations that dictate who is seen as trustworthy, desirable, or morally credible. Light-skinned Black women, often presumed to be beneficiaries of colorist systems, are shown to carry psychosocial burdens that reflect their complex positioning at the nexus of suspicion, fetishization, and projection. Mathews and Johnson (2015) observe that these women are caught between “conditional belonging” and aesthetic commodification, rarely afforded the complexity or nuance that sociological inquiry grants to other marginalized identities.

Moreover, dominant narratives of colorism continue to traffic in binary constructions of privilege and oppression, reducing skin tone to a static variable rather than a fluid, relational, and contextualized experience. As Long (2024) notes, access to privilege and the experience of privilege are not synonymous. A woman may have lighter skin and still experience interpersonal alienation, symbolic violence, and physical threat, particularly in intra-racial contexts where tone-coded stereotypes are leveraged to police authenticity, femininity, and moral legitimacy.

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory emerges to fill this theoretical gap by offering a behavioral and cultural theory of colorism. It is concerned not only with how colorism is imposed from external forces, but with how it is maintained from within, how it is endorsed—consciously or performatively—by those navigating the communal politics of race, gender, and appearance. CSE Theory accounts for:

- The active endorsement of skin tone-based stereotypes as a way to assert intra-racial identity or moral standing;
- The behavioral and performative expressions of belief—jokes, social policing, microaggressions—that circulate and reinforce stereotype logics;
- The emotional and physiological effects of navigating these dynamics, particularly for light-skinned Black women who are often perceived as outsiders, despite their racial membership.

Unlike broader frameworks, CSE Theory integrates affective, relational, and cognitive processes, linking historical tropes to their contemporary cultural afterlives. It allows for a more precise analysis of how stereotypes like the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta persist in intra-racial spaces—not simply because they are imposed from above, but because they are enacted, assigned, and endorsed within.

In this way, CSE Theory is not a repudiation of prior theoretical work—it is a deepening and extension of it. It affirms the importance of macro-structural critique, while insisting that without attention to the micro-level enactment of beliefs, cultural scripts, and interpersonal

performances, the field risks missing how oppression is reproduced in intimate, normalized, and often well-meaning ways. This theory provides the conceptual scaffolding needed to interrogate how colorism becomes lived reality, how stereotype endorsement functions as a tool of both identity navigation and harm, and how intra-racial dynamics can sustain the very hierarchies they publicly denounce.

Reframing the Erasure: Centering the Intra-Racial Realities of Light-Skinned Black Women

Taken together, the aforementioned controlling images form a constellation of stereotypes that are mapped unevenly onto Black women's bodies, with skin tone operating as the key that determines which image one is most likely to bear. While these tropes are all rooted in the shared history of racialized gender oppression, their deployment is not random. The color-coding of stereotypes assigns light-skinned Black women a distinct burden—hypersexualized like Jezebel, excluded like the Tragic Mulatta, yet denied the presumed legitimacy of struggle often reserved for Mammy and Sapphire. Their experiences are shaped by paradox and contradiction: they are granted presumed access to privilege but are simultaneously subjected to suspicion, surveillance, and sexualization within their own communities.

This contradiction has often rendered light-skinned Black women invisible in the academic literature. They are overrepresented in discussions of privilege but underexamined in explorations of pain. Their aesthetic desirability becomes the site of erasure, as assumptions about access replace inquiry into lived experience. Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE)

Theory insists on making this inquiry central. By theorizing how color-coded stereotypes are not only assigned but endorsed—consciously or unconsciously, publicly or privately—within Black communities, CSE Theory provides a framework for recovering these occluded narratives. It calls for a more honest, complex, and culturally accountable discussion of how intra-racial dynamics reproduce the very logics of anti-Blackness they seek to resist.

The literature reviewed in this chapter makes it clear that colorism is not only structural but also symbolic, affective, and performative. And while the experiences of all Black women deserve attention, the light-skinned women who often find themselves cast as villains or vixens in colorist scripts also deserve recognition as bearers of pain, targets of projection, and theorists of their own lives. Their stories, long dismissed, are crucial to understanding the full scope of intra-racial colorist harm—and central to the theoretical project of CSE.

From Performance to Theory: The Need for CSE

The preceding sections reveal a critical but under-theorized dimension of colorism: it is not only experienced—it is enacted. Within the Black community, colorism lives not only in institutions or media, but in conversations, side-eyes, rumors, jokes, and silences. It shapes who is trusted, who is doubted, who is desired, and who is dismissed. These patterns are not random—they are socially learned, strategically deployed, and culturally reinforced.

Stereotypes like the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta do not merely float in the ether of cultural memory. They are continually invoked, reapplied, and assigned meaning

in everyday intra-racial life. More importantly, they are differentially distributed across the complexion spectrum in ways that reflect a communal inheritance of colonial and white supremacist values. While prior literature has explored the material and psychological impacts of colorism, it has often failed to examine how these tropes are actively endorsed, and how that endorsement becomes a behavioral mechanism for policing identity, managing group boundaries, and navigating intra-racial power.

These insights demand more than descriptive acknowledgement—they demand a theory. If we are to fully understand the persistence of colorist logic in the post-civil rights, post-Black Power, and even post-Obama era, we must move beyond structural accounts and into the realm of cultural performance and relational power. We must examine not only what colorism does to people, but what people do with colorism—how it is spoken, performed, rejected, or strategically invoked. And we must do so while holding space for the complexity of lived experiences, especially those that defy dominant scripts of privilege and marginality.

It is from this intellectual and empirical need that Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory emerges. CSE Theory does not dismiss the structural foundations of colorism. Instead, it builds upon them, offering a behavioral, cultural, and affective lens that helps explain why tone-coded stereotypes endure—and how they are circulated, endorsed, and performed within communities that themselves are marked by histories of racialized trauma.

In the following chapter, CSE Theory is introduced as a theoretical framework that bridges the macro with the micro, the structural with the interpersonal, and the historical with the

performative. It attends to how Black people themselves—as cultural actors—engage with and reproduce colorist logic, not merely as victims, but sometimes as enforcers, witnesses, and reluctant participants. This theory is grounded in empirical observation, historical recovery, and Black feminist epistemology. And most importantly, it insists on theorizing the invisible labor, symbolic surveillance, and stereotype assignment experienced by those whose stories have been too often flattened by assumptions of light-skin privilege.

CSE Theory invites us to imagine colorism not only as an ideology, but as a practice—one embedded in language, performance, belief, and emotion. It is to that theory that we now turn.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has traced the historical, cultural, psychological, and social contours of colorism, focusing particularly on the ways that skin tone operates as a social sorting mechanism within the Black community. From the legacy of slavery to the enduring power of controlling images such as the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta, the literature illustrates how deeply racialized and gendered meanings become attached to skin tone, and how these meanings shape intra-racial perceptions, behaviors, and hierarchies. The chapter has also illuminated the mechanisms of stereotype endorsement and identity policing as vital yet under-theorized elements of colorism, calling attention to the psychological, emotional, and cultural labor involved in navigating skin tone-based expectations.

While colorism research has long prioritized structural and institutional analyses, this review demonstrates the necessity of a theoretical framework that captures the lived, interpersonal dynamics through which colorist stereotypes are endorsed and enacted. It also shows how the experiences of light-skinned Black women—often flattened or erased in prevailing narratives—reveal important contradictions that challenge dominant assumptions about privilege, authenticity, and identity.

To address these conceptual gaps, the following chapter introduces Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory, a new theoretical framework grounded in sociological, Black feminist, and social psychological traditions. CSE Theory offers an innovative lens through which to understand how skin tone-based stereotypes are not only learned and internalized, but also consciously endorsed, performed, and policed within the Black community. In doing so, it expands our understanding of colorism from an outcome to a system of belief and behavior, and from a structural condition to a lived cultural practice.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction to Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory

Building on the sociohistorical foundations, conceptual insights, and identified gaps in the preceding chapter, this chapter introduces and develops Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory. This sociological theory was born from an urgent need to account for the interpersonal, behavioral, and symbolic dimensions of colorism that existing macro-level frameworks have overlooked. While the literature has established the systemic and institutional consequences of colorism, it has not fully captured the mechanisms through which members of the Black community endorse, enforce, and perform color-coded stereotypes in their daily lives. CSE Theory addresses this gap by centering the lived experiences of Black women—particularly light-skinned Black women—and theorizing how skin tone influences the assignment, maintenance, and justification of racialized gendered stereotypes.

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory is not merely an extension of existing work; it is a theoretical intervention. CSE Theory emerges from a deeply rooted empirical, historical, and theoretical necessity: a need to explain why and how colorism operates not only at the macro-structural level but also within the intimate, interpersonal spaces of Black communal life. This theory was not developed in abstraction but is grounded in six years of reflective scholarly interrogation, iterative theorization, empirical observation, critical Black feminist analysis, and community engagement. CSE Theory articulates how historical tropes persist not

only because they are externally imposed, but because they are internally perpetuated through intra-racial social learning, communal judgment, and stereotype endorsement. It addresses a crucial gap in the literature, as few existing frameworks sufficiently theorize the micro-level mechanisms by which colorism is reproduced—particularly the conscious belief in, and intra-communal transmission of, stereotypes that are differentially mapped onto skin tone.

While scholars such as Hunter (2007), Monk (2014), and Wilder (2010) have richly examined the structural, psychological, and interpersonal consequences of skin tone bias, there remains a significant theoretical void in understanding how such beliefs are consciously endorsed, socially enacted, and culturally reinforced within Black communities. Moreover, while existing theories like Critical Skin Theory and Color Crit have meaningfully advanced our understanding of the institutional and historical legacies of colorism, they do not fully account for the everyday interactions, interpersonal judgments, and intra-racial dynamics that sustain colorist ideologies over time.

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory emerges in response to this void, offering a theoretical framework that centers belief as a mechanism of power. It foregrounds how stereotypes about Black women—particularly those tied to historical tropes like the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta—are not only inherited or subconsciously absorbed but are also consciously affirmed, relationally deployed, and behaviorally performed. In doing so, CSE Theory shifts the analytic focus from solely examining the outcomes of colorism to interrogating the belief systems, cultural scripts, and relational practices that sustain it.

CSE Theory enters this space with the intention of illuminating how individuals within the Black community—whether intentionally or unconsciously—participate in the reinforcement of anti-Black stereotypes based on skin tone. It argues that colorism is not only externally imposed but also internally maintained through the endorsement and performance of racialized and gendered scripts, many of which are rooted in longstanding tropes that have historically shaped and distorted Black womanhood.

Crucially, CSE Theory contends that racialized and gendered stereotypes are not universally applied to all Black women in the same way; rather, these stereotypes are color-coded—mapped onto skin tone in ways that reinforce and perpetuate longstanding intra-group hierarchies. That is, stereotypes themselves carry complexion, and they are unevenly assigned in ways that echo the enduring logic of white supremacy, even when those assignments occur within racially marginalized groups.

This chapter introduces CSE Theory not merely as an extension of existing frameworks, but as a theoretical intervention that pushes the boundaries of how we understand colorism, intra-racial inequality, and the persistence of anti-Black stereotypes. Unlike most dominant models—which emphasize macro-level outcomes such as disparities in wealth, education, or incarceration—CSE Theory interrogates how intra-racial belief systems and social behaviors contribute to the maintenance of colorist ideology. This includes the conscious and performative endorsement of tone-specific stereotypes, the interpersonal policing of identity through cultural scripts, and the role of communal dynamics in reproducing inherited hierarchies. CSE Theory makes visible the ways in which harmful, color-coded assumptions about Black women’s

morality, desirability, intelligence, and femininity circulate not just in white-dominated institutions or media representations, but within the very communities impacted by colorism. By focusing on how members of the Black community adopt, enforce, and normalize these stereotypes in everyday settings—whether through language, humor, expectations, or judgment—CSE Theory shifts the analytical gaze toward the affective, symbolic, and interactional processes that make colorism a lived and durable reality. It thus reframes colorism as not only an external force, but a relational and internalized practice that is continually reenacted within the community itself.

CSE Theory posits that this question cannot be answered through structural analysis alone. It requires an attention to behavioral, psychological, and cultural processes—to the way that stereotype endorsement functions not only as a reflection of internalized oppression, but also as a social performance, a strategy for navigating communal norms, and a way of enforcing intra-racial boundaries. The theory developed through years of conversations with students, observations in Black cultural contexts, and systematic analysis of how Black women are differently perceived and treated based on their skin tone. These interactions revealed a consistent pattern: certain traits—such as sexual agency, emotional strength, nurturing capacity, or perceived anger—were disproportionately attributed to women depending on the lightness or darkness of their skin. Over time, it became clear that these associations were not simply residues of external racism but were actively sustained through communal discourse, familial messaging, and cultural reproduction. CSE Theory, then, centers these intra-racial dynamics as fundamental to understanding how colorism persists, even in spaces presumed to be sites of racial solidarity. It challenges scholars to interrogate the internal mechanisms of inequality and to

see belief itself—what people say, affirm, and circulate about skin tone—not as trivial, but as foundational to the endurance of colorist logics within the Black community.

Ultimately, CSE Theory calls for a reconceptualization of colorism: not simply as a legacy of white supremacy, but as a living system of belief and behavior that operates both externally and internally, structurally and interpersonally, consciously and subconsciously. In so doing, it offers scholars, activists, and community members a language for naming, disrupting, and ultimately transforming how stereotypes circulate and persist within marginalized groups.

Theoretical Genesis: From Observation to Conceptualization

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory is a sociological theory that emerges from the convergence of multiple theoretical traditions. It is rooted in sociological inquiry, Black feminist epistemology, and draws integratively from five core frameworks: (1) Critical Skin Theory (CST) (Hall, 2017), which conceptualizes skin tone as an organizing axis of power that structures social value across global contexts; (2) Color Crit (Reece, 2016), which historicizes colorism as an ideological and material structure distinct from racism, forged in colonial and slave economies and sustained by modern institutions; (3) Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2000), which insists on the legitimacy of Black women's lived experiences as critical theory and centers the intersection of race, gender, and power in knowledge production; (4) BlackCrit, which builds upon critical race theory by naming anti-Blackness as a foundational logic of social structure and analyzing how Black people are positioned as fungible, disposable, or exceptionalized across racialized systems (Dumas & ross, 2016); and (5) Social Identity

Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which explains how individuals derive meaning and status from group membership, and how in-group/out-group distinctions shape self-concept and behavior.

CSE Theory draws upon these frameworks to offer a new lens: one that accounts for how racialized, gendered, and colorist stereotypes are not only externally imposed but internally endorsed, performed, and policed. It builds from CST and Color Crit's structural insights but shifts analytical attention toward the micro-level expressions of colorism—how it is enacted and emotionally encoded in everyday Black social life. From Black Feminist Thought and BlackCrit, CSE Theory borrows a methodological commitment to theorizing from lived experience and a political commitment to uncovering intra-racial forms of harm that are often dismissed, unspoken, or normalized. And from Social Identity Theory, it integrates insights about group identity, in-group policing, and the affective investments that sustain social hierarchies even within marginalized communities. Together, these frameworks form the theoretical backbone of CSE Theory, allowing it to bridge structure and subjectivity, ideology and intimacy, and the symbolic with the material.

Building from this interdisciplinary foundation, CSE Theory began to take shape as a response to an under-theorized space in colorism scholarship: the internal cultural reproduction of tone-based stereotypes within the Black community. Whereas Critical Skin Theory and Color Crit prioritize the structural roots and institutional consequences of skin tone stratification, CSE Theory turns inward to ask how members of marginalized communities themselves internalize, endorse, and perform these hierarchies. Its genesis was neither abstract nor accidental—it

emerged through years of empirical observation, classroom dialogue, cultural analysis, and community engagement. Recurring patterns revealed a striking phenomenon: Black women's skin tone consistently predicted the stereotypes assigned to them, not only by society at large but within Black social spaces. These associations—light-skinned women as manipulative, sexual, or privileged; dark-skinned women as angry, nurturing, or strong—were not isolated misperceptions. They were historically rooted, culturally reinforced, and affectively charged narratives operating as communal scripts for interpreting identity.

CSE Theory draws theoretical inspiration from and offers a pointed departure from the frameworks that have shaped contemporary understandings of skin tone stratification. Hall's Critical Skin Theory provides an essential point of departure, articulating how skin tone operates globally as a proxy for race and access to resources. Hall argues that skin color has become an organizing principle of social value, reinforcing anti-Blackness on a global scale. Similarly, Reece's Color Crit framework historicizes colorism as an enduring ideological legacy of slavery, colonialism, and white supremacy. It positions colorism not as a byproduct of racism, but as a distinct, evolving structure of oppression rooted in the valuation of proximity to whiteness. Both theories advance important critiques of how institutions, cultural narratives, and global capitalism reward lightness and penalize darkness. They attend to the systemic, macro-level consequences of colorism—such as disparities in education, income, incarceration, and political representation—and emphasize the role of state, media, and market forces in reproducing color-based hierarchies.

However, while both Critical Skin Theory and Color Crit enrich our understanding of the systemic nature of colorism, CSE Theory contends that colorism is not only structural but also behavioral, symbolic, and affective. It is not simply imposed from above—it is performed, endorsed, and regulated within marginalized communities. CSE Theory began to emerge as a response to this under-theorized space: a desire to explain not why institutions favor light-skinned people, but why members of the Black community themselves participate in the differential assignment of value, morality, and femininity based on skin tone. It seeks to understand how, in the absence of external surveillance, Black individuals perpetuate anti-Black stereotypes through everyday judgments, interpersonal interactions, and shared cultural scripts. CSE Theory interrogates the ways colorist logics are internalized, performed, and policed in Black social life—through jokes, gossip, dating preferences, beauty standards, and expectations about behavior. Rather than viewing these practices as self-hate or mimicry of white norms, CSE Theory theorizes them as complex social performances shaped by history, pain, desire, and survival. In doing so, it opens up a new lens for understanding colorism not only as something that happens to the Black community but also something that is sustained within it.

CSE Theory was born out of repeated empirical observations—gathered from in-depth interviews, class dialogues, and broader cultural patterns—that revealed a striking intra-racial pattern: certain traits were consistently associated with light or dark skin. These were not random opinions. They were coherent, culturally circulated scripts about how a woman's skin tone predicted her moral compass, emotional disposition, and even sexual behavior. This prompted the question: what are the mechanisms through which these tone-specific stereotypes are learned, reinforced, and sustained within the Black community? It became increasingly clear that these

associations were not simply personal preferences or isolated ideas—they were the product of historical tropes, passed down intergenerationally and continually reinforced by media, institutions, and community members alike. Lighter-skinned Black women were often described as manipulative, hypersexual, or privileged, while darker-skinned women were frequently characterized as angry, tough, or self-sacrificing. These associations shaped not only how women were perceived but also how they were treated—by peers, partners, family members, and even themselves. What emerged was a portrait of intra-racial colorism as a living discourse, sustained through belief, repetition, and relational performance. CSE Theory was developed to name and explain this process—to articulate how stereotype endorsement operates as a vehicle through which colorism is preserved and enacted in everyday life.

In dialogue with Hall and Reece, CSE advances a theoretical framework that does not dismiss structural inequality, but centers the people within those structures—their feelings, beliefs, choices, and performances. It draws heavily from sociological traditions that emphasize meaning-making, as well as Black feminist epistemologies that position lived experience as legitimate theory. In this way, CSE stands on the shoulders of Critical Skin Theory and Color Crit, while also carving out its own domain by attending to how colorism is enacted, resisted, and reinforced in the micro-politics of everyday Black life. CSE Theory is not only concerned with how colorism is structured into institutional arrangements but how it is expressed and experienced in the spaces where Black people live, love, learn, and create identity. It theorizes colorism as something that is taught through repetition and behavior, embodied through stereotypes, and often unconsciously maintained through rituals of speech, judgment, desire, and social positioning. By building this bridge between structure and subjectivity, CSE Theory

situates itself close enough to the ground to trace the intricacies of interpersonal dynamics, but theoretically expansive enough to contribute to broader conversations about race, gender, and inequality.

Theoretical Lineage and Positioning

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory emerges in dialogue with, but also in distinction from, three major frameworks that shape contemporary thinking on colorism and racial inequality: Hall's Critical Skin Theory, Reece's Color Crit, and Dumas and Ross's BlackCrit. These frameworks have contributed foundational insights into the global and structural dynamics of race, skin tone, and anti-Blackness. CSE Theory builds on their work by shifting the analytical gaze inward—toward how these dynamics are internalized, endorsed, and reproduced within Black communities.

