THE EXPERIENCES OF COLORISM

FOR SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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By

Aishwarya Nambiar

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Aishwarya Nambiar

Approved March 22nd, 2023 by

Natoya H. Haskins, Ph.D., LPC, NCC

Committee Member

Craig S. Cashwell, Ph.D., LCMHC, NCC, ACS

Committee Member

Janise S. Parker, Ph.D., LP, LSP, NCSP

Chairperson of the Doctoral Committee

Dedication

In loving memory of Dr. Vivian V. Lee. Thank you for always making me feel seen and for believing in me when I was unable to. I would not be here without you. Hope I am making you proud. Love and miss you.

To the South Asian community whose voices are rarely heard and represented in the counseling field.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Abstract

Research has limitedly explored how colorism shapes the mental health and well-being of South Asian women across the diaspora. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology study was to understand how South Asian women experience colorism and how these experiences shape their mental health and well-being. A total of 14 participants were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews and an artifact symbolizing experiences of colorism served as the methods of data collection. Critical Race Theory and Womanism were employed as the theoretical framework and the lens in which data was analyzed. A total of six main themes emerged in the study. The themes and subthemes for each were: (1) Perceptions of Beauty Standards (Fairness as the Beauty Standard and Family as Influential Sources), (2) Understanding Colorism vs. Racism (Skin Tone Discrimination with South Asians, Internalized Anti-Blackness, Racialized Experiences, Understanding One's Privilege), (3) Engagement in Strategies to Maintain/Modify Skin Tone (Avoiding Sun Exposure and Engaging in/Learning About Skin Lightening Behaviors), (4) Prominence in Shaping Self/Well-being (Negatively Shapes Sense of Self, Emotional/Mental Well-Being, and Learned to Embrace Self), (5) Learned to Navigate Colorism Experiences (Self-Directed Support Strategies, Reliance on Formal Supports, Friendships as a Source of Support, and Seeking Support), (6) Prominence in Shaping View of Others (Changed View of Others and Advocating for Others). Implications and limitations are addressed.

Keywords: Colorism, South Asian, diaspora, mental health, well-being

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The following chapter presents the gaps in the literature that support the notion that the impact of colorism on the mental health and well-being of South Asian women is critical. Further support for this idea is provided through exploring the current research on colorism, particularly for women of color and the role of colorism in the South Asian diaspora and region. Next, the author discusses the current approaches used to address colorism in clinical spaces. The author then proposes Womanism (Walker, 1983) and Critical Race Theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) as a theoretical framework to provide a culturally responsive lens in understanding how South Asians experience colorism and how it shapes their mental health and well-being.

Call to the Field

Colorism researchers have highlighted how lighter skinned individuals reap more financially, have better educational opportunities, and better health outcomes compared to darker skinned individuals (Kiang & Takeuchi, 2009; Monk, 2015; Ryabov, 2016; Stockstill & Carson, 2022). Women of color face unique challenges in terms of colorism due to the racialized beauty standards society espouses (Harper & Choma, 2018). As a result of this, women of color who are darker skinned are less likely to be represented in media, be selected as a suitable partner for marriage, and have decreased chances of getting hired for a job in comparison to lighter skinned women of color (Bahraini, 2021; Hunter, 2002; Reddy-Best et al., 2018).

Although women of color, in general, experience significant mental health and well-being issues, the findings are exaggerated for darker skinned women of color (Adams et al., 2020; Perreira et al., 2019). Most colorism scholars have focused on women in the Black and Latinx/é population (Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Quiros & Dawson, 2013). However, there is

emerging colorism literature in the Asian population specifically in East, Southeast, and South Asian communities (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Navata et al., 2023; Ryabov, 2016; Tran et al., 2017), yet colorism has still not been extensively explored in the South Asian region overall but for specifically for South Asian women. Moreover, research on colorism and mental health and well-being outcomes for South Asian women have been minimally explored (Prusaczyk & Choma, 2018; Sharif & Siddique, 2021).

