Skin Tone, Ratings of Attractiveness, and Personality Traits

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Abstract A survey research design was used to investigate whether or not HBCU (N=40) students’ self-reported skin tone (light, medium, and dark) could predict their ratings of their own attractiveness and their ratings of others’ attractiveness (as a function of skin tone). This study also investigated whether target’s skin tone impacted perceivers’ ratings of the targets’ personality traits. While results indicated no relationship between participants’ own self-reported skin tone and attractiveness (p>.05), results did indicate that darker-skinned participants, compared to light and medium-skinned participants, rated others as more attractive. Analyses did not reveal any statistically significant differences for personality ratings.

Key Terms—skin tone, attractiveness, personality traits

INTRODUCTION

Previous research indicates that light-skinned individuals, within and outside of a given racial or ethnic group, were perceived to possess more favorable traits than their dark-skinned counterparts (e.g., Hill 2002; Klonoff & Landrine, 2000; Maddox, 2004; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Parrish, 1946; Ramos & Bastone, 2004; Ross 1997; Wade, Irvine, & Cooper, 2004). To illustrate, dark-skin African-Americans experienced discrimination much more frequently than light-skinned African-Americans (Klonoff & Landrine, 2000), suggesting strong evidence for the negative perception of dark-skinned individuals. In addition, Maddox and Gray (2002) stated that when asked to report attributes of African-Americans with different skin tones, both Caucasians and African Americans listed more negative attributes for dark-skinned, compared to light-skinned, individuals.

Bond and Cash (1992) studied people’s perceptions of their own skin tones and reported that, while the African-
American college students in the study were satisfied with their skin tone, they would prefer being lighter than darker. Participants also reported that for African-American males, light skin was more attractive. Skin color in relation to the perceived attractiveness, personality traits, and life success of African Americans was investigated by Wade and Bielitz (2005), who reported that African American women with fair skin were rated higher than African American men with fair skin in terms of intelligence and parenting skills. Also women rated dark-skinned individuals higher than they rated fair-skin individuals on enthusiasm. While dark-skin individuals of color were typically regarded as ethnically authentic or legitimate compared to light-skin individuals, light-skin individuals had advantages in the areas of income, education, housing, and the marriage market because of the perceived association with beauty (Hunter, 2005; Hunter, 2007).

Both skin tone and facial features such as thickness of lips and width of nose had an impact on Whites’ perceptions of Blacks. That is, they had negative reactions towards those with darker skin tone and more prototypical facial features than those with lighter skin tone and less prototypical facial features (Hag iwara, Kashy, & Cesario, 2012). An interview of twenty-eight self-identified black women attending a large southeastern university indicated that lighter skin was perceived to be more attractive and possessing positive personality traits. It was also reported that lighter-skinned women were associated with increased value in dating contexts and sexual appeal to men (Stephens & Thomas, 2012). Two experimental studies were conducted to examine African Americans’ perceptions and attitudes toward light-skin and dark-skin African American female models in print advertisements. The results indicated that African American males evaluated light-skin female models higher than dark-skin female models in terms of physical attractiveness (Wat son, Thornton, & Engelland, 2010).

The purpose of the current study was to investigate if (1) people’s self-reported skin tones impacted ratings of their own attractiveness, (2) people’s self-reported skin tones impacted their ratings of others’ attractiveness, and (3) target’s skin tone impacted perceivers’ ratings of the targets’ personality traits.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Forty students (n=27 female, n=13 male, Mage = 19.85 years, age range: 18-24 years) were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses at an HBCU. Participation was on a voluntary basis. The academic classification of students was as follows: 4 freshmen, 30 sophomores, 5 juniors, and 1 senior. The majority of the participants (n=38) reported their ethnicity as African-American and 2 students reported as Caucasian.