Hall's Critical Skin Theory was constructed through interdisciplinary research on global patterns of skin tone stratification. Drawing from sociology, psychology, and economics, Hall argues that skin color, apart from race, has become a global organizing principle that dictates access to social, political, and economic capital. Moreover, he asserts that colorism will replace racism as the predominant or foremost form of stratified discrimination. His theory is built upon decades of comparative research, case studies, and empirical observations, particularly concerning skin bleaching and pigmentocracy in non-Western contexts. Hall's work is vital in illuminating how anti-Blackness is expressed through global preferences for lighter skin. However, his focus remains primarily at the structural and international level, offering little

analysis of the behavioral and interpersonal dynamics that sustain colorism within racially marginalized communities themselves.

Similarly, Reece's Color Crit is a conceptual intervention in Critical Race Theory (CRT). Reece critiques CRT's preoccupation with race to the exclusion of skin tone, arguing that colorism constitutes an independent and structurally embedded system of power. Color Crit is constructed through a critical reading of CRT's limitations and a reframing of race and phenotype as distinct yet overlapping systems of domination. Reece's work is rooted in history and legal theory, emphasizing how whiteness operates not only through racial exclusion but through the privileging of lighter phenotypes across and within racial groups. While Reece advances an urgent and necessary framework, Color Crit remains structurally oriented and largely silent on the micro-level processes—such as communal policing, intra-group stereotype assignment, and emotional surveillance—that CSE Theory centers.

Dumas and ross's BlackCrit takes a different but related approach. Constructed as a conceptual extension of CRT, BlackCrit focuses on anti-Blackness as a distinct and totalizing force, rather than one of many forms of marginalization. Their work draws heavily from Black studies, Afro-pessimism, and the Black radical tradition to frame Black suffering in schools and society not as exclusion but as foundational to the workings of racial capitalism. Unlike Hall and Reece, Dumas and ross place a strong emphasis on the psychic and symbolic dimensions of Blackness, but their analysis remains rooted in the structure of white domination. The question of intra-racial reproduction of dominant logics—especially in relation to gender and skin tone—remains outside the purview of their theoretical architecture.

CSE Theory both honors and departs from these frameworks. Like Hall, it sees skin tone as a consequential axis of stratification; like Reece, it critiques the insufficiency of existing theories to account for colorism as an autonomous force; and like Dumas and ross, it recognizes the cultural and affective dimensions of Black identity. However, CSE Theory centers intra-racial mechanisms: how colorist ideologies are learned, performed, endorsed, and justified within the Black community itself. It is concerned not just with institutional arrangements or global flows of anti-Blackness, but with everyday practices—how a joke, a dating preference, a backhanded compliment, or a stereotype function to reproduce inequality.

Where Hall constructed Critical Skin Theory through cross-national comparison, Reece through conceptual reframing, and Dumas and ross through radical critique, CSE Theory emerges from empirical observation, iterative theorizing, and grounded encounters within Black cultural life. It positions communal behavior, cultural memory, and stereotype endorsement as critical sites of inquiry—demanding that we take seriously the affective and symbolic reproduction of colorism not just as a remnant of external oppression, but as a living, breathing practice sustained by belief.

Epistemological Commitments and Theoretical Grounding

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory is grounded in a Black feminist epistemological tradition that privileges lived experience, emotional knowledge, and reflexive theorizing as valid and necessary forms of intellectual production. Drawing from the

foundational work of Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, CSE Theory insists that knowledge is not merely accumulated from the top down, but cultivated through the everyday negotiations of power, survival, and identity among the marginalized.

This epistemological orientation resists positivist frameworks that prioritize “objectivity” over subjectivity, detachment over investment, and abstract generalization over contextual depth. Instead, CSE Theory embraces a standpoint methodology—one that centers the voices and perceptions of those most affected by colorism. In doing so, it follows Collins’ assertion that Black women’s experiences offer “a subjugated knowledge” that challenges dominant epistemologies and reveals hidden dimensions of power.

Just as Black feminist thought insists that the personal is political, CSE Theory asserts that the interpersonal is structural. Micro-level acts of stereotype endorsement—statements made at the dinner table, jokes told among friends, preferences voiced in dating contexts—are not trivial. They are sites of meaning-making, and they are worthy of rigorous theoretical attention. This epistemological stance broadens what is recognized as data, what counts as evidence, and who is positioned as a theorist.

CSE Theory is also aligned with constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, which recognize that knowledge is socially produced, historically situated, and emotionally inflected. Meaning is not fixed; it is negotiated. Skin tone is not merely an immutable phenotype—it is a relational cue loaded with sociohistorical baggage and cultural coding. Thus, this theory does

not ask what is “true” in an essentialist sense; it asks what is believed, felt, enacted, and reproduced, and why.

Moreover, CSE Theory’s epistemological foundation is explicitly interdisciplinary. While rooted in sociology, it borrows freely from critical race theory, cultural studies, social psychology, and media studies to map the symbolic terrain of stereotype reproduction. This is a deliberate act of theoretical insurgency: to build a framework that is responsive to the complexity of lived Black experience, it must move across disciplinary boundaries rather than be constrained by them.

Finally, the theory takes seriously the emotional and embodied dimensions of knowledge. Following Lorde’s concept of the erotic as power and hooks’ advocacy for engaged pedagogy, CSE Theory acknowledges that pain, memory, joy, shame, and resistance are not secondary to knowledge production—they are central. These affective experiences are not anecdotal; they are data points, analytic sites, and sources of theory. When a young girl internalizes a joke about being “too dark,” or when a light-skinned woman is sexualized before she understands desire, these are not isolated experiences—they are racialized and gendered lessons about worth, visibility, and legitimacy.

In grounding itself in this epistemological lineage, CSE Theory not only contributes to sociological and feminist thought—it also affirms that theory can come from the margins, that scholarship can be accountable to the communities it studies, and that critical knowledge must be both rigorous and reparative.

Empirical Foundations of CSE Theory

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory did not emerge in isolation or in abstraction—it was cultivated through six years of empirical engagement with the everyday lived realities of Black American life. It was born in the classroom, refined through community dialogue, and crystallized through systematic data collection. At its core, the theory responds to an observable phenomenon: that within Black communities, stereotypes about Black women are not applied uniformly, but are filtered through the lens of skin tone.

The earliest indicators of this pattern surfaced through classroom conversations and ethnographic observation. In course discussions and student reflections, I began to notice recurring themes—light-skinned Black women were described or perceived as hypervisible, seductive, emotionally manipulative, or “stuck up,” while darker-skinned Black women were framed as combative, strong, aggressive, or emotionally resilient. These traits were not casually or randomly assigned; they followed a patterned logic that echoed historical tropes such as the Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire. They were also most often expressed by other Black individuals—signaling that these associations were not merely imposed from outside, but circulated within.

To test these insights more formally, I designed and administered a survey to 300 Black American participants. The instrument assessed both personal endorsement (participants’ own beliefs) and perceived community endorsement (what they believed other Black people thought) of a range of stereotypes. Each stereotype reflected traits historically associated with controlling

images of Black womanhood and asked respondents to indicate whether these traits were more likely associated with light-, medium-, or dark-skinned Black women. These trait-trope pairings included:

- Jezebel: manipulative, opportunistic, promiscuous, sexually alluring
- Tragic Mulatta: exotic, desirable, victimhood, weak
- Sapphire: angry, loud, difficult, argumentative
- Mammy: docile, subservient, loyal, selfless

Patterns in the data revealed tone-based clustering of stereotypes, regardless of statistical significance across every trait. Light-skinned Black women were frequently associated with the Jezebel Tragic Mulatta archetypes—described as manipulative, emotionally fragile, and socially strategic. Meanwhile, darker-skinned Black women were more often linked to traits historically rooted in the Mammy and Sapphire tropes, such as caretaking, anger, emotional toughness, or resilience. These associations not only appeared in individual attitudes but also emerged in broader perceptions of communal norms—suggesting that tone-coded stereotypes circulate through both belief systems and shared cultural expectations.

Importantly, these findings do not rely solely on quantitative significance; rather, they align with a larger set of ethnographic, theoretical, and qualitative patterns observed throughout this research process. They reflect the ways intra-racial communities absorb, reproduce, and sometimes resist dominant cultural narratives. Even among participants who explicitly disavowed colorism and affirmed racial solidarity, these associations still surfaced—indicating

that stereotype endorsement can be both affective and performative, enacted even when consciously rejected.

This insight became central to the development of CSE Theory: stereotype endorsement is not always unconscious or unintentional—it can be strategic, habitual, and culturally reinforced. It exists in the complex space between belief, behavior, and belonging. What people believe and what they perform may diverge, but both contribute to the maintenance of stereotype logics.

These empirical patterns—both qualitative and quantitative—form the scaffolding for CSE Theory’s five interlocking tenets: that stereotypes are color-coded, endorsed, enforced, justified, and transmitted. They reflect the continued relevance of historical tropes while also illuminating the micro-level social performances and internal negotiations that allow colorist logics to persist in contemporary Black life.

In this way, CSE Theory is not only conceptually rigorous but empirically grounded. It captures the nuanced and often contradictory ways Black individuals assign meaning to skin tone and theorizes stereotype endorsement as a relational, communal practice that helps preserve intra-racial hierarchies—even in the absence of white surveillance. The theory, then, emerges not just from theory-building but from listening, observing, coding, and witnessing how skin tone continues to structure social meaning within Black communities today.

These insights raised broader epistemological questions about how knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated in communities marked by both oppression and resilience. In the following section, I articulate the epistemological commitments that underpin CSE Theory, grounding it in a tradition of Black feminist inquiry that centers lived experience, affect, and community wisdom as theoretical data.

Conceptual Architecture of CSE Theory

CSE Theory is best understood as a theoretical framework that bridges empirical observation and abstract theorization to explain a specific social phenomenon: how stereotypes tied to skin tone are differentially endorsed and perpetuated within Black communities. It is not meant to explain all forms of colorism or racialized inequality, but rather to illuminate the mechanisms through which historically entrenched tropes are endorsed, enacted, and transmitted based on complexion. As such, CSE Theory brings together behavioral sociology, Black feminist theory, and social psychology to map how belief, identity, and performance intersect.

At the heart of the theory is the claim that stereotypes are color-coded—that is, mapped onto skin tone through culturally learned associations. These stereotypes do not circulate randomly; they are tied to longstanding cultural tropes and sociohistorical meanings attached to phenotype. This color-coding then invites endorsement, where individuals—either consciously or performatively—affirm these beliefs through statements, judgments, or behavioral cues.

Endorsement is not merely an internal belief; it is a social act, one that reflects and reinforces broader communal norms and power dynamics.

Once endorsed, these beliefs become tools for intra-group surveillance and boundary enforcement. Individuals within the community use them to define, evaluate, and police behavior—determining who is “respectable,” “ratchet,” “stuck up,” “strong,” or “promiscuous” based on skin tone. Because such judgments often contradict espoused values of racial solidarity or equity, individuals resolve this tension through justification, deploying rationalizations to maintain coherence between their values and their behaviors. These might include appeals to personal experience, cultural norms, or the idea that stereotypes are “just the truth.”

Finally, through social learning and generational transmission, these patterns become durable. Stereotypes are passed down through family interactions, media consumption, religious messaging, and peer influence, embedding them within communal knowledge and identity formation. The full system becomes cyclical: transmission reinforces endorsement, which reproduces enforcement, which then demands further justification.

In this way, CSE Theory functions as a circular and dynamic model. While each of the five tenets can stand alone analytically, their full power is realized when understood as part of a mutually reinforcing process. CSE Theory therefore offers not only a vocabulary for describing colorist behavior, but a structural logic that explains how tone-specific stereotypes endure—even in communities with strong racial pride or consciousness.

Core Tenets of CSE Theory

The Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) framework rests on five interlocking tenets that explain how colorism functions not merely as a structural system of inequality, but as a recursive, behavioral, and symbolic cultural practice. These tenets do not operate in isolation; rather, they reinforce one another through interpersonal dynamics, social learning, and communal norm-setting. Together, they form the foundation of the CSE conceptual model, which visualizes the theory as a circulating system of intra-racial meaning-making.

First, CSE Theory asserts that stereotypes are color-coded. That is, they are not evenly distributed across all Black women but are disproportionately assigned to those with certain skin tones. This color-assignment process is not random or individualized—it is historically patterned and socially learned. Light-skinned Black women are more likely to be perceived as manipulative, hypersexual, or emotionally fragile, while dark-skinned Black women are framed as angry, masculine, or caretaking. These stereotypes function as extensions of the historical tropes rooted in chattel slavery and colonial ideology, where phenotype signaled proximity to whiteness, presumed temperament, and gendered worth. What CSE Theory contributes is an understanding of how these historically racialized scripts are updated and re-circulated in modern Black social life. In everyday interactions—within peer groups, families, workplaces, and romantic contexts—skin tone acts as a symbolic shorthand that triggers implicit and explicit associations. These associations are not merely aesthetic; they carry moral and social meaning that influence how Black women are treated, judged, and positioned within their communities. CSE Theory names this pattern and frames it as a fundamental mechanism through which

colorism persists—not only through exclusion from white spaces, but through differentiation and ranking within Black ones.

Second, CSE Theory posits that stereotype endorsement is a conscious, performative, and relational act. Unlike internalization—which involves the subconscious absorption of ideas—endorsement entails the active, outward expression of belief in those ideas. It is performative in that it often takes place in social settings where agreement with dominant scripts can confer cultural credibility, protect social standing, or signal group belonging. Endorsement may be verbal, such as repeating tropes about certain skin tones in jokes or conversations, or behavioral, such as making assumptions about a person’s personality, sexuality, or trustworthiness based on complexion. It is relational because it often emerges in the context of managing group dynamics, establishing hierarchies, or reinforcing one’s perceived moral or social superiority within the group. CSE Theory emphasizes that individuals do not endorse colorist stereotypes in a vacuum; they do so within communal environments where those endorsements are reinforced, rewarded, or go unchallenged. This tenet reframes colorist thinking not as a purely individual bias or internal contradiction, but as a social performance that both reflects and reproduces broader cultural logics of anti-Blackness and gendered power.

Third, CSE Theory foregrounds intra-group surveillance and boundary enforcement as core processes in the perpetuation of colorist stereotypes. Within Black communities, colorist ideologies are not only reproduced through belief, but through social behaviors and subtle acts of regulation—side-eyes, comments about tone and attitude, assumptions about desirability, and jokes that “tease” while also policing. These seemingly minor gestures and exchanges function

as powerful tools of intra-racial social control. They establish and enforce norms about how Black women should behave, speak, dress, and even emote—expectations that are often determined by the perceived appropriateness or desirability of their skin tone. Lighter-skinned women may be told to “check their privilege” or viewed with suspicion if they assert strength, while darker-skinned women may be expected to absorb emotional labor or prove their femininity through extra labor. In this way, communal actors become arbiters of what is considered acceptable or unacceptable within Black social life. CSE Theory argues that this policing is not simply mimicry of white supremacy, but a complex relational strategy that seeks to maintain a sense of order, hierarchy, and identity coherence within a racialized and gendered context. Through surveillance and enforcement, colorism becomes a living, breathing phenomenon—woven into the fabric of community interaction.

Fourth, the theory incorporates the mechanism of cognitive dissonance and justification to explain how colorist stereotype endorsement can coexist with professed commitments to racial solidarity or equality. Many individuals who endorse color-coded stereotypes simultaneously claim to value racial unity, equity, and empowerment. This contradiction generates dissonance—a psychological discomfort that must be resolved. To manage this tension, individuals often rely on culturally sanctioned justifications. They may frame their views as “honest observations,” attribute them to personal experience, or insist that their comments are about behavior, not skin tone. Common rationalizations include statements like, “It’s not that she’s light-skinned, she just acts stuck up,” or “Dark-skinned women are just naturally stronger.” These narratives serve to obscure the role of colorism while allowing individuals to maintain a sense of moral coherence. CSE Theory highlights how justification

operates as a defense mechanism—one that protects individuals from acknowledging their own complicity in reinforcing colorist logics. Importantly, this mechanism also reinforces the very stereotypes it seeks to rationalize. The more individuals justify their views, the more deeply entrenched those views become, making them harder to challenge or unlearn. In this way, justification becomes a key force in the maintenance of colorist hierarchies.

Finally, CSE Theory emphasizes social learning and generational transmission as key mechanisms through which colorist stereotypes are sustained across time. These stereotypes do not emerge spontaneously or exist in a cultural vacuum—they are taught, modeled, and reinforced through a variety of socializing agents, including family, media, religious communities, peer groups, and educational institutions. From an early age, Black children receive both direct and indirect messages about the meaning of skin tone: who is considered beautiful, who is expected to be strong, who is assumed to be loud or passive, who is praised for being “articulate,” or who is warned about being “too angry.” These messages are encoded in compliments, warnings, jokes, punishments, and praise, often passed along without conscious awareness. CSE Theory underscores that this transmission is both horizontal and vertical—it happens between generations, but also among peers and across digital platforms, reinforcing a collective cultural memory about what certain skin tones signify. Over time, these patterns become normalized and embedded into the communal psyche, shaping how individuals see themselves and each other. In highlighting this tenet, CSE Theory insists that colorism is not simply a relic of the past—it is a socially learned system of belief, power, and discipline that continues to be actively taught and reproduced.

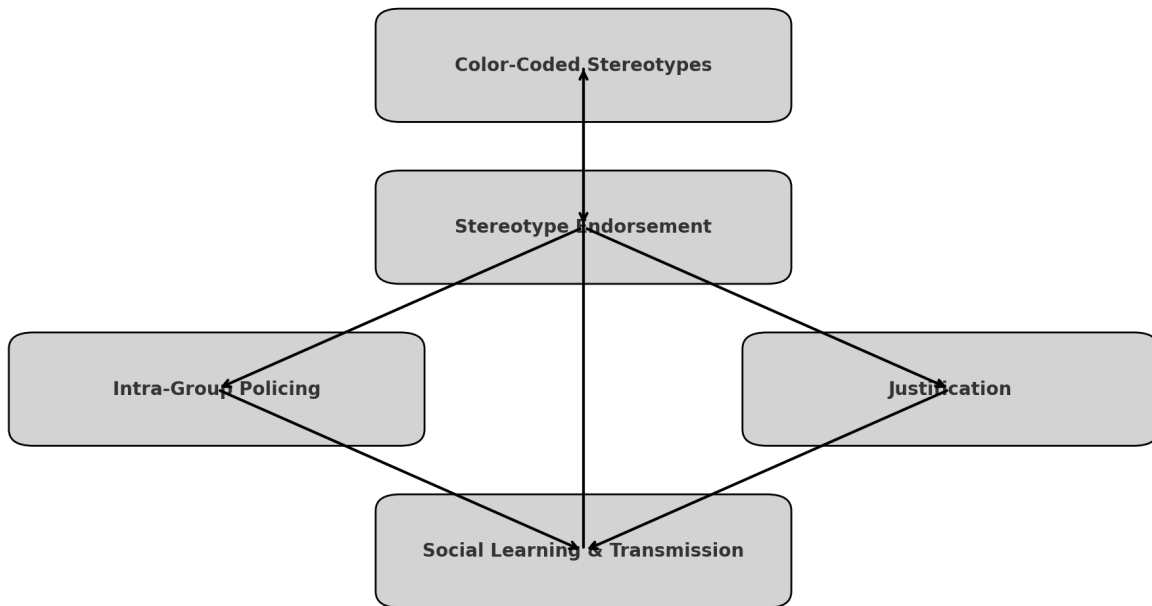
Together, these tenets describe a circulating system of cultural meaning in which skin tone is imbued with moral, emotional, and social consequence. Stereotypes are not only inherited—they are actively assigned, reinforced, rationalized, and reproduced through communal practices. These tenets form the backbone of the conceptual model presented in the next section, which visualizes how the dynamics of colorist stereotype endorsement operate recursively within Black communities.

These five tenets operate not in isolation, but as a recursive and mutually reinforcing system. Together, they constitute the core architecture of CSE Theory. To visually synthesize their relationships and circulatory logic, the following section introduces a conceptual model that illustrates how colorist stereotype endorsement functions across behavioral, relational, and cultural dimensions.