Scholarly articles on colorism in South Asia have depicted how prevalent the issue is both within the region and for those in the diaspora. For instance, researchers have shown that South Asian women receive messages that signify beauty being associated with fairness and that darker skin is devalued, as early as childhood (Jensen, 2020; Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016). Due to these messages, skin tone has become a significant identifier for attractiveness within the South Asian region with lighter skin individuals typically being most desirable (Ramasubramanian & Jain, 2009). As a result, South Asian women with lighter skin are deemed more attractive and have higher chances of getting married (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011).

To the authors knowledge there are only two empirical studies that exist exploring colorism and the mental health and well-being of South Asian women (Prusaczyk & Choma, 2018; Sharif & Siddique, 2021). Despite the advances both studies have made in colorism literature, gaps are present. The studies primarily focus on one ethnicity (e.g., Pakistani or Indian), one mental health/well-being outcome (e.g., self-esteem and depression), and only account for the experiences of South Asian women living in a specific region (e.g., Pakistan or India). Thus, the following study explored how South Asian women across the diaspora experience colorism and how this shapes their mental health and well-being.

Colorism Research

There has been an increase in scholarly literature on colorism with researchers exploring the intersection of colorism with education, incarceration, income, and mental/physical health, to name a few (Lanuza et al., 2021; Monk, 2015; Oh et al., 2021; Stockstill & Carson, 2022; Thompson & McDonald, 2016). In a systematic review that explored the impacts of colorism on the well-being of African Americans, researchers found colorism contributes to mental health issues, poor physical health outcomes, and the preference to marry or date lighter skinned individuals (Keyes et al., 2020). Additionally, a scoping review of 30 articles explored the relationship between colorism and social, academic, and emotional outcomes of students of color from various ethnic/racial backgrounds (Crutchfield et al., 2022). Throughout the articles, a common theme identified was that increased academic achievement and added years of schooling were more associated with lighter skin tone irrespective of students racial group (Crutchfield et al., 2022).

Across the literature on colorism, most scholars focus on the African American population and the Latinx/é population with few examining colorism in other communities of color (Bahraini, 2021; Kiang & Takeuchi, 2009). Although there are articles depicting how colorism manifests for individuals of all gender identities, the relationship between colorism and women has been explored extensively (Abrams et al., 2020; Ryabov, 2019).

Colorism and Mental Health

Research exploring the relationship between colorism and mental health has been limited, yet current evidence posits that a relationship exists. For instance, depression tends to be higher for darker skinned individuals than lighter skinned individuals of the same race, across cultures (Araújo & Borrell, 2006). Additionally, researchers have shown that for men, when colorism

increases, so does one's anxiety (Alexander & Carter, 2022). Similar outcomes are reported for women of color with researchers showing that anxiety and depressive symptoms for darker skinned women increase because of colorism (Alexander & Carter, 2022; Louie, 2020). A prominent outcome in terms of mental health and well-being for women is self-esteem, with multiple scholars noting the lower levels of self-esteem for darker skinned women of color compared to lighter skinned women of color (Adams et al., 2020; Thompson & Keith, 2001). Although there is research depicting how colorism plays a role in the mental health and well-being outcomes of women who belong to ethnic groups outside of the Latinx/é and African American population, such as the East, Southeast, and South Asian population (Prusaczyk & Choma, 2018; Sharif & Siddique, 2021; Tran et al., 2017), more research is needed to better understand the mental health and well-being outcomes of the women in these particular ethnic groups.

Colorism and South Asia

Despite the scholarly debate on the origins of colorism in the South Asian region, European colonial rule played a pivotal role in how colorism continues to permeate across the region (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Khanna, 2020; Mishra, 2015). The rise of the South Asian diaspora emerged due to forced migration during colonial rule and in later years, immigration (Pirbhai, 2009). Today, South Asians exist all over the globe with Africa, North America, Europe, Australia, and parts of Asia being home for many South Asians (Pirbhai, 2009). There is empirical evidence demonstrating how colorism continues to exist today within the region and South Asian diaspora. Some examples of this are the higher usage of fairness creams amongst South Asian women compared to South Asian men and lighter skinned South Asian women

being seen as more desirable and beautiful (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Jha & Adelman, 2009; Sahay & Piran, 1997; Shroff et al., 2018).