Materials

Researchers developed the survey. The first part of the survey consisted of demographic information such as gender, academic classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior), academic major, ethnicity, self-reported skin tone (light, medium, or dark), and self-reported attractiveness. To reach consensus for the three categories of skin tones used in this study, researchers showed participants sample images of African-American individuals that were described as light, medium or dark. Students were then asked to view photographs of 20 African-American individuals, half of whom had a light complexion and half of whom had a dark complexion. After viewing each photograph, participants rated the attractiveness of the person in the photograph using a 10-point scale (1 = not attractive and 10 = very attractive) and then indicated whether or not they believed any of the following descriptors would likely be attributed to the individual in the photograph: wealthy, poor, shy, friendly, leader, follower, mean, conceited, happy, likeable, independent, athletic, lazy, criminal, or childish.

Procedure

During a regularly-scheduled class session, researchers explained the scope of the research to their enrolled undergraduate students. Students who were willing to participate in the research met with the researchers outside of class, signed the informed consent form, and completed the survey.

RESULTS

To investigate the relationship between individuals’ self-reported skin tone and self-reported attractiveness, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. There were no statistically significant differences (p > .05); each group of participants reported high evaluations of their own level attractiveness (light [M = 9.14, SD = 1.027]), medium [M = 8.54, SD = 1.127], or dark-skinned [M = 9, SD = 1.080]).

Another one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the relationship between individuals’ self-reported skin tone and their ratings of the models’ pictures. Because the two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skin Tone</th>
<th>Average Ratings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Light-skinned</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-skinned</td>
<td>7.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark-skinned</td>
<td>7.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Figure. Participants’ Ratings of Others’ Attractiveness
analyses were simultaneously conducted, Bonferroni adjustment was applied to control for Type 1 error. Results of the analysis indicated a statistically significant omnibus (p = 0.013) even after the Bonferroni correction of \( p < 0.025 \). The LSD technique for pairwise comparisons reported that dark-skinned participants \( (M = 7.0, SD = 1.581) \) rated individuals higher than light-skinned participants \( (M = 5.71, SD = 1.437) \), and medium-skinned participants \( (M = 5.15, SD = 1.625) \). However, there were no differences between light and medium-skinned participants \( (p > 0.05) \). The figure shows the ratings of light, medium, and dark-skinned participants on a 10-point scale.

To investigate if different personality descriptors were likely to be attributed to individuals with light vs. dark skin tones, data were screened for accuracy and assessed for the appropriate assumptions. The standard rule is that 80% of the cells should have more than 6 observations. In other words, if more than 20% of the factors yield less than 6 frequencies, generalizations cannot be made. Accordingly, personality traits that failed to achieve at least a 20/80 ratio were deleted from analysis due to the low variability. Descriptive statistics indicated that only five descriptors achieved sufficient variance (i.e., at least a 20/80 ratio). The variables achieving this criterion were likeable, happy, friendly, shy, and independent. Results of a series of Pearson chi-squares reported no statistically significant difference \( (p = .103) \) among the levels of skin tone for these five traits. In conclusion, the models’ perceived personality characteristics were not associated with skin tone.

**DISCUSSION**

This study investigated if an individuals’ skin tone impacted their own perceived attractiveness, their perceptions of others’ attractiveness, and whether target’s skin tone impacted perceivers’ ratings of the targets’ personality traits. The results indicated that one’s own skin complexion had no effect on their own perception of attractiveness. With regard to ratings of others’ attractiveness, dark-skinned individuals seemed to be more generous than light and medium-skinned individuals. Regarding attribution of personality traits, skin tone did not impact perceivers at all. One of the limitations of this research study was the small sample size and related low statistical power. Another limitation is the lack of generalization due to convenience sampling.

Future research can recruit more participants, target a larger sample, and thus have more power to detect any differences. For example, gender differences could be examined. Also, the 20/80 ratio could be achieved with a larger sample thus making it possible to investigate whether or not personality traits are associated with skin tones.

**REFERENCES**