Visualizing the Theory: A Conceptual Model of CSE

The following conceptual model visualizes the structure and function of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory. It illustrates the relational logic between the five core tenets—color-coded stereotypes, endorsement, policing, justification, and transmission—and situates them within the broader cultural and psychological dynamics of intra-racial colorism. The model is designed to offer a clear, accessible synthesis of the theory’s conceptual architecture, emphasizing how each component works recursively to maintain tone-based stereotype systems within the Black community.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory



Explaining the Conceptual Model of CSE Theory

The conceptual model visually represents the architecture of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory. Rather than illustrating a linear process or a simple cause-and-effect chain, this model emphasizes the recursive, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing nature of the core tenets that comprise the theory. At the center of the model lies Stereotype Endorsement—the conscious acceptance or belief in racialized and gendered tropes that are color-coded and circulated within the Black community. From this central node, four key social mechanisms branch out and feed back into each other: Color-Coded Stereotypes, Intra-Group Policing, Justification, and Social Learning and Transmission.

Each mechanism functions as both a consequence of and a contributor to the persistence of stereotype endorsement, underscoring CSE Theory's claim that colorist logics are not merely internalized but also performed, enforced, and inherited within everyday Black social life.

Color-Coded Stereotypes represent the historical and symbolic assignment of traits—such as anger, promiscuity, strength, or fragility—to individuals based on skin tone. These stereotypes do not arise spontaneously; they are inherited through cultural memory and reinterpreted through present-day interactions.

Intra-Group Policing refers to the relational processes through which individuals regulate one another's behavior, identity expression, or perceived authenticity based on these tone-coded scripts. This includes social sanctions like ridicule, side-eyes, gossip, or exclusion—seemingly minor acts that carry significant disciplinary weight.

Justification captures the rationalizations that individuals use to endorse or maintain colorist stereotypes while minimizing cognitive dissonance. These may include statements like “I’m just being honest,” or “It’s not about skin tone, it’s about how she acts,” which serve to legitimize stereotype belief without directly acknowledging its bias.

Social Learning and Transmission reflects the intergenerational and peer-based processes through which colorist beliefs are passed down, reinforced, and normalized. These can occur in

family socialization, school environments, beauty standards, religious discourse, and media consumption.

The model emphasizes that these processes are not discrete stages but part of a circulating system of cultural maintenance. Stereotype endorsement fuels and is fueled by these four mechanisms, creating a feedback loop that continuously reaffirms the moral, emotional, and social meanings attached to skin tone.

Importantly, this visual structure supports CSE Theory's assertion that skin tone bias is not just an external imposition, but a living intra-racial ideology sustained through belief, behavior, and belonging. The model underscores that disrupting colorism requires not only structural reform, but cultural self-awareness, intra-group accountability, and communal healing.

Naming and Defining Core Concepts within CSE Theory

To further solidify Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory as a durable and transferable framework, this section introduces several core concepts developed through the theory's empirical and conceptual scaffolding. These terms are designed to be exportable—usable across disciplines and contexts—while remaining anchored in the sociocultural specificity of Black American life.

Tone-Tagging

Tone-tagging refers to the practice of assigning moral, behavioral, or emotional meaning to a person based on their skin tone. This concept builds on the idea that stereotypes are not simply associated with race writ large but are differentially mapped onto individuals within the same racial group based on complexion. For example, a light-skinned woman might be tone-tagged as “manipulative” or “privileged,” while a dark-skinned woman might be tagged as “angry” or “resilient.” Tone-tagging is often subtle, communicated through language, gaze, body language, or assumptions, but its impact on identity and social treatment is profound.

Performative Alignment

Performative alignment refers to the behavioral choices individuals make to either conform to, resist, or subvert the tone-coded stereotypes assigned to them. Drawing from symbolic interactionism and impression management theory, this concept recognizes that people are aware of the scripts projected onto them and may consciously adjust their presentation to avoid social sanctions or gain communal acceptance. For instance, a light-skinned Black woman may intentionally downplay her sexuality or assertiveness to avoid being cast as a Jezebel or “stuck-up.” Performative alignment reveals the relational and strategic dimension of stereotype endorsement and resistance.

Moral Stratification of Skin Tone

CSE Theory introduces the notion of a moral stratification of skin tone—the idea that complexion is not only a site of aesthetic or sexual valuation, but also a moral and emotional hierarchy. In this system, different shades are imbued with assumptions about virtue, trustworthiness, emotional resilience, and femininity. This concept expands the scope of colorism from beauty and desirability into the terrain of moral character and social worth, helping to explain why tone-based stereotypes carry such durable weight in intra-racial communities.

Intra-Group Boundary Policing

Building on Goffman and labeling theory, intra-group boundary policing refers to the communal enforcement of tone-coded norms through micro-interactions, commentary, social shaming, and silence. It is a mechanism through which tone-tagging and endorsement are maintained, not solely through media or institutions, but through community surveillance and relational power. This concept underscores the participatory nature of stereotype reproduction—it is not only what is believed but also what is performed, rewarded, or punished in everyday settings.

Clarifying Key Distinctions and Definitional Nuances

As Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory introduces new conceptual language, it is important to clarify the distinctions between several overlapping yet analytically distinct terms. These clarifications ensure theoretical precision and enhance the framework's exportability for other scholars.

Intra-Group Surveillance vs. Intra-Group Policing

While often interconnected, intra-group surveillance and intra-group policing operate at different registers. Intra-group surveillance refers to the watchful, anticipatory gaze—often unspoken—that members of a marginalized community cast upon one another to assess alignment with communal norms, especially those related to skin tone, respectability, and femininity. It is the social monitoring that occurs when someone “reads the room,” adjusts their tone, or anticipates backlash for how they present based on their complexion.

By contrast, intra-group policing involves active enforcement. This includes jokes, criticisms, subtle digs, or outright exclusion meant to correct or punish behavior seen as violating tone-based norms. Where surveillance is passive and observational, policing is reactive and regulatory. Surveillance may be internalized; policing is enacted.

Performative Alignment vs. Endorsement

CSE Theory also distinguishes between performative alignment and stereotype endorsement. Endorsement refers to an individual's expressed belief in a stereotype, whether genuine or not. It is often an act of agreement or repetition—"She's just like that because she's light-skinned"—that supports existing colorist scripts.

Performative alignment, on the other hand, refers to how individuals manage themselves in anticipation of being tone-tagged or stereotyped. It is the strategic behavioral adjustment made to avoid confirmation of a stereotype or to gain social acceptance. A dark-skinned woman downplaying anger to avoid being labeled "aggressive," or a light-skinned woman deflecting compliments about her appearance to avoid being called "conceited," are both examples. Performative alignment is not about what one believes; it is about how one navigates stereotype expectations in real time.

Tone-Tagging vs. Stereotype Assignment

Tone-tagging refers to the subtle or overt act of attaching social meaning or judgment to someone's skin tone—often in casual or coded language. It may manifest as a comment about someone's attitude, presumed sexuality, or emotionality, based not on behavior but on complexion.

By contrast, stereotype assignment refers to the structural and cultural inheritance of certain tropes being disproportionately projected onto individuals based on tone. Whereas tone-tagging is a behavior or practice enacted by individuals or communities, stereotype assignment describes the broader system through which certain tropes (e.g., Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire) are racialized and distributed unevenly across skin tone.

These distinctions are essential to understanding how stereotype endorsement operates not just cognitively but interpersonally, behaviorally, and symbolically. Together, they help delineate the layered dimensions of intra-racial colorism that CSE Theory seeks to name, unpack, and transform.

Contrasts with Existing Theories

While Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory is in conversation with Hall's Critical Skin Theory and Reece's Color Crit, it is conceptually and methodologically distinct. Hall's Critical Skin Theory positions skin tone as a global organizing principle, arguing that complexion operates independently of race to shape access to resources, social mobility, and institutional legitimacy. Hall's work offers an essential intervention into how anti-Blackness operates through colorist stratification on a global scale. However, his theory, like much of the literature on colorism, remains primarily focused on macro-level structures and outcomes—overlooking the everyday behavioral, symbolic, and psychological mechanisms that perpetuate colorism within Black communities.

Similarly, Reece's Color Crit framework offers a powerful structural and historical critique of how colorism functions as a dynamic system of racialized oppression rooted in slavery, colonialism, and white supremacy. Reece provides valuable insights into how whiteness and proximity to whiteness shape access to power. Yet, like Hall, his focus is centered on institutionalized inequality—such as disparities in employment, criminal justice, or media representation—rather than on the intra-group logics that sustain colorist ideologies at the micro-level. Although both frameworks name the structural contours of colorism, they leave underexplored how those structures are reinforced and enacted through interpersonal relationships, communal beliefs, and affective judgments.

CSE Theory builds upon and expands these frameworks by centering the lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and emotional labor of Black women. As a theory rooted in Black feminist thought, CSE takes seriously the gendered dynamics of colorism—particularly how stereotypes about Black women are not just racialized, but also deeply gendered, sexualized, and moralized in ways that differ depending on skin tone. Where Hall and Reece provide necessary accounts of colorism's institutional life, CSE Theory examines its interpersonal choreography: the jokes, glances, judgments, and social cues through which colorist ideas are taught, reinforced, and policed. It attends to how Black women are differently surveilled, praised, punished, or rendered invisible based on the tone of their skin and the stereotypes attached to it.

CSE Theory does not reject Critical Skin Theory or Color Crit. Instead, it extends their insights by adding a critical Black feminist perspective—one that foregrounds belief systems, symbolic interaction, and community-based forms of knowledge production. In doing so, it

illuminates how power circulates not only through formal institutions but also through informal cultural practices, socialization, and interpersonal dynamics. It reminds us that colorism is not only something done to marginalized people, but something that can be reproduced within marginalized communities—often unconsciously, yet with deeply consequential effects.

Stereotype Endorsement and Social Identity Theory: A Social Psychological Bridge

Although Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory is grounded in sociological and Black feminist frameworks, its explanatory power is enriched through integration with social psychological concepts—particularly the literature on stereotype endorsement and Social Identity Theory (SIT). In social psychology, stereotype endorsement refers to the conscious or unconscious acceptance of generalized beliefs about a group, including one's own group. CSE Theory builds upon this concept by emphasizing the outward expression of belief systems that are not only individually held but socially performed and reinforced.

Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), provides a useful lens for understanding how individuals construct their self-concept through group membership and how they maintain or protect a positive social identity through comparison with out-groups. CSE Theory draws from SIT's foundational tenets, particularly the processes of social categorization, positive distinctiveness, and social comparison, all of which help explain the intra-group dynamics through which colorist stereotypes are endorsed and reproduced. As Trepte and Loy (2017) explain, these processes are interwoven with media consumption, daily

interactions, and broader cultural reinforcement, which can elevate certain group traits as normative and devalue others.

Trepte and Loy (2017) and Hogg et al. (1995) further distinguish SIT from Identity Theory, noting SIT's particular usefulness in examining intergroup tensions and cognitive representations of the self based on group-level traits. CSE Theory leverages this orientation to underscore how Black individuals may endorse stereotypes about skin tone as a way to align with internalized ingroup norms or to distance themselves from stigmatized traits projected onto others within their group. Stereotype endorsement becomes a behavioral expression of group conformity, boundary enforcement, and social policing.

Islam (2014) elaborates that group identity can serve both protective and evaluative purposes, especially in the context of perceived threat. Within CSE Theory, this logic applies to intra-racial dynamics: light-skinned Black women may be subjected to Jezebel stereotypes not only by out-groups but by other Black individuals attempting to assert moral distance or claim symbolic proximity to respectability. Similarly, darker-skinned women may be stereotyped as strong or angry as a way to preserve a stable ingroup narrative of endurance or sacrifice. These patterns reflect the internalization of external tropes, selectively endorsed to maintain a semblance of intra-racial order.

Crucially, CSE Theory distinguishes itself by focusing on the behavioral expression of these stereotypes as a social practice. While SIT explains how social identity is formed and maintained through psychological mechanisms, CSE Theory shows how these processes become

embodied through belief systems, affective judgments, and intergenerational transmission. The theory posits that endorsement is not just an internal belief but a performative act of intra-racial positioning and relational power.

Thus, CSE Theory bridges the insights of SIT with a culturally grounded critique of internalized anti-Blackness, showing how colorism is not merely an inherited ideology but a dynamic practice of group identity maintenance, cultural conformity, and micro-level hierarchy enforcement. This multidimensional framework allows us to observe how individuals participate in the reproduction of anti-Black stereotypes while simultaneously navigating the contradictory demands of intra-racial loyalty, personal esteem, and social survival.

Stereotype Endorsement as a Social Psychological and Cultural Practice

To further clarify the theoretical underpinnings of CSE Theory, it is important to engage more deeply with the psychological literature on stereotype endorsement itself. In social psychology, stereotype endorsement refers to the extent to which individuals consciously or unconsciously agree with, accept, or reproduce widely held beliefs about particular groups. This process is distinct from stereotype awareness or stereotype threat, as endorsement involves some degree of cognitive agreement or belief—whether implicit or explicit. CSE Theory extends this notion by emphasizing how endorsement operates not only as an internal belief but also as a relational and performative act within Black communities, shaped by race, gender, and skin tone hierarchies.

Blanton, Christie, and Dye (2002) provide critical insight into how stereotype endorsement can reshape social identity. Their research showed that when women were primed with a negative stereotype about their math abilities, they shifted from evaluating themselves in relation to an intergroup standard (men) to judging themselves by intragroup standards (other women). This shift toward internal comparison suggests that endorsement of stereotypes can cause members of a marginalized group to reorient their reference frames, using their own group as a benchmark in ways that reinforce stereotypes and limit self-perception.

Schmader, Johns, and Barquissau (2004) further illuminate how stereotype endorsement—particularly when it involves legitimizing beliefs about group differences—can negatively shape career intentions and self-efficacy. In their studies, women who accepted gender stereotypes about math ability were not only more likely to doubt their competence but also more likely to consider leaving math-related disciplines. CSE Theory draws on this idea to suggest that skin tone-based stereotypes—such as the Jezebel, Mammy, or Sapphire—operate similarly, affecting Black women’s social identity, self-concept, and perceived place within their racial community.

Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck (1998) contribute another dimension by identifying the role of implicit theories about human traits in stereotype formation and endorsement. They found that individuals who believe human traits are fixed (entity theorists) are more prone to stereotyping and more likely to attribute behaviors to stable group traits. In contrast, those with incremental theories—who see traits as malleable—are less likely to engage in stereotypical thinking. CSE Theory incorporates this insight to explain why individuals may vary in their susceptibility to

endorsing tone-specific stereotypes: those who view personality as fixed may be more likely to see behavioral traits as biologically or culturally linked to skin tone.

Within CSE Theory, stereotype endorsement is understood as both a psychological disposition and a cultural practice. It is informed by personal belief systems, group identification, and social learning, but also reinforced through intergenerational narratives, media, religious discourse, and community policing. This dual conceptualization allows CSE Theory to explain both why individuals might believe in tone-coded stereotypes and how such beliefs become normalized, maintained, and transmitted within intra-racial contexts.

Ultimately, CSE Theory reconceptualizes stereotype endorsement as a dynamic and situated practice—one that is simultaneously cognitive, relational, and structural. It helps illuminate how tone-specific stereotypes are internalized and reproduced in Black communities even in the absence of external white surveillance. This framework foregrounds the affective and moral economy in which these beliefs are situated, highlighting how people participate in their own subjugation through belief in, and performance of, culturally inherited racial scripts.

Boundaries and Theoretical Constraints

As with any theory, CSE Theory is most effective when understood within the scope of its intended contributions. It is not a totalizing explanation of all aspects of colorism, nor does it claim to fully account for every instance of intra-racial inequality. Rather, CSE Theory is designed as a focused framework that explains how and why stereotypes are unevenly endorsed

and distributed across skin tone lines within Black communities—particularly among Black women.

First, CSE Theory does not reduce colorism to mere aesthetics or personal preference. While skin tone can influence romantic or social desirability, this theory focuses specifically on how belief systems and stereotypes—not just preferences—become attached to complexion and how those associations are reinforced through endorsement and communal behavior.

Second, CSE Theory does not claim to displace or replace structural accounts of racism, patriarchy, or class oppression. Instead, it builds upon them, showing how those structural conditions are also internalized and perpetuated through micro-level practices within the community. The theory argues that skin tone bias is not solely imposed from above; it is also enacted within marginalized groups, sometimes in contradiction to their political values or aspirational sense of solidarity.

Third, CSE Theory is not primarily about identity formation or self-perception. While it intersects with these areas, it is most concerned with how skin tone becomes a social script, one that assigns moral, sexual, emotional, and behavioral meaning to individuals in ways that are historically patterned and socially enforced.

Fourth, CSE Theory is not a universal model of stereotype endorsement across all racial or ethnic communities. While the logics of the theory may be applicable in other contexts, it is specifically grounded in the experiences of Black Americans and the legacies of U.S. slavery,

Jim Crow, and contemporary anti-Blackness. Its insights may resonate beyond these boundaries, but its empirical and cultural grounding remains intentionally specific.

Finally, CSE Theory does not claim that every Black person who endorses a stereotype is doing so out of conscious malice or ignorance. Rather, it emphasizes how social learning, communal norms, and the desire for belonging can lead individuals to reproduce harmful logics even while holding egalitarian or pro-Black values. The goal of CSE Theory is not to pathologize communities, but to illuminate the tensions and contradictions that exist within them—and to provide tools for naming and disrupting those contradictions.

By articulating these boundaries, CSE Theory remains a precise, culturally grounded framework. It speaks to a particular phenomenon—the interpersonal circulation of skin tone-based stereotypes and the systems that sustain them—with the intention of opening space for deeper understanding, more honest dialogue, and transformative change.

Anticipating Counterarguments and Clarifying Misinterpretations

As with any emerging theory that challenges dominant frameworks or directs critique inward toward marginalized communities, Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory is subject to potential misinterpretation or resistance. In the spirit of critical engagement, this section addresses some likely counterarguments and clarifies how CSE Theory both responds to and distinguishes itself from these concerns.

Counterargument 1: “Isn’t this just internalized racism?”

A common critique might suggest that CSE Theory merely repackages the concept of internalized racism—that is, the unconscious absorption of dominant white supremacist ideals by marginalized people. While internalized racism is undoubtedly relevant to colorism, CSE Theory makes a critical distinction: it focuses on conscious and performative acts of stereotype endorsement that occur within intra-racial settings. These acts are not always unconscious. In many cases, individuals actively express or perform these beliefs to align with communal norms, assert social standing, or protect identity boundaries.

Moreover, internalized racism often centers whiteness as the primary referent. CSE Theory shifts the analytic lens to examine intra-group logics, where skin tone stratification persists even in the absence of white observers or direct institutional control. In this way, CSE Theory supplements rather than substitutes internalized racism, offering a more behavioral, relational, and communal account of how colorism endures.

Counterargument 2: “Aren’t these just personal preferences or attitudes?”

Some may dismiss the phenomena described in CSE Theory as simply a matter of individual opinion, taste, or anecdotal experience. CSE Theory challenges this reduction by documenting patterns in how specific stereotypes—like the hypersexual Jezebel, the angry Sapphire, or the nurturing Mammy—are disproportionately assigned based on skin tone. These

patterns are not incidental; they are historically rooted, culturally reinforced, and socially transmitted.

While individual variation exists, the theory argues that such preferences and attitudes are often shaped by social learning, group norms, and collective memory. By framing stereotype endorsement as a social practice—not just a personal belief—CSE Theory highlights the cultural scripts that structure even what may appear to be isolated or private judgments.

Counterargument 3: “Doesn’t this pathologize the Black community?”

CSE Theory is explicitly grounded in a Black feminist ethos that rejects the idea of pathologizing Black life. Instead, it seeks to name and interrogate internal contradictions in order to support healing, self-awareness, and transformation. The goal is not to cast blame but to foster a more honest and critical engagement with the intra-racial dynamics that can undermine solidarity and perpetuate harm.

The theory positions Black communities not as uniquely flawed, but as fully human—capable of reproducing dominant ideologies while also developing the tools to resist them. This is a call-in, not a call-out. As such, CSE Theory emphasizes collective accountability, cultural reflection, and the potential for transformation through dialogue, education, and intentional unlearning.

Counterargument 4: “Is CSE Theory overly focused on Black women?”

CSE Theory is intentionally focused on the gendered experience of colorism, particularly as it relates to Black women. This specificity is not an exclusion but a political and methodological choice that reflects the disproportionate burden placed on Black women to navigate and embody the contradictions of colorist logic. The theory is attuned to how gender and skin tone intersect to shape particular stereotypes and communal responses.