Current Approaches in Addressing Colorism

Studies have shown that colorism has been addressed using poetry with African American youth (Crutchfield et al., 2020). The authors found that participants were able to heal from the historical trauma experienced due to colorist incidents with poetry. Furthermore, healing was characterized as prayer, perseverance, teaching self-love, and belief in oneself. Although the findings were not generated in a clinical setting, the authors provide insight into the effectiveness of poetry and how mental health practitioners can utilize this as a tool when working with clients who have experienced colorism (Crutchfield et al., 2020).

Scholars have proposed an M^3CB (Multiracial/multiethnic/multicultural competency building model; White & Henderson, 2008, p. 24) for mental health practitioners to use to address colorism with their clients (Adames et al., 2016). The model focuses on change and growth for mental health practitioners in terms of multicultural competency (White & Henderson, 2008). The model includes four different levels: change on a theoretical level, using experiential discourse to discuss multicultural issues and nurture emotional development, meaningful interactions with those who are different from you to foster behavioral development, and the final stage is integration of all three levels into practical skills in order to work cross-culturally and meet the needs of diverse clients (Adames et al., 2016; White & Henderson, 2008). Although there is no empirical evidence to support the models use with colorism in clinical practice, there has been a conceptual piece to illustrate the use of this model when working with the Latinx/é population (Adames et al., 2016).

In an article by Tummala-Narra (2007), the author used case studies based on real clients whom she had worked with to showcase the importance of addressing colorism in the therapeutic space. Addressing colorism may look like exploring skin color in the context of the client's family and attending to countertransference and transference that may present itself in these conversations in the therapeutic relationship (Tummala-Narra, 2007). Additionally, one study examined the role of art, specifically the creation of a mural, to address the role of colorism with Dominican-Haitian girls (Napoleón, 2021). The author was an art therapist and provided further suggestions for therapists to use in the clinical space, some of which include, engaging in conversations on colorism, maintain self-reflection, the use of a strengths-based approach when addressing colorism, and developing a framework from a decolonized lens (Napoleón, 2021).

Despite strengths in many of the strategies proposed, there are still gaps present given that the interventions described have not been empirically tested within the therapeutic space. Moreover, there is still a lack of knowledge for clinicians to address colorism with women of color. For instance, colorism is rarely addressed in counseling programs, evidenced by it not having an influence on counseling student's clinical judgement of the mental health of African American clients (Hairston et al., 2018). Hairston et al. (2018) posited that students may be more familiar with racism than colorism and thus, viewed images through the skin tone dichotomy of European American and non-European American. As a result, the following outcome engenders the need for colorism to be more integrated into the curriculum in counseling programs. Moreover, the findings provide a possible explanation for why the research is scarce in addressing colorism in clinical practice in addition to providing insight as to why the literature on the mental health and well-being impact of colorism among women of color is present but not extensive.

Womanism and Critical Race Theory Framework

The proposed study was conducted using a womanist and critical race theory (CRT) framework. Given that the researcher aimed to explore the lived experiences of South Asian American women in connection with colorism, a womanist framework not only addresses how racism, capitalism, and colonialism reinforce one another but it considers the intersectionality of race and gender orientation (Medwinter & Rozario, 2021; Sanchez-Hucles, 2016). Based on the association between colorism and racism (Hunter, 2007), CRT allowed for a critical lens to explore this relationship through Whiteness (Harris, 1993).