However, this does not mean CSE Theory is inapplicable to other groups. The framework may be extended or adapted to explore how colorist stereotypes impact Black men or non-binary individuals, though such adaptations would require empirical grounding and theoretical refinement. Its current form prioritizes depth over universality, following a Black feminist tradition of theorizing from the margins.

Theoretical Connections: Symbolic Interactionism, Labeling Theory, and Everyday Colorist Scripts

While Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory is deeply rooted in Black feminist thought, cultural sociology, and social psychology, its explanatory power is further enriched by classical sociological frameworks that emphasize meaning-making in everyday life. In particular, symbolic interactionism and labeling theory offer complementary tools for understanding how colorist logics are enacted, reinforced, and contested in the intimate, micro-level interactions that form the backbone of CSE Theory.

Symbolic Interactionism and the Performance of Stereotypes

Symbolic interactionism—pioneered by George Herbert Mead and later expanded by Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman—emphasizes how meaning is constructed through social interaction. From this perspective, identity is not a static trait but a dynamic process, co-constructed through the feedback of others. Within CSE Theory, this insight is vital: the stereotypes assigned to Black women based on skin tone are not just abstract ideas—they are scripts that are learned, expected, and performed within specific social contexts.

Erving Goffman's concept of impression management is especially useful for understanding how individuals navigate colorist expectations. Light-skinned Black women, for instance, may feel pressure to perform humility or deference to counter assumptions of arrogance or promiscuity. Dark-skinned Black women may overcompensate in emotional expression or caretaking to avoid being perceived as cold or aggressive. These performances are not always strategic or conscious; often, they are shaped by years of feedback from family, friends, romantic partners, teachers, and media. CSE Theory foregrounds these micro-level negotiations, highlighting how colorist stereotypes are lived, embodied, and resisted in real time.

Labeling Theory and the Durability of Colorist Tropes

Labeling theory, rooted in the work of Howard Becker, offers another lens through which to understand the persistence of color-coded stereotypes. Labeling theory argues that deviance is not an inherent quality but a social definition, applied through processes of judgment, repetition,

and institutional reinforcement. Once an individual is labeled, that label can begin to structure not only how others treat them, but also how they come to see themselves.

In the context of colorism, labels such as “fast,” “angry,” or “bitter” are disproportionately applied to Black women based on skin tone. These labels are often introduced early—sometimes in adolescence—and reinforced over time through peer interaction, media portrayal, and even adult authority figures. As CSE Theory shows, these labels gain legitimacy not only from institutions but from intra-group repetition and agreement. Labeling becomes a communal act of meaning-making, where stereotypes harden into expectations, and expectations into identity.

Moreover, the labeling process within colorism is often moralized—meaning that individuals are not just described but evaluated. Light-skinned women are often coded as untrustworthy or “stuck up”; dark-skinned women as intimidating or undesirable. These are not neutral assessments; they are infused with assumptions about who is deserving of care, respect, intimacy, and opportunity. CSE Theory attends to the moral economy of stereotype endorsement—how beliefs about complexion map onto assumptions about worth, behavior, and belonging.

Applications and Use Value of CSE Theory

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory is not only an interpretive framework—it is also a practical tool for intervention. It offers scholars, educators, practitioners, and

community organizers a lens through which to name, trace, and interrupt the tone-coded logics that structure everyday Black social life. By unpacking how stereotypes are color-coded, endorsed, and circulated within the community, CSE Theory provides a language for what is often left unspoken but widely felt.

In academic research, CSE Theory opens space for scholars to explore the micro-level processes through which colorism persists—across contexts such as education, media, politics, healthcare, religion, and family life. Sociologists can use the theory to guide studies of stereotype transmission in institutions or intimate settings; psychologists can investigate how endorsement shapes self-perception, identity formation, or trauma; and communication scholars can trace how tone-coded scripts appear in online discourse, reality television, and visual culture. The theory is particularly generative for qualitative and mixed-methods research, including surveys, interviews, ethnography, and discourse analysis.

In educational contexts, CSE Theory equips teachers, administrators, and school counselors with the critical tools to identify how colorist beliefs shape classroom dynamics and discipline practices. It can inform professional development workshops that address implicit bias—not just across racial groups, but within them. CSE Theory can also shape curriculum in Black studies, sociology, gender studies, and teacher education programs, prompting students to reflect on how stereotype endorsement is normalized through humor, language, dress codes, or expectations of “attitude” or “behavior.”

In clinical and counseling work, the theory provides language for Black clients—particularly women and girls—to name the psychological and emotional toll of being stereotyped based on skin tone. Therapists, school psychologists, and social workers can use CSE Theory to help clients process intra-racial harm, stereotype anxiety, and generational messaging around complexion. It also provides clinicians with an intervention framework rooted in cultural knowledge rather than pathologization.

In community work and public engagement, CSE Theory has the power to transform dialogues around colorism by moving beyond surface-level conversations about “preference” or “representation.” It allows for the facilitation of workshops, healing circles, intergenerational dialogues, and anti-colorism campaigns rooted in a shared understanding of how stereotype endorsement functions as both belief and behavior. Community organizers can use the theory’s five tenets as a teaching framework to interrogate tone-coded language, dating politics, respectability logics, and media literacy in culturally grounded, relational ways.

Finally, in institutional and organizational equity work, CSE Theory broadens existing anti-racism models by addressing intra-racial bias—an often-neglected form of inequality in diversity initiatives. By tracing how stereotypes are assigned not just across race but within it, the theory invites organizations to attend to how skin tone influences workplace perceptions of competence, leadership, “fit,” or professionalism among Black employees. CSE Theory opens space for nuanced dialogue, accountability, and healing, not through blame, but through reflection and cultural rigor.

In sum, the use value of CSE Theory lies in its ability to bridge disciplines, reach across contexts, and give name to the unseen architecture of tone-based stereotype belief. It is not just a theory to study—it is a theory to use, teach, and build with. Through critical reflection and practical application, CSE Theory offers a path toward intra-racial accountability, cultural healing, and liberatory praxis.

These current applications illustrate the theory's flexibility and accessibility across disciplines and settings. Yet CSE Theory also holds untapped potential for continued growth and refinement. The following section explores future directions for theoretical expansion, interdisciplinary adaptation, and empirical testing.

Future Directions and Theoretical Expansions

As Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory continues to evolve, several potential avenues for expansion and application remain open for future research. These directions not only extend the theoretical reach of CSE but also deepen its analytical and empirical precision.

First, future work can explore how CSE Theory applies to different gender identities and sexual orientations. While this iteration of the theory centers Black women's experiences, colorist stereotypes also shape how Black men, nonbinary individuals, and queer Black communities are perceived and policed within intra-racial contexts. Expanding CSE to account for these intersections would sharpen its capacity to analyze gendered tone-based stereotyping as a multi-dimensional phenomenon.

Second, researchers can extend the theory to transnational or diasporic contexts, examining how CSE's central logics apply in other Black communities shaped by different colonial, cultural, or linguistic histories. For instance, how do Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Caribbean, or African immigrant communities engage in intra-racial stereotype assignment based on skin tone? While the theory is grounded in the Black American experience, its core tenets may hold cross-cultural resonance and reveal common patterns of postcolonial colorist reproduction.

Third, CSE Theory can be tested and refined through additional mixed-methods studies, including experimental designs that examine stereotype activation, endorsement, and relational outcomes. Quantitative scales could be developed to measure colorist stereotype endorsement in various domains (e.g., dating, workplace, school discipline), while qualitative work could further unpack how endorsement is navigated in real-time interaction and discourse.

Fourth, future research may apply CSE Theory to digital spaces, where colorist discourse is frequently amplified or resisted through meme culture, commentary threads, and visual representation. Analyzing how tone-coded stereotypes are reproduced or challenged on platforms like TikTok, Twitter, or YouTube would provide insight into how stereotype endorsement functions within the ever-evolving terrain of Black digital life.

Finally, CSE Theory can be a launching point for intervention design, particularly in educational, therapeutic, and organizational settings. Curriculum modules, training workshops,

or community healing circles can be built around the theory's five tenets to help individuals recognize, name, and interrupt colorist logics in their daily lives.

As this theory grows, it invites interdisciplinary collaboration, community feedback, and grounded application. Its ultimate promise lies in its ability to remain anchored in Black cultural experience while flexible enough to travel, evolve, and inspire transformation across spaces of study, care, and struggle.

Conceptual Contributions to Black Feminist Thought

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory is fundamentally a Black feminist project. It builds on the legacy of thinkers such as Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who have long insisted that race, gender, class, and sexuality must be theorized in concert—not in parallel. These scholars provided the epistemological foundation for understanding how power is mediated through controlling images, intersecting systems of oppression, and lived experience. CSE Theory honors this foundation while contributing a new analytic: the differential endorsement of anti-Black stereotypes based on skin tone within the Black community.

Where traditional Black feminist work has emphasized how Black women are dehumanized through dominant cultural narratives—such as the Mammy, Jezebel, or Sapphire—CSE Theory expands this critique by analyzing how those narratives are internalized, selectively assigned, and circulated within Black communities. It does not shift blame onto the community

but rather interrogates how structural oppression becomes communal practice—how historical trauma gets repackaged as judgment, humor, side-eye, or silence. In doing so, CSE Theory refuses both pathologization and romanticization. It insists on a clear-eyed view of how intra-group dynamics can mirror the very systems of domination they resist.

The theory also draws from Lorde’s insistence on the erotic as a source of power and Collins’ concept of lived experience as a form of knowledge production. CSE Theory was born in Black classrooms, in candid conversations, in collective witnessing and memory work. It affirms that the theory does not have to emerge from institutions to be real—it can be traced in the choreography of social interaction: the way a joke is told, a girl is corrected, a body is read. In this way, CSE Theory continues a tradition of theorizing from the margins, insisting that knowledge is valid not despite its intimacy—but because of it.

Furthermore, CSE Theory reanimates Collins’ concept of controlling images, arguing that these tropes are not simply projected from dominant white institutions, but are performed, endorsed, and enforced intra-racially. When a stereotype is echoed by a family member, repeated by a peer, or joked about in a group chat, it gains new social life. The theory shows how these moments—often minimized as interpersonal or cultural quirks—function as sites where oppression is reproduced and normalized.

Finally, CSE Theory deepens Black feminist praxis by foregrounding the affective and moral economy of skin tone. It theorizes colorism not only as a system of aesthetic or sexual valuation, but as a system of emotional, social, and moral differentiation. Tone-coded stereotypes

are not only about who is desirable—they are about who is trustworthy, who is palatable, who is disciplined, who is “strong enough” to carry others’ pain. These moral assignments have consequences for mental health, relational intimacy, social status, and self-worth—especially for Black women who exist at the intersection of race, gender, and complexion.

In all these ways, CSE Theory not only draws from Black feminist thought—it expands it. It insists that the project of liberation must be inward-facing as well as outward-looking. That to dismantle white supremacy, we must also confront the scripts we’ve inherited, the logics we’ve normalized, and the silences we’ve accepted. In doing so, CSE Theory joins a long lineage of Black feminist theorizing committed not only to critique—but to transformation, care, and collective accountability.

Sociological Implications

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory offers a critical intervention into how sociology conceptualizes inequality, identity, and the interpersonal reproduction of domination. At its core, the theory insists that the study of race, gender, and class must account not only for structural arrangements and institutional outcomes, but also for the micro-level cultural practices and belief systems that sustain stratification within marginalized communities themselves.

1. Reframing Intra-Racial Inequality

Sociological research has long focused on inter-group disparities—between Black and white populations, between men and women, between rich and poor. CSE Theory demands that we also interrogate intra-group inequality: the hierarchies that emerge within racialized communities, especially those shaped by skin tone, phenotype, and proximity to dominant norms. It invites sociology to move beyond binary models of oppression and instead examine how colorist logics operate horizontally—among people who share a racial identity, but not equal access to cultural legitimacy, emotional labor, or perceived humanity.

2. Expanding the Definition of Power

Traditional sociological models often frame power as something wielded by institutions or systems. CSE Theory reveals how power also circulates through everyday practices—through side-eyes, judgments, silences, jokes, preferences, and assumptions. These actions, though seemingly small, contribute to the enforcement of complexion-based hierarchies. CSE Theory therefore encourages sociologists to take seriously the symbolic and affective dimensions of domination, particularly as they manifest in intra-racial contexts.

3. Bridging Micro and Macro Analysis

CSE Theory builds a bridge between micro-level interactional dynamics and macro-level structural forces. It theorizes how state-sanctioned ideologies—such as the hypersexualization of

Black women and the strong Black woman trope—become internalized, personalized, and redeployed through communal norms and performances. In doing so, CSE provides a conceptual scaffold for understanding how individual beliefs and behaviors actively sustain structural inequality, even within spaces that might appear insulated from white power.

4. Methodological Implications

CSE Theory has important methodological implications for sociological research. It calls for a shift toward measuring belief systems, endorsement patterns, and symbolic practices—not only structural outcomes like wealth, incarceration, or education. The theory invites more mixed-methods approaches, including survey tools to assess stereotype endorsement, ethnographic studies of intra-group interaction, and discourse analyses of colorist language in everyday speech. It pushes researchers to capture the intangible but potent forces—feelings, judgments, performances—that shape how identity is policed and stratified.

5. Implications for Policy, Practice, and Pedagogy

CSE Theory also offers practical insights for applied sociology. It can inform the development of anti-colorism initiatives, culturally responsive pedagogy, and racial equity trainings that address intra-group dynamics—not just interracial disparities. It equips educators, social workers, and policy designers with a vocabulary and framework for addressing how colorism lives in intimate spaces: the classroom, the home, the workplace, and the community meeting.

6. Contributing to Critical Race and Intersectional Sociology

Finally, CSE Theory contributes to critical race sociology by foregrounding skin tone as an analytic distinct from race, and to intersectional sociology by showing how tone-based stereotypes are always already gendered. It underscores how intersecting systems of domination do not only operate across social categories, but also within them—among Black women, among Black men, and across generations of Black family and community life.

In all of these ways, CSE Theory broadens the sociological imagination. It calls for a more nuanced, layered understanding of inequality—one that centers the lived, performed, and endorsed experiences of Black life. It insists that cultural practices are not secondary to structure—they are part of structure, and they are essential to its reproduction and potential transformation.

While CSE Theory makes significant contributions to how we understand power, identity, and intra-group inequality, no theory is without its constraints. In the spirit of reflexivity and critical engagement, the next section outlines the boundaries of the framework and the assumptions it does not make.

Critical Reflections on Theoretical Scope

While Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory offers a powerful lens for analyzing intra-racial colorism, it is important to acknowledge its conceptual and methodological

limitations. These constraints do not undermine the theory's utility; rather, they clarify its scope and encourage future refinement, adaptation, and critical engagement.

First, CSE Theory is primarily culturally grounded in the Black American experience. It draws from specific U.S.-based histories of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and anti-Black stereotyping. While its tenets may hold cross-cultural resonance, particularly across the African diaspora, its foundational claims may require recalibration when applied to distinct colonial, linguistic, or national contexts. Future researchers should take care to account for cultural specificity when using or extending the framework.

Second, CSE Theory focuses on psychological and symbolic mechanisms—such as belief systems, identity policing, and stereotype endorsement—rather than material outcomes like income, incarceration, or healthcare access. While these outcomes are critical to understanding the full impact of colorism, they fall outside the immediate analytic frame of this theory. CSE is designed to explain how beliefs are formed, enacted, and reproduced—a necessary precursor to understanding how such beliefs influence structural conditions.

Third, the theory currently centers Black women's experiences, particularly those shaped by gendered racial tropes such as the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta. While this centering is intentional, it does not fully capture how tone-based stereotype endorsement functions for Black men, nonbinary individuals, or queer communities. Future work may expand or adapt the framework to account for these experiences without diluting the theory's focus or specificity.

Finally, while the theory is informed by empirical data, it is not designed as a universal law or predictive model. It does not assume that all Black individuals will endorse colorist stereotypes or that these endorsements occur with equal frequency or intent. Instead, CSE Theory illuminates the patterns, logics, and cultural mechanisms through which stereotype endorsement becomes normalized. It offers a framework for inquiry and reflection—not a rigid formula for social behavior.

By naming these limitations, CSE Theory remains open to critique, evolution, and collaborative development. Its strength lies in its specificity, and in its willingness to pose difficult questions about belief, power, and complicity within marginalized communities.

On Theoretical Humility

CSE Theory, like all theoretical frameworks, is shaped by its time, its author, and the lived world from which it emerged. It is not exhaustive, nor does it claim to explain every manifestation of intra-racial colorism. It is rooted in Black American cultural contexts and shaped by my own intersectional standpoint as a scholar, observer, and participant in the dynamics it interrogates.

The theory is neither fixed nor final. It is porous by design—intended to invite expansion, contradiction, refinement, and revision. Its strength lies not in perfect universality, but in its ability to offer language where silence once lived, and structure where intuition once stood alone.

I offer this framework not as an end, but as a beginning. A tool for naming and understanding—and, perhaps more importantly, for disrupting and reimagining the cultural logics we inherit. The hope is that others will continue the work: building upon it, challenging it, translating it across contexts, and wielding it toward collective transformation.

Theoretical Promise and Transformative Potential of CSE Theory

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory offers more than an explanation of intra-racial colorism—it offers a new lens for understanding how systems of domination are sustained through belief, behavior, and relational performance. It opens a conversation about what we inherit, what we enact, and what we choose to endorse, even within communities committed to liberation. Its promise lies in its ability to move beyond critique and toward a praxis of accountability, cultural reflection, and intracommunal transformation.

Theoretically, CSE bridges structural and symbolic domains. It provides a language to describe how skin tone operates not only as a marker of desirability or proximity to whiteness, but as a socially coded moral and emotional economy—a way of assigning value, blame, trust, strength, and worth within Black communities. By foregrounding the conscious endorsement of stereotypes, CSE Theory shifts the analytic focus away from white institutional power and toward the everyday interactions and social scripts that reproduce inequality horizontally.

Practically, the theory's power lies in its accessibility and adaptability. It can be used to shape empirical studies, guide anti-colorism training, foster curriculum development, or catalyze community dialogue. Its five interlocking tenets—color-coded stereotypes, endorsement, policing, justification, and transmission—offer a teachable, tangible model for identifying how tone-based bias lives and moves in social life. Whether in a classroom, clinic, family conversation, or policy space, CSE Theory equips people with a framework to see what is usually felt but unnamed, and to interrogate what has long been normalized under the guise of culture, preference, or tradition.

CSE Theory also honors the Black feminist principle that lived experience is a site of knowledge production. Its genesis in classroom conversations, community reflections, and empirical observation affirms that theory does not have to emerge from elite institutions to be real—it can rise from kitchens, beauty salons, lecture halls, group chats, and fieldwork notes. It insists that the sociological imagination must make room for the emotional, the interpersonal, and the inherited—the parts of social life that often go unmeasured but are deeply consequential.

Ultimately, the promise of CSE Theory is its ability to disrupt silence with language, denial with clarity, and reproduction with reflection. It opens the door to healing—not by denying that harm exists within the community, but by naming it without shame and confronting it without apology. It offers a new terrain for intra-racial justice, one rooted not only in critique of white supremacy, but in care for ourselves and one another.

CSE Theory reminds us that liberation is not only about tearing down systems—it is also about changing the way we see, speak, and show up for each other. In that, it is both a theory and a tool. A framework and a mirror. An invitation to think differently—and to love better.

Conclusion: Naming, Disrupting, and Reimagining Colorist Belief

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory is a call to see differently—and to name what has too often been left unspoken. It offers a new vocabulary for understanding how anti-Black gendered stereotypes are not only inherited from external structures, but also performed, endorsed, and maintained within Black communities through tone-coded social practices. In doing so, the theory challenges the tendency within both academic and popular discourse to treat colorism as solely a legacy of white supremacy or as a matter of aesthetic preference. CSE insists that colorism is also a living system of communal belief—one that assigns emotional, moral, and cultural meaning to skin tone.

This chapter has traced the intellectual and empirical foundations of the theory, situated it within Black feminist and critical race traditions, and positioned it as a bridge between macro-structural analysis and micro-sociological understanding. It has defined CSE Theory's core tenets, articulated its conceptual contributions, and mapped its potential applications across disciplinary and community contexts. It has also named the theory's boundaries and anticipated its critiques—not to limit its power, but to sharpen its precision and integrity.

CSE Theory affirms that the work of justice must include inward-facing accountability. That to build freer futures, we must first confront the internalized logics we have inherited, the scripts we reproduce, and the silences we protect. It invites scholars, practitioners, and community members to ask difficult but necessary questions: What do we believe about each other? Where did those beliefs come from? What do they cost us? And what might become possible if we let them go?