Transformative Critical Theory Paradigm

A transformative framework is predicated on the notion that knowledge does not emulate neutrality but instead relationships and power in society (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given this, the lives of marginalized peoples are sought to be improved with the knowledge gained (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus is on marginalized people such as women, Black/Brown/Indigenous individuals, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, people with disabilities, and those who come from a low income background (Mertens, 2009). It is liberatory and collaborative as it helps individuals break away from oppressive language/behavior promoted by society and it serves to work with the individuals rather than working from an oppressive lens where an agenda is placed onto them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Thus, participants within this study were invited to assist in the data collection stage where transcription of interviews were sent to the participants for review, along with the write up of the results section of the study. Furthermore, the transformative framework informs the critical theory paradigm which serves to demolish the oppressive systems that marginalize specific groups/individuals (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Using a critical theory paradigm

engendered a social justice approach which allowed for the humanization of participants, participants voice to be centered, and minimization of possible exploitation during the data collection processes (Hays & Singh, 2012; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to understand how South Asian women experience colorism and how their understanding of these experiences shaped their mental health and well-being. Although there is research to demonstrate the deleterious effects of colorism, inclusive of mental health, on communities of color as well as women of color, the literature has exclusively explored colorism in Black and Latinx/é communities. Historically, however, colorism has been pertinent in the South Asian region (Jablonski, 2012; Khanna, 2020; Mishra, 2015) and recent research shows that it continues to permeate the region and the diaspora today (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Chan & Hurst, 2022; Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016). Although researchers have highlighted the impact of colorism on South Asian women, there is still limited understanding on how colorism shapes the mental health and well-being of South Asian women across the diaspora. Thus, the present study aimed to fill this gap. By conducting this study, the findings will not only expand on existing literature on colorism, but it will shed light on how colorism unravels in the South Asian diaspora. More importantly, this will be the first study, to the authors knowledge, to understand how colorism impacts the mental health and well-being of South Asian women across the diaspora.

Research Questions

1. How do South Asian women experience colorism?
2. How do South Asian women's understanding of their colorism experiences shape their mental health/well-being?

Methodology and Sampling Procedures

Using criterion and snowball sampling, the researcher interviewed South Asian women across the diaspora (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). Prior to carrying out the study, the proposal was submitted to the William & Mary Institutional Review Board (IRB) to receive approval. Once authorization was received, recruitment of participants commenced. Participants were screened for eligibility and recruited through social media platforms, the researcher's personal and professional network, South Asian community forums, and word of mouth. Eligibility to participate included: South Asian, cis-gendered woman, personally experienced colorism, and above the age of 18 years old. The age criterion was intentionally kept broad to invite a better understanding of the developmental nature of colorism and its implications across the lifespan. A total of 14 South Asian women participated in the study. From the 14 participants, 3 were living in the United Kingdom and 11 were living in the United States. Semi-structured interviews, the primary method of data collection, were conducted via Zoom and generally lasted for an hour. Participants were requested to bring an item that symbolized their experiences with colorism and this served as the artifact, the secondary method of data collection.

Importance of the Study

Colorism has shown to have a powerful impact on communities of color. Based on existing literature, it is evident that colorism creates a disadvantage academically, occupationally, financially, and legally for darker skinned Black and Brown individuals due to societal oppression (Bozo et al., 2018; Monk, 2019; Stockstill & Carson, 2022; Thompson & McDonald, 2016). More specifically, studies have demonstrated how colorism has a greater impact on women of color with research generating findings that depict the negative impact

colorism has on the mental health and well-being of darker skinned women of color (Adams et al., 2020; Alexander & Carter, 2022; Diette et al., 2015). Given that many of the studies depicting the impact of colorism have focused on African American/Black and Latinx/é communities, it is unclear whether similar findings extend to other communities where colorism is prevalent such as the South Asian community. More specifically, it is difficult to ascertain whether the impact of colorism is similar for South Asian women as it is has been shown for women of color in other communities particularly in the context of mental health. Additionally, while literature on colorism exists in mental health journals (Abrams et al., 2020; Adbi et al., 2021), there is limited research exploring colorism in counselor education (Hairston et al., 2018). Thus, the following study (a) served to contribute to existing literature on colorism, particularly within the South Asian context, (b) provided insight to mental health professionals and educators on how colorism manifests for South Asian women, particularly in regard to their mental health, and (c) generated awareness on how colorism plays a role in the mental health and well-being of South Asian women.

Definition of Terms

Anxiety. Defined as fear or anxiety that is extreme where fear is the response towards threat that is real or perceived and anxiety is the expectation of a threat that may occur in the future (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Colorism. Defined as one's skin color being the basis for discriminatory or privileged treatment amongst individuals of the same race (Walker, 1983).

Racism. Defined as the unfair treatment of an individual based on their physical characteristics, with the most defining being skin color (Nuru-Jeter et al., 2008).

Depression. The DSM-5-TR defines depression as emptiness, irritable mood, or sadness that significantly impairs ones ability to function (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Diaspora. Defined as individuals of South Asian descent who permanently live away from the South Asian region due to previous or current migratory practices. Their experience/connection to South Asian culture is dependent on factors such as geographical location, religion, politics, and ethnocultural to name a few (Pirbhai, 2009).

Self-esteem. Defined as being treated favorably by others and feeling positive about oneself (Thompson & Keith, 2001).

South Asian. Defined as individuals who are ethnically and culturally from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Maldives (Kumar, 2020).

Womanism. Defined as a culturally responsive approach that embraces and celebrates Black women and their entire being and identity (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Díaz, 2016; Sanchez-Hucles, 2016, Walker 1983).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Skin color has historically been utilized in differentiating and classifying humans (Jablonski, 2021). Till today, it is the primary marker used to categorize individuals by race (Feliciano, 2016). As a result of this categorization, communities of color are subject to racial discrimination, with the discrimination amplified for African Americans who experience it regardless of one's membership to an ethnoracial group. However, within a racial group, skin color further categorizes individuals from lightest to darkest (Hunter, 2007). Consequently, this leads to another form of discrimination which is often not accounted for in racial and ethnic studies (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018). Scholars have termed this categorization or skin tone stratification as colorism which holds similar roots to racism, as it emerged out of interracial dynamics (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018). However, colorism is often more pronounced intra-racially as it is frequently perpetuated by those within the same racial/ethnic group with family members playing a vital role (Dove, 2021; Wilder & Cain, 2011).

Colorism was coined by Alice Walker who defined it as one's skin color being the basis of discriminatory or preferential treatment amongst individuals of the same racial group (1983). In essence, it affords privileges to those who are lighter skinned that are inaccessible to those who are darker skinned and emphasizes preference towards Eurocentric features (Hunter, 2007; Monk, 2021). Existing literature has referred to colorism as skin tone discrimination, color-based discrimination, shadeism, and color preference (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007; Keith & Monroe, 2016; Keyes et al., 2020; Reece, 2019). However, colorism is not termed as this in everyday language and instead, has been referred to as a "color complex" or "light skin vs. dark skin" (Wilder, 2010, p. 185). Irrespective of the term used, the underlying meaning behind colorism is a form of discrimination (Lemi & Brown, 2020). Although colorism primarily is discrimination

based on skin tone, several scholars have noted that Eurocentric features (e.g., facial features and hair) also play a role in shaping colorism such that the less Eurocentric one's features are, the more likely they are to be discriminated against by others (Khanna, 2020; Monk, 2021).

Colorism vs. Racism

Racism is defined as the unfair treatment of an individual based on their physical characteristics, with the most defining characteristic being skin color (Nuru-Jeter et al., 2008). Racism operates on an individual and structural level with the latter defined as laws and policies implemented by governing bodies that are steeped into the norms of culture and society (Bailey et al., 2021). In an article by Jones (2002), the author provides a universal definition of racism such that it is "a system built on structuring opportunity and assigning value based on race" (p. 10). Consequently, it unjustly advantages some individuals and communities while unjustly disadvantaging other individuals and communities (Jones, 2002). The author describes racism as operating on three different levels: institutionalized, personally meditated, and internalized racism (Jones, 2002). Internalized racism is when individuals from a marginalized racial group accept negative messages about themselves resulting in a devaluation of one's self-esteem and aptitudes (Jones, 2002). Researchers have shown that when internalized racism exists, it manifests into colorism, denigrating views about oneself resulting in the use of skin lightening products, and beliefs steeped in inferiority towards those in the same racial group (Alexander & Carter, 2022; David et al., 2019; Mendoza, 2014).