As a framework, CSE Theory is not a static explanation—it is a living tool. It is meant to be revised, extended, critiqued, and activated in the service of deeper understanding and collective liberation. Its ultimate contribution lies not only in what it reveals, but in what it makes thinkable: that colorism is not just a problem to be studied, but a system of belief that can be named, disrupted, and reimagined.

CSE Theory is both a mirror and a map. It reflects the often-unspoken dynamics of intra-racial life, and it offers a path forward—one grounded in theoretical rigor, cultural accountability, and a radical hope for communal transformation.

CSE Theory as a Living Framework: A Final Reflection

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement Theory was never just an intellectual pursuit. It emerged from lived tensions, silences, contradictions, and conversations that refused to be ignored. It was built in classrooms and beauty salons, in whispered disclosures and viral comment threads, in the shared knowing glances of Black women who have felt what language

can't always name. It is a theory not only of colorism—but of cultural memory, survival, and the quiet negotiations that happen behind every stereotype believed, every silence maintained, and every truth denied.

In that sense, CSE Theory is more than a framework for analysis. It is a mirror. It invites us to look inward—not just at what we've inherited, but at what we've agreed to carry forward. It asks: What do we believe about each other? Why? And what would it take to stop believing it?

This theory is unfinished by design. It is meant to evolve. As our communities shift, so too will the stories we tell, the hierarchies we reproduce, and the visions we dare to cast. CSE Theory is offered in the spirit of invitation—an offering for scholars, organizers, teachers, and neighbors who are willing to confront the parts of our collective reflection we have been taught to avoid.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Philosophical and Methodological Orientation

This study is grounded in a critical interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Drawing from Black feminist thought, it positions lived experience, embodiment, and intra-group dynamics as central to understanding systems of oppression (Collins, 2000). This orientation challenges dominant positivist paradigms that treat social behavior as value-neutral, arguing instead that behaviors—such as stereotype assignment—are fundamentally shaped by power, identity, and cultural memory.

Methodologically, this project employs a quantitative approach to test Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory, which posits that skin tone-based stereotypes about Black women are not only externally imposed but also internally endorsed and enacted within Black communities. The aim was to generate empirical data that could evaluate these propositions while remaining anchored in critical race and Black feminist epistemologies.

Study Design and Theoretical Testing

A cross-sectional online survey was used to examine how Black respondents assign stereotype traits to Black women of different skin tones. This design made it possible to test two

central claims of CSE Theory: (1) that historical controlling images—such as Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta—are color-coded within Black communities, and (2) that these associations are enacted behaviorally through trait assignments.

The survey balanced breadth and depth by collecting data from a large, geographically diverse sample ($N = 300$) of Black American adults across various age, gender, income, education, and regional categories, while also capturing detailed measures of stereotype endorsement tied to skin tone. This approach allowed for nuanced analysis of intra-racial colorist patterns and enabled multivariate modeling of how skin tone, alongside other demographic and contextual factors, shapes stereotype assignment.

Sample Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited through an online, convenience-based sampling strategy intentionally designed to reach a broad cross-section of Black American adults across the United States. In 2024, I developed a digital study flyer that outlined the purpose of the research—examining intra-racial perceptions and beliefs within the Black community—along with eligibility criteria (self-identification as Black or African American and being at least 18 years of age), an estimated completion time, and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality.

This flyer was disseminated primarily through social media platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram. By leveraging both personal and professional networks, as well as relevant community groups focused on Black identity and culture, the study invitation

reached a wide audience. Over the course of approximately two months, the recruitment posts were reshared, quoted, and circulated multiple times by individuals and organizations, thereby expanding the study's visibility well beyond my immediate networks.

To encourage participation and acknowledge the time contributed by respondents, individuals who completed the survey were entered into a lottery for a \$50 VISA gift card. At the conclusion of the data collection period, one individual was randomly selected to be the winner of this gift card. Entry into the drawing was entirely voluntary and was conducted through a separate link, ensuring that any contact information provided for the incentive remained disconnected from survey responses. This process upheld participant anonymity and confidentiality while still offering a modest incentive for engagement.

Through this recruitment strategy, a sample of 300 self-identified Black American adults was obtained, representing a diverse range of ages, gender identities, educational backgrounds, income levels, regional locations, and—most importantly for the theoretical aims of this study—self-classified skin tones. While the reliance on social media platforms naturally limits the sample to those with internet access and some level of online engagement, this method effectively facilitated the collection of wide-ranging intra-racial perspectives from geographically dispersed respondents. Such diversity aligns with the exploratory, theory-generating goals of this dissertation and supports a robust examination of how color-coded stereotypes are endorsed, navigated, and resisted within Black communal life.

Ultimately, this approach to sample recruitment provided the empirical foundation necessary for testing Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory. It enabled an investigation into the relational, affective, and culturally patterned ways that tone-based stereotypes are both perpetuated and contested, offering critical insight into the mechanisms by which these beliefs are sustained and how they might be disrupted.

Survey Instrument Development

The survey instrument was constructed using Qualtrics and underwent a rigorous, multi-stage development process to ensure theoretical alignment, cultural appropriateness, and psychometric integrity. Drawing from foundational literature on racialized gender stereotypes, I identified four historically rooted tropes—Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta—and selected four traits for each to operationalize their core features. These pairings were derived from scholarly syntheses and supported by empirical and theoretical precedent:

- Jezebel: manipulative, opportunistic, promiscuous, sexually alluring
- Mammy: docile, subservient, loyal, selfless
- Sapphire: angry, loud, difficult, argumentative
- Tragic Mulatta: exotic, desirable, victimhood, weak

These traits were initially drawn from peer-reviewed literature and subsequently refined for clarity, face validity, and cultural accuracy through expert consultation. To ensure diverse academic input, I selected three senior scholars with disciplinary expertise in race, gender, and

cultural studies. These scholars represented three different institutions from diverse geographic regions of the United States and were at different career stages (from mid-career to full professor). Importantly, none were affiliated with the University of Georgia or my dissertation committee. They were chosen based on their publication record, topical alignment with colorism and Black womanhood, and their scholarly contributions to Black feminist theory and critical race studies. Each had previously published work on racialized identity, cultural stereotypes, or intra-racial stratification—criteria that helped ensure content and construct relevance.

The expert reviewers provided detailed feedback on language precision, cultural nuance, theoretical coherence, and the appropriateness of trait selection. Their guidance led to multiple refinements in item wording and a stronger alignment between the theoretical goals of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory and the operational items on the survey. This process was essential in strengthening the face validity and theoretical fidelity of the instrument.

Following expert validation, I conducted a pilot study with 30 participants to further evaluate item clarity, survey logic, trait definitions, timing, and overall respondent experience. Pilot participants were selected through purposive sampling to reflect the target population for the full survey—Black American adults with varied skin tones, gender identities, geographic locations, and age groups. Demographically, the pilot group included 60% women, 40% men, with ages ranging from 20 to 55, and a diversity of skin tones across the spectrum from very light to very dark. This demographic range allowed for insight into how survey items functioned across the intended respondent profile.

Feedback from the pilot phase prompted several improvements, including clearer instructions, streamlined branching logic, and refined trait definitions to reduce ambiguity. The pilot data also offered preliminary evidence of internal consistency among trait groupings, which was further tested and confirmed in the full dataset using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients. All trope scores exceeded the commonly accepted $\alpha = .70$ threshold, indicating strong internal consistency and reliability. Internal consistency estimates for each trope scale are provided in Appendix Table A1.

This dual process—combining expert review with participant-based piloting—ensured both the validity and reliability of the instrument. It also enhanced the cultural resonance and theoretical fidelity of the measurement approach, allowing the survey to meaningfully reflect the lived experiences and intra-racial perceptions that CSE Theory seeks to examine.

Measures and Variables

The primary independent variable in this study was respondents' self-identified skin tone, measured categorically as light, medium, or dark. This trichotomous construction aligns with intra-racial understandings of phenotype (Hunter, 2007; Monk, 2014) and was captured through the question, "How would you classify your skin complexion?" This self-perception measure was chosen over shade cards or external ratings because prior research shows that self-identified skin tone, especially relative to one's community context, is a strong predictor of colorism-related experiences and outcomes (Monk, 2014; Maddox & Gray, 2002).

The dependent variables were four continuous trope scores—one for each stereotype category—created by summing participants’ ratings of four traits tied to each trope. Respondents rated each trait on a 10-point bipolar scale from 1 (“more descriptive of light-skinned Black women”) to 10 (“more descriptive of dark-skinned Black women”). Following Maddox and Gray (2002), these ratings were recoded into a dichotomous structure: scores of 1–5 were coded as 0 (indicating an association with light-skinned women), and 6–10 as 1 (indicating an association with dark-skinned women). Summing these within each trope produced scales ranging from 0 to 4, where higher scores reflect stronger associations of stereotype traits with dark skin and lower scores indicate stronger associations with light skin.

In addition to using this trichotomous self-classification as the independent variable in all multivariate OLS regression analyses, a dichotomous version was created for descriptive tabulations in Chapter 5. This version was derived from participants’ own placements on the 10-point bipolar scale, with ratings of 1–5 coded as 0 (light-skinned identity) and 6–10 as 1 (dark-skinned identity). While this binary construction necessarily simplifies the nuance of the trichotomous model, it facilitated clearer visualization of broad patterns and highlighted the cultural polarization of traits. All multivariate regressions retained the three-category coding to preserve theoretical and empirical distinctions among light, medium, and dark skin tone, consistent with the core commitments of CSE Theory.

To account for possible confounding influences, the following control variables were included in all regression models:

- Age (continuous): Participant age in years.
- Gender (categorical): Self-identified gender (e.g., Female, Male, Transgender Woman, Transgender Man, Nonbinary or Gender Non-conforming or Gender Fluid, and Other (please specify)).
- Education (ordinal): Educational attainment, ranging from less than high school to postgraduate/professional degree.
- Marital Status (categorical): Married, Widowed, Divorced, Separated, Never married, and Cohabiting.
- Income (ordinal): Annual household income, captured in standard income brackets.
- Childhood Region (categorical): U.S. region where the participant was primarily raised (South, Midwest, Northeast, West, and U.S. Territory).
- Current Region (categorical): U.S. region where the participant currently resides (South, Midwest, Northeast, West, and U.S. Territory).
- Spaces Navigated (categorical, multi-response): The racial and cultural spaces participants regularly navigate (e.g., predominantly Black, predominantly white, racially mixed), included to account for sociocultural context that may influence internalized beliefs or stereotype assignment.

These variables were selected based on previous research showing their relevance to racial perception, colorism outcomes, and identity formation (Keith & Herring, 1991; Hunter, 2007; Monk, 2014). Their inclusion strengthens the internal validity of the model and allows for a more precise estimation of the effect of respondent skin tone on stereotype endorsement.

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire at the beginning of the survey to capture key background characteristics. The purpose of this section was to provide context for the analysis, support the inclusion of control variables, and allow for descriptive reporting of the sample. Demographic questions were formatted using multiple-choice, drop-down menus, and text-entry fields depending on the response type.

Participants were first asked to report their **age** using a text-entry field: “*How old are you?*” Next, **gender identity** was captured via a multiple-choice item with an open-text “Other” option. Response options included: Female, Male, Transgender Woman, Transgender Man, Nonbinary or Gender Non-conforming or Gender Fluid, and Other (please specify).

Participants were also asked about their **marital status** through the question, “What is your marital status?” with response options including Married, Widowed, Divorced, Separated, Never married, and Cohabiting. This measure provided additional context for understanding relational dynamics that might intersect with perceptions of colorism and stereotype endorsement.

Educational attainment was measured through a drop-down menu asking, “*What is the highest level of education you have completed?*” Response options ranged from Less than high school to Doctoral or Professional Degree. **Annual household income** was measured using a drop-down menu with bracketed categories, asking participants: “*What is your annual household income?*” Response options included: Less than \$10,000; \$10,000–\$19,999; \$20,000–\$29,999;

\$30,000–\$39,999; \$40,000–\$49,999; \$50,000–\$59,999; \$60,000–\$69,999; \$70,000–\$79,999; \$80,000–\$89,999; \$90,000–\$99,999; \$100,000–\$149,999; More than \$150,000; and Prefer not to answer. These categories were designed to capture a broad range of socioeconomic positions. For the purposes of analysis, income was treated as a categorical variable, which allowed for the assessment of group-based differences in stereotype attribution without assuming a linear or continuous relationship between income levels. This approach enabled a more accurate exploration of how varying levels of economic status may intersect with skin tone and other identities in shaping intra-racial perceptions and stereotype endorsement.

Skin tone was assessed using multiple distinct survey items, but this dissertation centers on **self-rated skin tone** as the independent variable of interest. First, participants were asked to classify their own skin complexion using the multiple-choice question: *“How would you classify your skin complexion?”* with response options: Very Light, Light, Medium, Dark, and Very Dark. Second, participants rated their complexion along a 10-point visual continuum ranging from 1 = Light to 10 = Dark, using the prompt: *“Using the continuum, where would you place your skin complexion?”* These self-assessments allowed respondents to reflect on how they personally understand and identify their skin tone within a broader intra-racial spectrum.

Participants also indicated both the state(s) in which they were primarily raised in their youth and their current state of residence using two separate drop-down menus. They were asked: *“Where did you grow up as a child?”* with a multiple select option permitting respondents to select more than one option if needed and *“Where do you currently live?”* For both questions, participants selected their **U.S. state** of origin and current residence from a full list of state

options. These state selections were later **recoded into broader regional categories**—South, Midwest, Northeast, West, and U.S. Territory—based on U.S. Census Bureau classifications to facilitate regional comparison and analysis.

Finally, the survey included a multiple-selection checkbox question on **spaces navigated**, asking: “*Which of the following best describe the racial or cultural spaces you primarily navigate in your daily life? (Select all that apply)*” Response options included: Predominantly Black spaces, Predominantly White spaces, racially mixed or multicultural spaces, and Other (please specify).

Analytical Strategies

Data cleaning and analysis were performed in Stata 16. First, responses missing more than 10% of survey data were removed through listwise deletion, preserving data integrity while retaining a sufficient sample size. Item non-response was under 5% and did not require imputation. Variables were numerically recoded, and dummy variables were created for categorical predictors such as region and education level. Internal consistency was confirmed via Cronbach’s alpha, with all trope scores exceeding the $\alpha > .70$ threshold, indicating high reliability.

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was employed to test whether skin tone predicted stereotype trait assignment. Each regression model treated a trope score as the dependent variable and included skin tone as the key independent variable, with demographic

variables entered as controls. This constitutes a multivariable regression framework, in which a single outcome is predicted based on one main independent variable and multiple covariates. This approach allowed for the isolation of the effect of skin tone while accounting for possible confounding influences such as age, gender, education, income, regional background, and racialized space navigation.

OLS regression was chosen over ANOVA and bivariate correlation for multiple reasons: (1) it allows for the simultaneous inclusion of control variables, enhancing internal validity; (2) it supports directional and predictive inference, aligning with the theory-testing nature of the study; and (3) it better accommodates the composite nature of the dependent variables, preserving the integrity of stereotype constructs as theorized in CSE Theory. Model diagnostics confirmed no violations of multicollinearity, linearity, or homoscedasticity. Significance was evaluated at the $p < .05$ level, and standardized coefficients were reported to facilitate comparative interpretation across variables.

Variable Construction and Reference Group Justification

To ensure both conceptual clarity and empirical robustness, several control variables in this study were collapsed or recoded into categorical groupings. These decisions were guided by theoretical alignment with existing literature, empirical distribution within the sample, and the methodological need to maintain adequate cell sizes in multivariate regression models. The following section outlines the rationale for each collapsed control variable and the selection of corresponding reference groups used in the analyses.

Skin Tone

Skin tone was trichotomized into three categories: light (0), medium (1), and dark (2). This construction allowed for the analysis of colorist perceptions across a fuller range of intra-racial variation. Medium skin tone (1) was selected as the reference group because it represents the conceptual midpoint between the poles of lightness and darkness and comprises the largest proportion of the sample (52%). This approach enables a symmetric comparison that evaluates how lightness and darkness, relative to medium complexion, affect stereotype endorsement. Selecting medium skin tone as the reference category also reflects a more sociologically grounded understanding of the gradient-based nature of colorism within the Black community.

Region of Childhood and Current Residence

Both the region in which participants were raised and their current region of residence were recoded into four U.S. Census-based regions: South (0), Northeast (1), Midwest (2), and West (3). The South was chosen as the reference group due to its historical significance as the origin point of colorism in the United States and its enduring cultural influence on Black identity formation. Additionally, the South was the modal category for both variables, with 56.67% of participants raised and 67% currently residing there. Using the South as the baseline facilitates meaningful regional comparisons while centering the analysis in the region most historically and culturally associated with intra-racial color hierarchies.

Education

Educational attainment was collapsed into three ordinal categories: low (0 = less than high school, high school/GED, some college), mid (1 = vocational/technical certificate, associate degree, bachelor's degree), and high (2 = master's degree, doctoral degree, or professional degree). The low education category was selected as the reference group because it reflects the greatest socioeconomic vulnerability and aligns with patterns of historical educational disenfranchisement in the Black community. This reference point allows for comparisons that assess the relationship between increasing educational attainment and the endorsement of colorist stereotypes.

Gender Identity

Gender identity was recoded into a dichotomous variable: male (0) and female-coded (1). The female-coded group includes women, trans women, and nonbinary individuals—reflecting a shared vulnerability to gendered racial stereotypes and controlling images. No trans men participated in this study. Male respondents were selected as the reference group based on both historical and theoretical considerations. Given that the dependent variables in this study focus on stereotypes applied to Black women, male respondents serve as a distinct contrast group for evaluating how gender identity influences the attribution of these stereotypes.

Marital Status

Marital status was collapsed to include two categories: not married (0) and currently married (1). The reference category (0) encompasses all respondents who were not legally married at the time of the survey—including those who were cohabiting, divorced, widowed, or separated. This approach acknowledges the intersectional realities of Black familial and relational structures—often diverging from white middle-class norms—while maintaining analytic simplicity in the analysis. Using a unified “non-married” category as the baseline allows for examination of how marital status may signal perceived respectability or stability in relation to stereotype endorsement.

Income

Income was originally measured in 13 ordinal categories but was collapsed into three groups: low (0 = income levels 0–3), mid (1 = income levels 4–7), and high (2 = income levels 8–11). The final group—“Prefer not to answer” (12)—was imputed based on educational attainment to avoid introducing missingness into the models. The low-income group was selected as the reference category, representing participants with annual household incomes below \$40,000. This grouping aligns with standard thresholds used in sociological research on socioeconomic stratification and allows for meaningful comparisons across economic tiers.

Age Group

Age was grouped into the following categories: 18–24 (0), 25–34 (1), 35–44 (2), 45–54 (3), and 65+ (5). The 18–24 group was used as the reference category because it represents the youngest respondents in the sample and reflects a generational cohort most likely shaped by contemporary discourses on identity, race, and intersectionality. The age group 55–64 was omitted from final models due to its small sample size and to preserve statistical parsimony. Using the youngest cohort as the baseline facilitates intergenerational comparisons of stereotype endorsement patterns.

Spaces Navigated

Participants were asked to report the racial composition of the spaces they predominantly navigate. Responses were recoded into four categories: predominantly Black (0), predominantly white (1), multiracial or multiethnic (2), and other (3). The predominantly Black group was selected as the reference category because these settings are the most culturally relevant for assessing intra-racial dynamics and communal meaning-making around skin tone and identity. Using Black-majority spaces as the referent allows the analysis to foreground the internal reproduction of colorist beliefs, rather than framing them solely through the lens of white gaze or interracial exposure.

This structured variable construction provides both theoretical depth and methodological clarity. Each collapsed category and reference group decision was made with close attention to

the interpretive goals of the study and the broader sociological implications of intra-racial colorism among Black Americans.

Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to survey initiation, and respondents were assured of their anonymity and the voluntary nature of participation. Because the survey included items related to race, identity, and stereotype beliefs, participants were provided with a debriefing statement and contact information for counseling resources, should they experience any distress. Data were stored securely, and only the principal investigator had access to the full dataset.

Ethical considerations extended beyond procedural compliance. In alignment with Black feminist ethics, care was taken to avoid framing participants as “biased” or “prejudiced.” Rather, the study situates stereotype assignment within broader sociohistorical contexts, recognizing participants as cultural agents navigating complex intra-racial dynamics. The language of the survey was intentionally neutral, and trait selection was informed by scholarly discourse rather than deficit-based assumptions. This reflexive and respectful approach ensured that the research remained accountable to the communities it sought to understand.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 has detailed the methodological architecture of this study, from philosophical orientation to analytic execution. By designing a theory-driven, empirically rigorous, and ethically grounded study, I aimed to produce data capable of capturing how color-coded stereotypes about Black women are endorsed, performed, and reproduced within Black communities. Through expert-validated instruments, careful sampling, validated scales, and theoretically justified statistical modeling, this chapter demonstrates that methodological rigor is not incompatible with cultural complexity. Rather, when done with intentionality, methodology becomes a site of epistemological integrity and theoretical advancement—particularly in studies that seek to challenge and expand prevailing frameworks on intra-racial dynamics and identity formation.

CHAPTER 5

DESCRIPTIVE PATTERNS AND TABULATIONS

This chapter presents descriptive tabulations of how Black American participants in the study assigned stereotype traits to light-, medium-, and dark-skinned Black women. The primary independent variable is self-identified skin tone, categorized as 0 = light, 1 = medium, and 2 = dark. Each dependent variable corresponds to a trait historically associated with one of four controlling image archetypes: Jezebel, Tragic Mulatta, Sapphire, and Mammy. Tabulations represent percentages of trait endorsement by skin tone. The purpose of this chapter is not to test statistical significance, but rather to trace patterns in personal perception—focusing on the cultural logics and communal meaning-making that shape how Black women are differently racialized by complexion.

Descriptive Overview of Study Sample

Table 5.1 presents descriptive statistics for the analytic sample. The final dataset included 300 respondents. In terms of skin tone, 16.67% identified as light-skinned ($n = 50$), 52% as medium-skinned ($n = 156$), and 31.33% as dark-skinned ($n = 94$). The largest proportion of the sample self-classified as medium-skinned, consistent with previous demographic distributions of the Black American population.

Age was grouped into six categories. The largest share of respondents fell into the 25–34 age group (30.33%), followed by 35–44 (26.67%) and 45–54 (21.33%). Respondents aged 18–24

made up 8.67% of the sample, while those aged 55–64 and 65+ represented 9% and 4% respectively. In terms of gender identity, 74% (n = 222) of respondents identified as women, trans women, or nonbinary, and 26% (n = 78) identified as men.

Educational attainment was grouped into three levels: low (42%), mid (43%), and high (15%). Income followed a similar structure: 25% reported low income, 44.33% mid-income, and 30.67% high income. Most respondents came from the South (67%), with the remaining from the Northeast (12.33%), Midwest (12%), and West (8.67%). Childhood region showed a similar pattern, with 56.67% raised in the South. Finally, when asked about their predominant social navigation space, 29.67% said they navigate predominantly Black spaces, 19% White spaces, 51% multiracial/multiethnic spaces, and less than 1% identified “Other.”

These figures provide baseline context for the analyses that follow, establishing the intra-racial diversity of the sample across race, class, region, and gender identity.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Study Variables (N = 300)

Variable	Category	Percent (%)
Skin Tone	Light	16.67%
	Medium	52%
	Dark	31%
Age Group	18–24	9%
	25–34	30%
	35–44	27%
	45–54	21%
	55–64	9%
	65+	4%
Gender Identity	Male	26%
	Female/Trans	74%
	Woman/Nonbinary	
Education Level	Low (<HS, HS/GED, Some College)	42%
	Mid (Vocational/Assoc/Bachelor's)	43%
	High (Master's/Doctoral/Prof.)	15%
Marital Status	Not Married	71%
	Married	29%
Income Level	Low (<\$40,000)	25%
	Mid (\$40k–\$79,999)	44%
	High (\$80k and above)	31%
Childhood Region	South	57%
	Northeast	18%
	Midwest	15%
	West	11%
Current Region	South	67%
	Northeast	12%
	Midwest	12%
	West	9%
Navigation Space	Predominantly Black	30%
	Predominantly White	19%
	Multiracial/Multiethnic	51%

Other	.33%
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Note on Scope

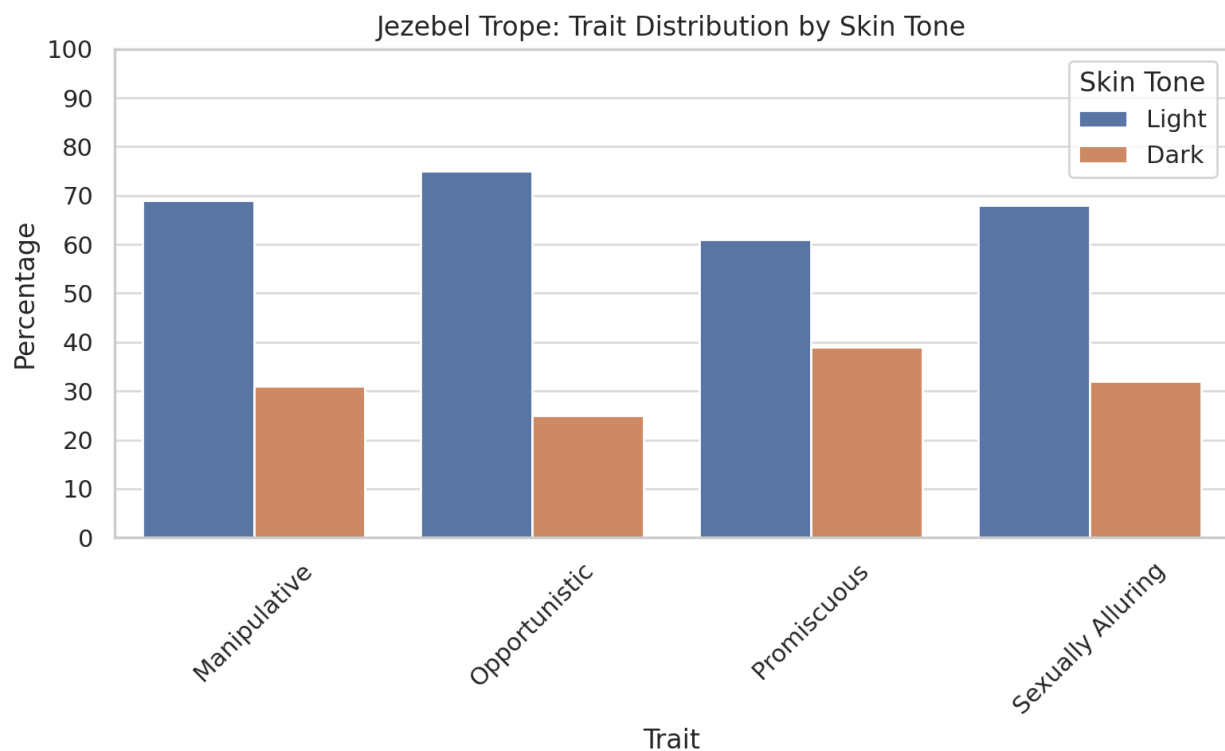
The findings in this chapter reflect participants’ personal perceptions only. While the broader survey included items measuring perceived community endorsement of these stereotypes, those data are reserved for future research and are not included in this dissertation.

Jezebel Trope Patterns

The Jezebel archetype—historically constructed to justify sexual violence and moral disregard toward Black women and rooted in their hypersexualization was operationalized through the traits: manipulative, opportunistic, promiscuous, and sexually alluring. Across all four traits, respondents disproportionately assigned them to light-skinned Black women. Specifically, 69% of respondents associated “manipulative” with light-skinned women compared to 31% with dark-skinned women. Similarly, 75% associated “opportunistic” with light-skinned women, while only 25% selected dark-skinned. For “promiscuous,” 61% selected light-skinned, and 39% selected dark-skinned. Lastly, 68% of participants selected light-skinned women as “sexually alluring,” compared to 32% for dark-skinned women. These findings, visualized in Figure 2, affirm a recurring intra-racial pattern: light-skinned Black women are perceived as more socially strategic and sexually available—an internalization of the Jezebel trope that both echoes and complicates dominant cultural narratives. Thus, reinforcing the enduring link between lightness, desirability, and perceived sexual cunning within the cultural imagination.

Figure 2 illustrates the percentage distribution of four Jezebel-associated traits—manipulative, opportunistic, promiscuous, and sexually alluring—by respondent-assigned skin tone. In every category, light-skinned Black women were more frequently associated with these hypersexualized traits than their dark-skinned counterparts. The pattern suggests a color-coded attribution of sexual manipulation and desirability, with lightness corresponding to greater assumed sexual agency and deviance. These findings support the premise of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory that the Jezebel trope, though historically rooted in controlling images of mixed-race women, remains disproportionately projected onto light-skinned Black women in contemporary intra-racial contexts.

Figure 2. Jezebel Trope: Trait Distribution by Skin Tone



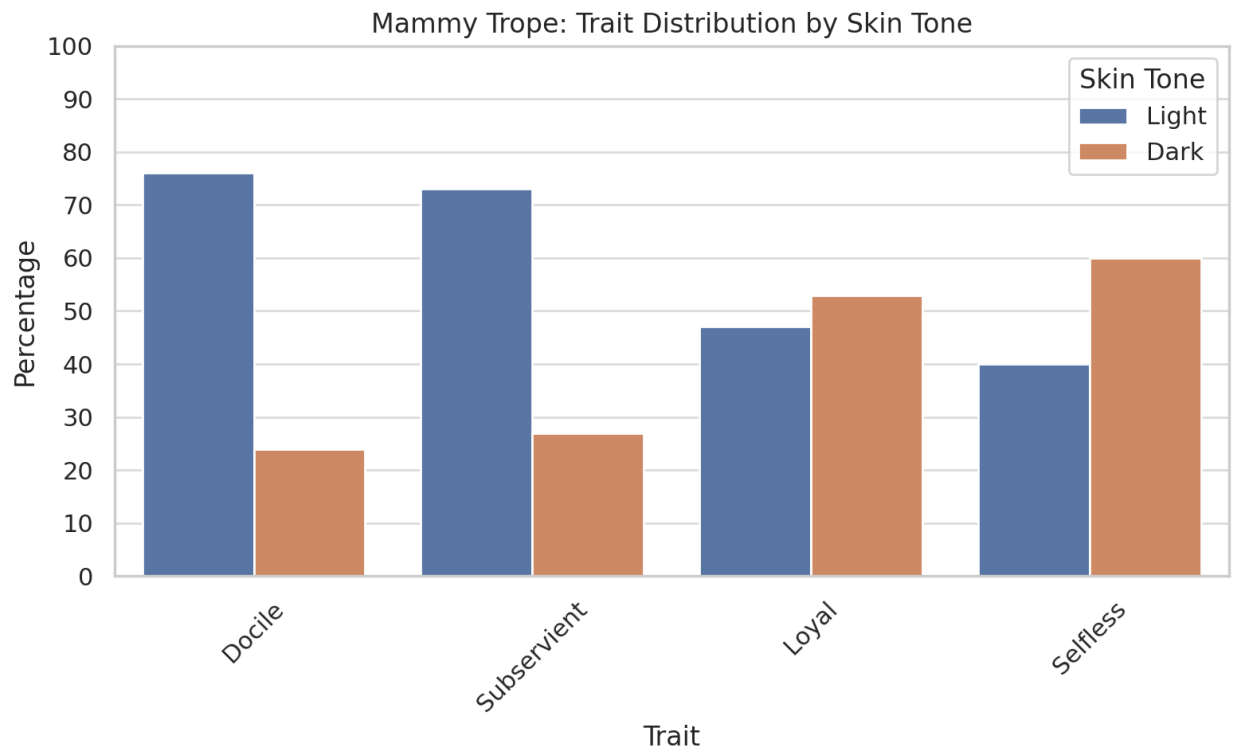
Mammy Trope Patterns

The Mammy trope, anchored in imagery of devotion, servitude, and strength, was represented by the traits docile, subservient, loyal, and selfless. The findings here were more mixed, with two traits strongly associated with light-skinned Black women and two with dark-skinned women. “Docile” was assigned to light-skinned women 76% of the time, and to dark-skinned women 24% of the time. “Subservient” was attributed to light-skinned women 73% of the time, and to dark-skinned women 27%. However, “loyal” was nearly evenly split, with 53% choosing dark-skinned and 47% choosing light-skinned women. “Selfless” was assigned to dark-skinned women 60% of the time and to light-skinned women 40%. As seen in Figure 5.2, this distribution suggests that while light-skinned women were more often viewed as obedient or compliant, dark-skinned women were more often viewed as dependable and sacrificial—a subtle but telling division of labor in communal perceptions of care, duty, and emotional labor. Light-skinned women were more often perceived as docile and subservient, dark-skinned women were seen as more loyal and selfless—suggesting a complex narrative where emotional care and sacrifice are projected onto darker-skinned women, while behavioral compliance is assigned to those lighter in complexion. This mixture highlights the overlapping gendered burdens across both ends of the skin tone spectrum.

Figure 3 presents the distribution of the Mammy trope’s four traits—docile, subservient, loyal, and selfless—by skin tone attribution. Traits such as docility and subservience were more frequently assigned to light-skinned Black women, while loyalty and selflessness were more often attributed to dark-skinned Black women. This divergence reveals a dual projection pattern:

while light-skinned women are still ascribed servility, dark-skinned women are elevated as self-sacrificing and morally loyal. These patterns complicate the assumed coherence of the Mammy trope and suggest the persistence of tone-based nuance within shared stereotype categories.

Figure 3. Mammy Trope: Trait Distribution by Skin Tone



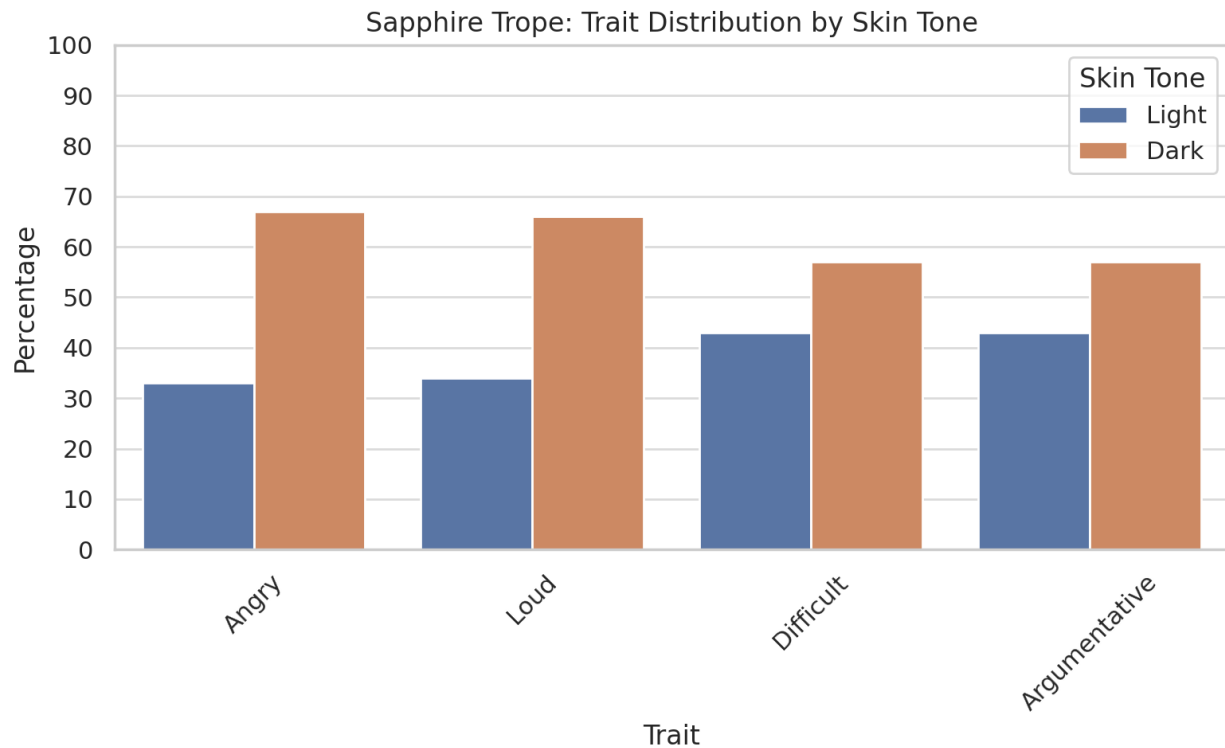
Sapphire Trope Patterns

The Sapphire trope, constructed around hostility and defiance, was assessed through four characteristics: angry, loud, difficult, and argumentative. In contrast to the Jezebel and Tragic Mulatta tropes, these traits were disproportionately assigned to dark-skinned Black women. A striking 67% of respondents associated “angry” with dark-skinned women, and only 33% with light-skinned. “Loud” followed a nearly identical distribution: 66% dark-skinned and 34% light-

skinned. The “difficult” trait was assigned to dark-skinned women 57% of the time and to light-skinned women 43%. Similarly, “argumentative” was attributed to dark-skinned women 57% of the time and to light-skinned women 43%. These results, shown in Figure 5.3, confirm the disproportionate burden that dark-skinned Black women carry when it comes to cultural perceptions of anger, confrontation, and emotional intensity. Darker-skinned Black women were consistently framed as emotionally volatile and temperamentally aggressive. The overlap across all four traits underscores the tenacity of the Sapphire image as a racialized and gendered burden disproportionately placed on darker-skinned women—even among fellow Black respondents.

Figure 4 depicts the percentage of respondents who attributed the Sapphire trope’s traits—angry, loud, difficult, and argumentative—to either light- or dark-skinned Black women. Dark-skinned women were consistently assigned all four traits at significantly higher rates, reinforcing the intraracial alignment of anger, defiance, and disruption with darker skin tones. These findings mirror prior research on the “angry Black woman” trope and suggest a persistent link between darker skin and perceptions of uncontrollable emotion, insubordination, and social antagonism. The consistency across traits demonstrates the internalized reproduction of the Sapphire stereotype within Black communities.

Figure 4. *Sapphire Trope: Trait Distribution by Skin Tone*



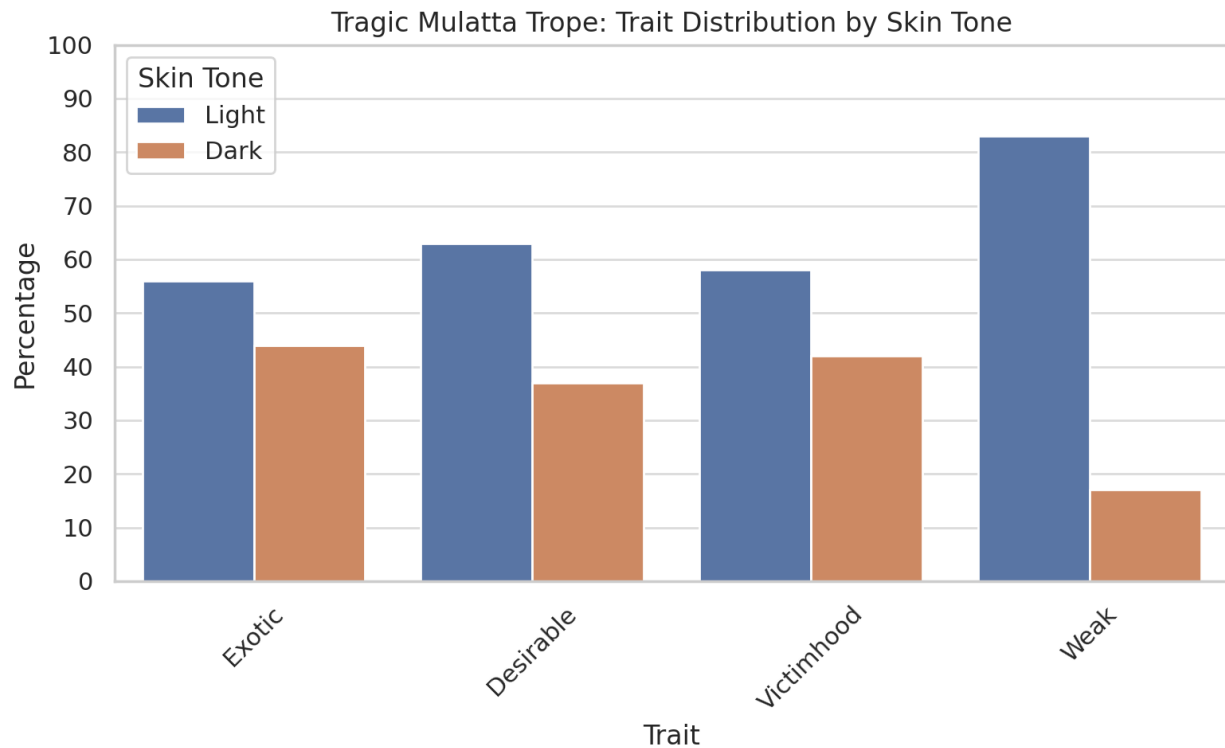
Tragic Mulatta Trope Patterns

The Tragic Mulatta trope, rooted in the 19th century racial melodrama and originally constructed around the image of a light-skinned, racially ambiguous woman trapped between two worlds, was measured through four traits: exotic, desirable, victimhood, and weak. A majority of participants selected light-skinned Black women as the embodiment of all four characteristics. “Exotic” was assigned to light-skinned women 56% of the time, and to dark-skinned women 44% of the time. “Desirable” was attributed to light-skinned women 63% of the time, and to dark-skinned women 37%. “Victimhood” followed a similar distribution—58% for light-skinned, 42% for dark-skinned. The most significant discrepancy appeared in the “weak” category, where 83% of respondents assigned the trait to light-skinned Black women, compared

to only 17% for dark-skinned women. These patterns, displayed in Figure 5.4, illustrate how emotional fragility and cultural liminality remain entangled with perceptions of light-skinned femininity. Light-skinned Black women were perceived as more vulnerable, aesthetically idealized, and emotionally fragile. Although “exotic” and “victimhood” displayed narrower margins, the trait “weak” emerged as especially salient—indicating a strong link between lightness and perceived helplessness within intra-racial perception.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of the Tragic Mulatta traits—exotic, desirable, victimhood, and weak—by skin tone. Light-skinned Black women were far more likely to be described as exotic, desirable, and weak, suggesting continued alignment with the historical construction of the Tragic Mulatta as a delicate, alluring, and vulnerable figure. This attribution pattern affirms the trope’s lasting hold on intra-racial perceptions and supports the idea that light skin continues to symbolize emotional fragility and aesthetic desirability, even when detached from explicit mixed-race ancestry. These internal community projections further substantiate the theoretical claim that colorism operates through affective and narrative scripts grounded in historical imagery.

Figure 5. *Tragic Mulatta Trope: Trait Distribution by Skin Tone*



Cross-Trope Synthesis and Interpretive Patterns

Across all four trope categories, distinct tone-based patterns emerged. Light-skinned Black women were more frequently associated with traits signaling manipulation, desirability, weakness, and compliance, while dark-skinned Black women were consistently linked to anger, emotional strength, caretaking, and resilience. These findings demonstrate that even in the absence of explicit white gaze, skin tone continues to shape intra-racial perceptions of Black womanhood in ways that reproduce the logics of historical controlling images.

While some tabulations—such as “exotic,” “victimhood,” and “loyal”—yielded narrower gaps, this proximity should not be interpreted as evidence of racial neutrality. Rather, it may

reflect transitional zones where stereotype scripts are more flexible, ambiguous, or contested. Importantly, the presence of these patterns, regardless of statistical significance, reflects a durable cultural logic: that skin tone informs how Black women are read, treated, and socially interpreted by other Black individuals.

By centering personal perception in this chapter, the analysis highlights the affective and psychological terrain through which colorist stereotypes circulate—not just as imposed narratives but as internalized and enacted judgments. The decision to reserve community-based perception for future analysis allows this chapter to remain tightly focused while laying the groundwork for continued inquiry into how collective norms and private beliefs may diverge or converge in the performance of intra-racial meaning-making. This chapter provides empirical confirmation that colorist stereotypes are not merely relics of the past—they remain operative frameworks for interpreting identity, assigning value, and reproducing intra-racial hierarchies. These descriptive patterns set the stage for the inferential analyses and theoretical implications discussed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 6

REGRESSION-BASED ANALYSIS OF STEREOTYPE ENDORSEMENT

To explore how self-identified skin tone predicts the assignment of stereotypical traits across different controlling images, four separate linear regression models were conducted—one for each trope category: Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta. These OLS regressions specifically examine whether respondents' own self-identified skin tone predicts how they endorse four controlling image tropes — operationalized as the extent to which they associate Jezebel traits with light skin, Mammy traits with dark skin, Sapphire traits with dark skin, and Tragic Mulatta traits with light or ambiguous skin. Each model used a trichotomous construction of skin tone with medium skin tone (coded as 1) as the reference group. Categorical covariates were also included in each model, with the “0” coded category serving as the reference group across all: gender identity (male), education (low: less than high school, high school/GED, some college), income (low: <\$40,000), childhood and current region (South), and navigation space (Predominantly Black). Age group 0 (18–24) served as the reference for age, which was treated categorically, not continuously.

This modeling approach enables a more nuanced examination of intra-racial colorist dynamics by centering skin tone gradations while using categorical controls to mitigate confounding effects. What follows is a summary of results for each stereotype model.

Jezebel Trope Model

Table 2: Linear Regression Predicting Jezebel Stereotype Endorsement by Skin Tone and Covariates

Variable	Coef.	Std. Err.	P> t
Light	.19	.17	.26
Dark	.13	.14	.35
Age 25-34	.00	.23	.99
Age 35-44	.12	.23	.61
Age 45-54	-.02	.32	.96
Age 55-64	.02	.31	.96
Age 65+	-.35	.60	.56
Gender(Female)	-.31	.14	.03
Education(Mid)	.00	.13	.99
Education (High)	.16	.20	.41
Marital Status (Not married)	.12	.16	.48
Marital Status (Married)	.21	.13	.11
Income (Mid)	.02	.15	.89
Income (High)	-.11	.18	.54
Childhood Region (Northeast)	.07	.22	.73
Childhood Region (Midwest)	-.68	.27	.01
Childhood Region (West)	-.16	.30	.59
Current Region (Northeast)	.20	.24	.41
Current Region (Midwest)	.66	.29	.02
Current Region (West)	.60	.32	.06
Predominantly White	.39	.18	.03
Multiracial/Multiethnic	.10	.14	.45
Other	-.80	1.11	.47

This model examines whether respondents' own self-identified skin tone predicts their endorsement of the Jezebel trope, understood here as the tendency to assign traits such as

manipulative, opportunistic, and sexually alluring specifically to light-skinned Black women. A positive coefficient on this dependent variable indicates a greater likelihood of associating these hypersexualized traits with light skin, while a negative coefficient would imply stronger association with dark skin. This operationalization follows the framework of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory, which posits that endorsement of these stereotypes is color-coded and relationally performed within Black communal contexts.

In this analysis, skin tone was not a significant predictor of associating Jezebel traits with light skin. Compared to medium-skinned respondents, both light- and dark-skinned individuals showed positive but statistically non-significant coefficients: light-skinned ($b = .19, p = .26$), dark-skinned ($b = .13, p = .35$). However, the model demonstrates that people do endorse these stereotypes to varying degrees based on other social and demographic factors.

Notably, gender identity was significant: female-identifying respondents (including women, trans women, and nonbinary individuals) were less likely to assign Jezebel traits to light skin ($b = -.31, p = .03$), suggesting greater critical distance or resistance to perpetuating these controlling images. Region of childhood residence also mattered: respondents raised in the Midwest were less likely to make these associations ($b = -.68, p = .01$), while current residence in the Midwest was positively linked to endorsement ($b = .66, p = .02$), pointing to potential regional shifts. Additionally, navigating predominantly White spaces was significantly associated with greater endorsement ($b = .39, p = .03$), highlighting how interracial environments may shape or reinforce colorist views.

Mammy Trope Model

Table 3: Linear Regression Predicting Mammy Stereotype Endorsement by Skin Tone and Covariates

Variable	Coef.	Std. Err.	P> t
Light	-.34	.22	.12
Dark	.20	.18	.26
Age 25-34	-.32	.29	.28
Age 35-44	-.49	.30	.10
Age 45-54	-.50	.32	.12
Age 65+	-.54	.43	.22
Gender(Female)	.28	.18	.21
Education(Mid)	.10	.17	.55
Education (High)	.62	.26	.02
Marital Status (Not married)	-.31	.21	.15
Marital Status (Married)	.22	.17	.20
Income (Mid)	-.00	.20	.10
Income (High)	.09	.23	.70
Childhood Region (Northeast)	.47	.28	.10
Childhood Region (Midwest)	.17	.35	.63
Childhood Region (West)	.82	.39	.03
Current Region (Northeast)	-.37	.31	.24
Current Region (Midwest)	-.27	.37	.46
Current Region (West)	-.49	.42	.25
Predominantly White	-.35	.23	.13
Multiracial/Multiethnic	-.25	.18	.17
Other	.67	1.44	.64

This model examines whether respondents' own self-identified skin tone predicts their endorsement of the Mammy trope, defined here as the tendency to assign nurturing, self-sacrificing traits specifically to dark-skinned Black women. A positive coefficient on this

dependent variable indicates a greater likelihood of associating these caregiving stereotypes with dark skin, while a negative coefficient would imply stronger association with light skin. This approach aligns with CSE Theory's focus on how stereotype assignment is relationally enacted within intra-racial contexts.

In this analysis, skin tone was not a significant predictor of associating Mammy traits with dark skin. Neither light-skinned ($b = -.34, p = .12$) nor dark-skinned ($b = .20, p = .26$) respondents differed significantly from medium-skinned individuals. However, the model shows that people do endorse such caregiving stereotypes to varying degrees based on other social and demographic characteristics.

Education emerged as a significant predictor: respondents with high educational attainment were more likely to associate Mammy traits with dark skin ($b = .62, p = .02$), a counterintuitive finding that may reflect either heightened exposure to dominant narratives or evolving interpretations of familial and caretaking roles. Childhood region also played a role, with those raised in the West significantly more likely to endorse these associations ($b = .82, p = .03$). Although gender identity was not statistically significant, the positive coefficient ($b = .23, p = .21$) suggests that men may be somewhat more inclined to link caregiving stereotypes to dark skin than women or nonbinary individuals.

Sapphire Trope Model

Table 4: Linear Regression Predicting Sapphire Stereotype Endorsement by Skin Tone and Covariates

Variable	Coef.	Std. Err.	P> t
Light	-.26	.27	.33
Dark	-.16	.22	.46
Age 25-34	-.19	.36	.60
Age 35-44	-.20	.37	.60
Age 45-54	.15	.35	.67
Age 55-64	.013	.40	.10
Age 65+	-.20	.49	.68
Gender(Female)	.057	.22	.80
Education(Mid)	-.17	.21	.43
Education (High)	-.20	.31	.53
Marital Status (Not married)	-.17	.26	.50
Marital Status (Married)	-.15	.21	.48
Income (Mid)	.47	.24	.05
Income (High)	.23	.28	.42
Childhood Region (Northeast)	.46	.34	.18
Childhood Region (Midwest)	-.02	.43	.96
Childhood Region (West)	.56	.47	.24
Current Region (Northeast)	-.12	.38	.76
Current Region (Midwest)	.14	.45	.75
Current Region (West)	-.06	.52	.91
Predominantly White	.46	.28	.10
Multiracial/Multiethnic	.19	.22	.38
Other	2.87	1.76	.11

This model examines whether respondents' own self-identified skin tone predicts their endorsement of the Sapphire trope, defined here as the tendency to assign traits like anger,

loudness, and argumentativeness specifically to dark-skinned Black women. A positive coefficient indicates a stronger association of these “angry Black woman” characteristics with dark skin, while a negative coefficient would imply assigning these traits more to light skin. This operationalization captures how controlling images tied to emotionality and defiance are color-coded within Black intra-racial spaces.

In this analysis, skin tone was not a significant predictor of associating Sapphire traits with dark skin. Both light-skinned ($b = -.26, p = .33$) and dark-skinned respondents ($b = -.16, p = .46$) showed no significant difference from medium-skinned respondents. However, the model demonstrates that people do endorse these stereotypes to varying degrees based on other factors.

Income emerged as significant: respondents in the middle-income bracket were more likely to link these traits to dark skin ($b = .47, p = .05$), suggesting a potential class-based reinforcement of “attitude” stereotypes. Navigation space also approached significance, with those in predominantly White spaces ($b = .46, p = .10$) and “Other” spaces ($b = 2.86, p = .11$) more inclined to make these associations, indicating how broader racial contexts may shape the internalization or reproduction of such views.

Tragic Mulatta Trope Model

Table 5: Linear Regression Predicting Tragic Mulatta Stereotype Endorsement by Skin Tone and Covariates

Variable	Coef.	Std. Err.	P> t
Light	.13	.19	.49
Dark	.26	.15	.08
Age 25-34	-.51	.25	.04
Age 35-44	-.52	.26	.04
Age 45-54	-.60	.28	.03
Age 65+	-.59	.40	.14
Gender(Female)	-.14	.15	.38
Education(Mid)	.24	.15	.10
Education (High)	.56	.22	.01
Marital Status (Not married)	.16	.18	.40
Marital Status (Married)	.27	.15	.06
Income (Mid)	.13	.17	.43
Income (High)	-.03	.20	.88
Childhood Region (Northeast)	.57	.24	.02
Childhood Region (Midwest)	-.17	.30	.57
Childhood Region (West)	.26	.33	.43
Current Region (Northeast)	-.32	.27	.23
Current Region (Midwest)	-.36	.31	.25
Current Region (West)	-.39	.36	.28
Predominantly White	-.09	.19	.66
Multiracial/Multiethnic	-.13	.15	.37
Other	.52	1.22	.67

This model examines whether respondents' own self-identified skin tone predicts their endorsement of the Tragic Mulatta trope, understood here as the tendency to assign traits like exoticism, desirability, victimhood, and weakness primarily to light-skinned or ambiguously

racialized Black women. A positive coefficient on this dependent variable indicates a greater tendency to link these characteristics to light skin, while a negative coefficient would suggest assigning them more to dark skin. This framing maintains the study's focus on how stereotype assignment is color-coded and culturally reinforced.

In this analysis, skin tone did not consistently emerge as a significant predictor. Dark-skinned respondents showed a marginal association with assigning these traits to light skin ($b = .26, p = .08$), while light-skinned respondents also had a positive but non-significant coefficient ($b = .13, p = .49$). Nonetheless, the model indicates that people do endorse these stereotypes to varying degrees based on other social factors.

Education was significant: respondents with high educational attainment were more likely to associate these Tragic Mulatta traits with light skin ($b = .56, p = .01$), perhaps reflecting more layered readings of racialized femininity. Region of childhood residence also mattered, with those raised in the Northeast significantly more likely to make these associations ($b = .67, p = .01$), suggesting regional differences in how ambiguity or marginality are romanticized. Gender identity, income, and navigation space were not significant predictors in this model.

Synthesis and Implications

Collectively, these regression models reveal that skin tone differences, while not always statistically significant, consistently aligned with descriptive and theoretical patterns from earlier

chapters. Notably:

- Light-skinned respondents were more likely to assign Jezebel and Tragic Mulatta traits.
- Dark-skinned respondents were more likely to endorse Mammy and Tragic Mulatta tropes.
- Medium-skinned respondents served as the perceptual “middle ground,” yet often bore the highest endorsement of Sapphire traits.

Control variables such as region, gender identity, and education frequently emerged as more predictive than skin tone alone, reinforcing the idea that colorism does not operate in isolation but intersects with geography, class, and gendered positionality.

These findings lend empirical support to Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory by demonstrating that stereotype assignment across skin tone gradients is internally reproduced within the Black community, often reflecting complex interplays of structural, interpersonal, and representational logics.

In the next chapter, I return to theory to deepen the sociological and Black feminist implications of these findings, and to clarify how CSE Theory can illuminate broader processes of intra-racial stratification and identity formation.

CHAPTER 7

THEORETICAL INTEGRATION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter weaves together the empirical findings from Chapters 5 and 6 with the theoretical contributions of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory. I synthesize the patterns observed across both descriptive and regression-based analyses, revisit the theoretical structure of CSE, and explore its implications for intra-racial dynamics, colorism scholarship, and Black feminist sociological thought. I also consider how this study opens new pathways for investigating identity, cultural reproduction, and communal belonging within Black America.

Synthesizing Empirical and Theoretical Insights

The findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 reveal a complex picture of how color-coded stereotypes operate within the Black community. Descriptive tabulations demonstrated that trait assignments were indeed patterned by complexion and closely mirrored the historical controlling images of the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatta. Light-skinned women were more frequently associated with Jezebel and Tragic Mulatta traits—such as being perceived as manipulative, sexually alluring, or emotionally weak. Dark-skinned women were more often linked to Sapphire and Mammy traits, including anger, loyalty, strength, and selflessness. Medium-skinned women, used as the reference category in regression models, typically occupied a more ambivalent position, less frequently tied to extreme stereotype assignments.

The regression analyses incorporated controls for gender identity, income, education, childhood region, current residence, navigation space, marital status, and age—using theoretically and empirically justified reference groups. For instance, medium skin tone served as the reference point to capture contrasts at both tonal extremes, while the South anchored regional comparisons. Educational attainment, gender identity, and income levels were similarly structured to support meaningful sociological interpretations.

While skin tone itself did not consistently emerge as a statistically significant predictor across the multivariate models, people nonetheless endorsed these color-coded stereotypes to varying degrees based on other factors. Significant associations were found for variables such as education, income, gender identity, and regional context, underscoring that the reproduction of these controlling images is deeply embedded within broader social structures and individual positionalities.

These patterns affirm the central propositions of CSE Theory: that stereotype endorsement is not merely an individual or isolated phenomenon, but a culturally patterned, performative practice situated within Black communal life. The findings underscore how intra-racial stereotype assignment operates through complex intersections of structural position, communal environment, and lived identity—shaping how Black people navigate, endorse, and sometimes resist these enduring tropes.

Revisiting the CSE Framework in Light of Findings

CSE Theory builds upon and extends existing work on skin tone stratification by centering intra-racial processes of stereotype assignment. Unlike Critical Skin Theory and Color Crit, which foreground structural and institutional manifestations of colorism, CSE Theory turns inward—emphasizing how Black individuals themselves participate in the affective and symbolic labor of maintaining color hierarchies. The findings of this study highlight that tone-based stereotype endorsement is not merely a reflection of internalized racism, but a relational act of cultural sorting, boundary-setting, and identity regulation.

This is particularly evident in the recurrence of historical tropes. Light-skinned women were persistently read through the lens of desirability, sexual cunning, and fragility, while dark-skinned women were cast as angry, loyal, and emotionally durable. These assignments were not random, but highly patterned—and reflected a communal familiarity with long-standing cultural narratives. The persistence of these controlling images within intra-racial perception underscores one of CSE Theory's most urgent claims: that stereotype endorsement is not simply a remnant of the past, but an active, ongoing process of communal meaning-making.

Moreover, the theory's emphasis on endorsement—rather than mere internalization—illuminates how stereotypes are validated and reinforced through collective judgment, conversation, and assumption. This focus on performance and communal enforcement marks a shift from individualistic models of prejudice to a more cultural account of how identity norms

are policed and perpetuated.

Theoretical Contributions to Colorism and Black Feminist Thought

This study introduces a novel theoretical contribution to the study of colorism by framing stereotype endorsement as a communal process of identity regulation. Rather than conceptualizing skin tone solely as a predictor of discrimination, CSE Theory posits it as a semiotic marker—one that shapes how individuals are interpreted, sorted, and disciplined within the racial group itself. This insight deepens our understanding of colorism as not merely a structural or interpersonal phenomenon, but a collective cultural logic.

Rooted in Black feminist theory, CSE Theory draws from Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and other foundational thinkers to assert that cultural narratives are not just externally imposed but internally reproduced. It embraces the complexity of Black women's lived experiences and recognizes that community, while often a site of healing, can also be a space of surveillance and stereotype reproduction.

Importantly, this framework also nuances the presumed privilege of light-skinned Black women. Rather than reinforcing a simplistic narrative of advantage, the findings reveal how light skin often invites a different set of stereotypes—ones that position light-skinned women as socially strategic, emotionally manipulative, or sexually provocative. These projections—while distinct from the stereotypes assigned to dark-skinned women—are no less harmful or reductive.

CSE Theory thus complicates colorist hierarchies by showing how both ends of the tone spectrum carry burdens, albeit differently coded ones.

Implications for Intra-Racial Dialogue and Cultural Change

The persistence of color-coded stereotypes within Black communities necessitates more robust intra-racial dialogue about the historical, emotional, and political dimensions of colorism. CSE Theory offers a language for naming and interrogating these dynamics—not to indict the community, but to understand the affective labor and cultural inheritance that shape them.

Transforming these dynamics requires not only raising awareness but reconfiguring the scripts through which Blackness is narrated. This includes revisiting how we teach beauty, discipline anger, interpret emotionality, and reward social behavior. It also means holding space for complex, often contradictory realities: that Black women of all complexions are negotiating layered and intersecting expectations within a society—and within a community—that has long been conditioned by both external and internalized hierarchies.

Academically, the study calls for greater attention to intra-racial variation in race and gender research. Too often, intra-group dynamics are marginalized in favor of binary Black–white frameworks. CSE Theory insists that internal variation—particularly as it relates to skin tone—is not a secondary variable but a central analytic axis that demands rigorous theoretical and empirical attention

Methodological Considerations and Future Research

This study focused intentionally on personal perceptions of stereotype endorsement, leaving the analysis of perceived community endorsement for future work. This decision was made to maintain conceptual clarity and analytic focus, but future research will expand into how Black individuals believe their communities interpret and assign these stereotypes—an inquiry that may reveal divergence or convergence between private belief and communal perception.

Moreover, while the study used OLS regression and self-reported data, future iterations should include qualitative and mixed methods to enrich the findings. Interviews, focus groups, and media analysis can provide additional insight into how these tropes circulate and are contested across different settings and generations. Future research should also engage more deeply with nonbinary experiences, generational shifts, and regional contexts—particularly given the Southern dominance of the present sample. Exploring nonlinear effects of age and intersectional dynamics of queerness, class, and gender identity would significantly expand the explanatory power of the CSE framework.

Final Reflections: Inheritance, Accountability, and Possibility

Colorist Stereotype Endorsement Theory asks us to grapple with how cultural inheritance becomes social judgment—how stories, images, and scripts are not only passed down but actively performed. Stereotype assignment by skin tone is not simply about prejudice; it is about the rituals of belonging and exclusion that organize communal life.

This study reveals that the logics of stereotype endorsement are emotionally complex, historically deep, and socially consequential. By making these logics visible, CSE Theory opens space for critical reflection and cultural transformation. It does not offer a simple solution to intra-racial colorism but invites a deeper reckoning—one rooted in accountability, historical awareness, and the possibility of reimagined relational ethics.

In sum, this chapter affirms that colorism is not merely a system of skin privilege or symbolic hierarchy—it is a lived practice, shaped by cultural memory, communal scripts, and collective affect. CSE Theory provides a roadmap for understanding, interrupting, and ultimately transforming that practice.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This final chapter synthesizes the major findings of the study and situates them within the broader landscape of Black feminist theory, colorism literature, and sociological understandings of identity, power, and intra-racial stratification. Building upon the descriptive and regression-based analyses, this chapter revisits the theoretical contributions of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory, evaluates its resonance with existing frameworks, and reflects on the empirical, theoretical, and cultural implications of the work. It concludes with methodological considerations, directions for future research, and personal reflections on inheritance, accountability, and possibility.

Synthesizing Empirical and Theoretical Insights

Across both descriptive tabulations and multivariate regression models, this study revealed that Black women are not assigned stereotypes uniformly, but rather in ways that are patterned and deeply informed by cultural histories of color-coded tropes. Descriptive analyses demonstrated clear clustering of trait attribution by complexion: light-skinned women were more frequently associated with Jezebel and Tragic Mulatta characteristics—such as being emotionally fragile, manipulative, sexually alluring, or exoticized—while dark-skinned women were more commonly linked to Sapphire and Mammy traits, including anger, strength, loyalty, and selflessness.

However, skin tone itself did not consistently emerge as a statistically significant predictor in the multivariate models. Instead, these models highlighted that people do endorse these stereotypes to varying degrees based on other social and demographic factors. Variables such as education, income, gender identity, and regional context often played more decisive roles in shaping the likelihood of assigning specific trope-related traits. This underscores that colorist stereotype endorsement is not simply about one's own complexion, but is also profoundly structured by broader social positions and contexts.

These findings affirm the central premise of Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory: that stereotype assignment is not arbitrary but is color-coded, relationally performed, and culturally reinforced within Black communities. The study demonstrated how controlling images continue to shape intra-racial perceptions, operating through communal scripts that govern who is seen as hypersexual, nurturing, angry, or tragic. By accounting for critical covariates—including gender identity, income, education, age, regional background, and the racial composition of navigated spaces—this analysis provided a nuanced view of how stereotype endorsement is maintained and justified within Black social life.

Notably, age did not yield significant associations in any model, suggesting that these processes may operate similarly across generational lines. Taken together, the findings lend support to the five interlocking processes proposed by CSE Theory: stereotypes are color-coded, endorsed, enforced, justified, and transmitted within intra-racial dynamics—reinforcing cultural hierarchies even in spaces ostensibly insulated from white power structures.

Revisiting the CSE Framework in Light of Findings

The empirical patterns observed refine, substantiate, and extend the theoretical architecture of CSE Theory. Unlike frameworks that view colorism solely as an external imposition, CSE Theory foregrounds the internal cultural mechanisms through which stereotypes are interpreted, assigned, and regulated within Black communities themselves. It asserts that skin tone is not merely a variable of privilege or discrimination, but a cultural code—a system of communal signification that shapes how Black women are seen, interpreted, and responded to by other Black people.

Importantly, CSE Theory resists flattening narratives of light-skinned privilege or dark-skinned oppression. It instead reveals how distinct burdens are placed on different tonal groups, each rooted in historically conditioned controlling images. Light-skinned women are rendered emotionally suspect, sexually strategic, and socially calculating, while dark-skinned women are cast as angry, loyal, and perpetually strong. These assignments operate as scripts that regulate identity and police belonging—scripts that participants internalize, perform, resist, or reinforce, often without conscious intent.

Endorsement—not merely internalization—is the theoretical distinction that sets CSE apart. Endorsement implies active cultural participation: it is the way communal logics are invoked through judgment, assumption, narrative, and performance. Even respondents who consciously rejected colorism often reproduced its logics when asked to assign traits. This

underscores CSE Theory's claim that stereotype endorsement is a deeply affective and communal practice—shaped by history, reinforced by culture, and maintained through repetition.

Theoretical Contributions to Colorism and Black Feminist Thought

This dissertation makes three significant theoretical contributions to the fields of colorism studies and Black feminist theory:

1. Centering Intra-Racial Stereotype Assignment

By documenting how Black individuals themselves assign stereotype traits by skin tone, this study reframes colorism as an intra-racial practice of identity regulation. It highlights the cultural and relational processes through which controlling images are not only inherited, but also endorsed, enacted, and enforced within the community.

2. Expanding the Concept of Controlling Images

Drawing from Patricia Hill Collins' foundational work, this study shows that controlling images are not static but tonalized. The same trope—Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, or Tragic Mulatta—manifests differently depending on the complexion of the woman it is mapped onto. This tonal dimension introduces new complexity to Black feminist analyses of racialized femininity, revealing how historical tropes evolve and adapt within intra-racial frameworks.

3. Interrogating the Complexity of Color Privilege

This study challenges assumptions that light-skinned women are simply beneficiaries of proximity to whiteness. While some forms of social capital may be more readily available, light skin also invites sexualization, emotional surveillance, and cultural mistrust. The findings reveal that privilege and harm are not mutually exclusive, and that proximity to whiteness is a double-edged sword—offering visibility while inciting stereotype assignment.

Implications for Intra-Racial Dialogue and Cultural Change

The persistence of tone-based stereotypes within Black communities demands deeper intra-racial dialogue about the meanings, assumptions, and performances attached to complexion. Participants in this study—whether consciously or not—endorsed complex sets of communal scripts about Black women based on skin tone. These scripts shaped how strength, sexuality, loyalty, and desirability were perceived and regulated.

This work calls for a cultural reckoning. It asks Black communities to not only name colorism, but to interrogate its emotional and interpersonal consequences. This includes asking: Who is expected to be strong? Who is presumed to be desirable? Who is read as manipulative or angry? These are not merely academic questions—they shape family dynamics, friendships, dating relationships, and professional environments.

CSE Theory provides a framework for engaging these questions with both critical rigor and cultural compassion. It encourages accountability without shame, and complexity without

reduction. It invites transformation through clarity—through the difficult but necessary process of unlearning inherited scripts and cultivating new communal ethics rooted in mutual recognition and respect.

Methodological Considerations and Future Research

Several methodological choices in this study merit reflection and open important avenues for future research. First, this study relied on self-identified skin tone, honoring participant agency and how individuals understand their own complexions within their cultural contexts. However, this approach may differ from how respondents are externally perceived, which is also crucial in shaping colorist dynamics. Future research could incorporate third-party skin tone ratings or photographic coding to examine how external perceptions interact with or diverge from self-classification in influencing stereotype assignment.

Second, while the sample was geographically diverse, its size limited the ability to conduct more granular intersectional analyses. Expanding future studies to include broader gender identities, regional subcultures, and generational cohorts would deepen understanding of how tone-based stereotype endorsement is shaped by intersecting identities and lived experiences.

Third, this study focused on personal perceptions of stereotype endorsement, setting aside data on perceived community beliefs to maintain conceptual clarity in testing CSE Theory. Future analyses should examine how personal and communal beliefs overlap, diverge, or

mutually reinforce each other, offering insights into the communal scripts and negotiations that sustain or contest color-coded stereotypes.

Finally, while skin tone itself did not consistently emerge as a significant predictor in the multivariate models, people nonetheless endorsed these stereotypes to varying degrees based on other factors, including education, income, gender identity, and regional context. This suggests that future research might explore how these social positions mediate or amplify stereotype endorsement, and whether non-linear age or life stage patterns reveal more complex generational dynamics than captured here. Such investigations would advance the sociological and Black feminist understanding of how colorism operates within intra-racial spaces—not only through individual bias, but through layered, collective processes that warrant continued exploration.

Final Reflections: Inheritance, Accountability, and Possibility

This dissertation began with an internal query—why are certain stereotypes assigned to certain Black women by other Black people? What seemed, at first, anecdotal or intuitive revealed itself to be patterned, historical, and deeply cultural.

From that question came a theory—Colorist Stereotype Endorsement—a framework that speaks to the way controlling images live not only in systems and institutions but in speech, memory, and cultural expectation. This theory is not just an academic intervention; it is a mirror. One that reflects not only how others see us, but how we come to see each other—and ourselves—through inherited scripts of tone and type.

For me, this work is also a reclamation. As a Black feminist sociologist and light-skinned Black woman, I have felt the pain of misrecognition, the complexity of cultural belonging, and the burden of being both seen and unseen in stereotype. This dissertation is my offering to the field—and to the community—a way of naming what has long been felt but rarely theorized with such precision.

The findings reveal not only a legacy of harm, but a possibility for cultural repair. They affirm that healing begins not just with critique of systemic oppression, but with the courage to face our own complicity in reproducing it. The call is not to indict, but to illuminate. Not to fix identity, but to free it—from scripts, from silence, and from the subtle scaffolding of stereotype that constrains how we love, trust, and belong to one another.

The work continues. The reckoning is ours. And the possibility—for something more whole, more honest, and more liberatory—remains within reach.

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Appendix

Image A1 - Survey Instructions

Instructions: Please rate each statement as you personally perceive its association with Black women of a specific skin tone and as you believe it is associated with certain skin tones within the Black community. Using the given format, rate your response ranging from *more descriptive of light-skinned Black women* (1) to *more descriptive of dark-skinned Black women* (10).

Image A2 - Survey Question Presentation

I believe that the statement "Black women are promiscuous " is more descriptive of [*make your selection*] Black women.

Light
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Dark
10

Complexion Selection



Figure A1: Jezebel Trope Numerical Tabulation

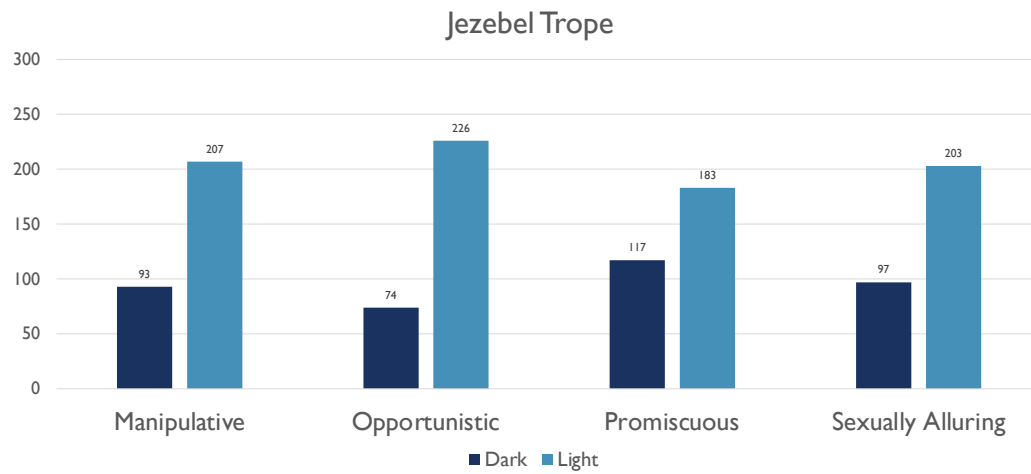


Figure A2: Mammy Trope Numerical Tabulation

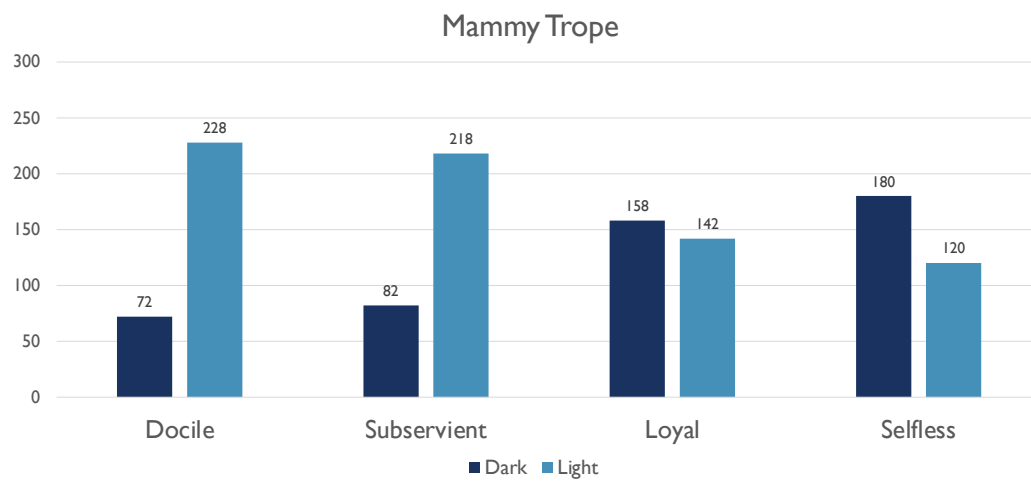


Figure A3: Sapphire Trope Numerical Tabulation

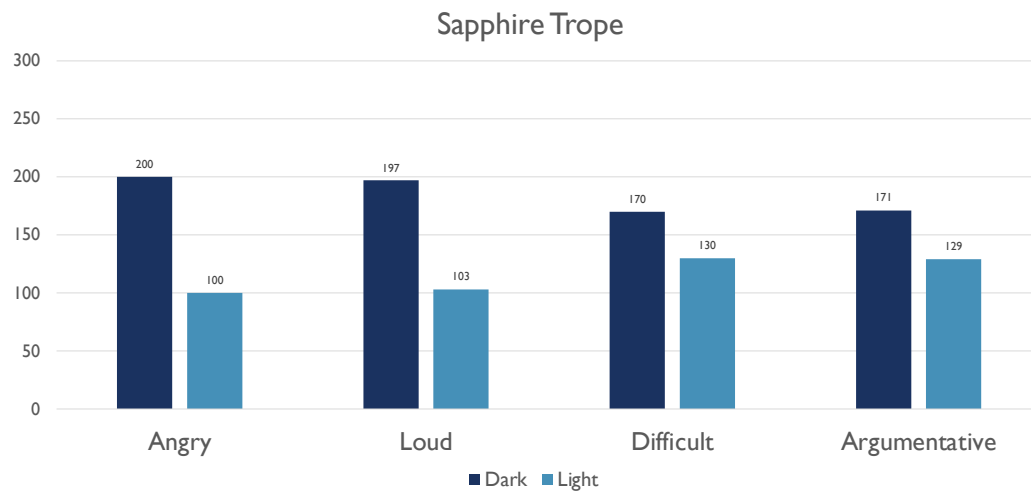


Figure A4: Tragic Mulatta Trope Numerical Tabulation

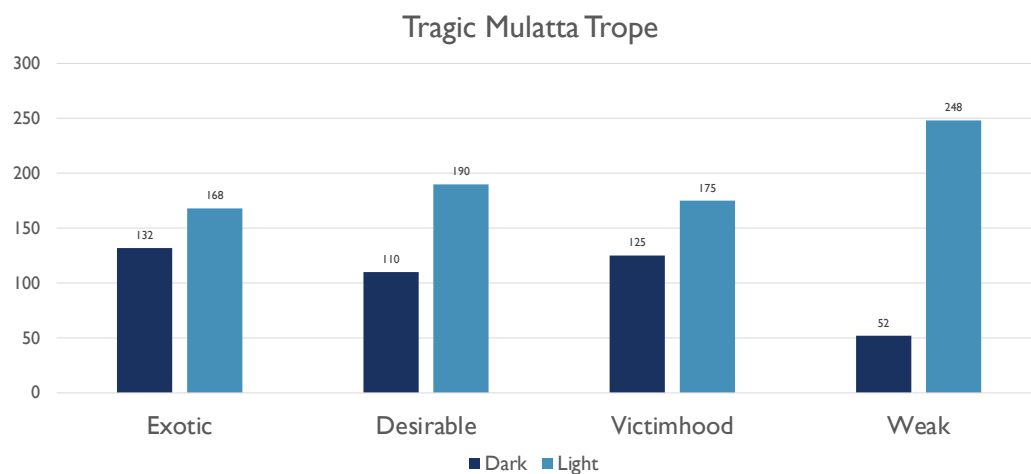


Table A1: Internal Consistency Reliability Estimates (Cronbach's α) for Trope Scales

Trope Scale	Items Included	No. of Items	Cronbach's α
Jezebel	Manipulative, Opportunistic, Promiscuous, Alluring	4	.72
Mammy	Docile, Subservient, Loyal, Selfless	4	.73
Sapphire	Angry, Loud, Difficult, Argumentative	4	.83
Tragic Mulatta	Exotic, Desirable, Victimhood, Weak	4	.75

Cronbach's alpha (α) values represent the internal consistency reliability of each trope stereotype scale used in the survey. Each scale was constructed as the mean of four trait items identified through the historical and theoretical literature on controlling images of Black women.

Glossary of Key Concepts in Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE) Theory

- **Colorist Stereotype Endorsement (CSE):** The conscious or performative agreement with racialized and gendered stereotypes that are mapped onto individuals based on skin tone, particularly within the Black community.
- **Tone-Tagging:** The process of assigning meaning—emotional, moral, or social—to an individual based on skin tone. This includes assumptions about behavior, intent, or value rooted in complexion rather than evidence.
- **Performative Alignment:** The strategic self-presentation individuals adopt to avoid triggering tone-coded stereotypes. This includes suppressing, amplifying, or reshaping behavior to align with or counter community expectations based on skin tone.
- **Moral Stratification of Skin Tone:** The informal ranking of individuals' perceived moral, emotional, or social worth based on skin tone. Lightness or darkness becomes a proxy for innocence, danger, fragility, or credibility.
- **Intra-Group Policing:** The active enforcement of community norms about behavior, respectability, or identity based on tone-coded expectations. Often manifests in correction, gossip, criticism, or social exclusion.
- **Intra-Group Surveillance:** The anticipatory gaze individuals direct at each other to assess conformity to complexion-based norms. It is an internalized awareness of being watched, judged, or measured.
- **Stereotype Justification:** The rationalization individuals use to resolve dissonance between their egalitarian values and their endorsement of colorist stereotypes. Often couched in language of realism, “truth,” or cultural critique.

- **Social Learning and Transmission:** The intergenerational and communal processes through which tone-coded stereotypes are passed down and normalized within families, institutions, media, and peer groups.
- **Stereotype Assignment:** The systemic and often unconscious application of historical tropes to individuals based on their skin tone. This includes being read as Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, or Tragic Mulatta based on complexion alone.