Specifically with colorism, scholars have suggested that due to the colorism experienced, internalized colorism can occur whereby individuals disconnect from, change, and/or blame their skin tone (Landor & Smith, 2019). Studies have depicted a relationship between internalized racism and colorism with results showing that lighter skinned Latinas are more likely to hold

internalized racist beliefs compared to darker skinned Latinas when there is a higher level of socioeconomic status present. Similarly, lighter skinned Latinas in this sample did not report higher discrimination (Uzogara, 2019). The finding brings forth the importance of colorism and its close relationship with racism.

Colorism is often seen as a subset of racism due to the foundations of it being steeped in colonialism and interracial dynamics (e.g., European Americans vs. African Americans; Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018). However, scholars have argued that seeing colorism as a byproduct of racism dissuades one from examining the insidious effects of the concept and takes away the importance of colorism in race-related discourse (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018). The importance of colorism is taken away by not giving it sufficient examination, understanding, and evaluation in race-related discourse particularly as colorism functions more covertly than overtly (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018). Moreover, when examining colorism intra-racially, it is often seen as independent from racism (Alexander & Carter, 2022). Colorism can occur both intra-racially and inter-racially with most of the literature highlighting the phenomena in an intra-racial setting (Forster-Scott, 2011).

Many understand colorism as an ethnoracial process that works alongside racism, however, there are distinctions between the two (Han, 2020). Scholars have described how racial discrimination operates on two distinct levels, racism and colorism, which make them intricately linked (Hunter, 2007). To explain this further, a darker skinned and lighter skinned Black/Brown/Indigenous person may be less likely to be employed or promoted at their job compared to an individual who is Caucasian due to ethnic/racial group identification (racism; Hunter, 2007). However, the darker skinned Black/Brown/Indigenous person may have their chances further reduced than a lighter skinned Black/Brown/Indigenous person due to their skin shade/tone (colorism; Hunter, 2007). Thus, how racism and colorism differ is that racism is

discrimination based on one's membership in a racial or ethnic group (e.g., South Asian), whereas colorism is frequency, intensity, and outcome of the discrimination experienced being dependent on the skin tone of the individual (e.g., light skin vs. dark skin; Hunter, 2007).

Historical Underpinnings of Colorism

Colorism is a global phenomenon and while its roots lie in colonization, there are differences present in how it spread and manifested. Across continents, the historical underpinnings of colorism emerged from European colonialism where skin tone established a hierarchical system that assigned Whiteness as superior (Bettache, 2020). Globally, lighter/fairer skin was associated with goodness and darker skin was associated with badness (Tummala-Narra, 2007). In the United States, slavery was engendered and in the African American community, division intra-racially occurred (Keith & Monroe, 2016). Those who were mixed with White and Black, termed as "Mulattos" (Reece, 2019, p. 7), were uniquely positioned due to being a part of the Black community and placed between Black and White individuals (Reece, 2019). Given their proximity to Whiteness, they were perceived more favorably compared to those who were Black and were provided advantages that were inaccessible to Black people (Reece, 2018, 2019). Due to racial reorganization that embodied the "one-drop rule" (Reece, 2018, p. 3), Mulattos were at risk of losing the benefits they had once reaped (Reece, 2019). However, once the racial reorganization was established, Mulattos were positioned as lighter skinned Black individuals thus, advantages were not lost completely but instead, reinforced (Reece, 2019).

In Latin America, skin tone stratification was prominent due to the Spanish conquest (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). Under the Spanish colonization, indigenous people suffered displacement, exploitation, diseases, and tremendous loss of their culture, practices, and beliefs

(Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). As the indigenous community slowly diminished due to the torture of Spanish conquest, African slaves were forcefully brought to Latin America for labor (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). During the Spanish rule, a stratification system was built which operated on the basis of ones phenotypical characteristics and skin color. As such, Spaniards were placed at the top where they exercised the most power, those mixed with Indigenous and European ancestry in the middle, and the Africans were at the bottom (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014).

In Asia, scholars have noted that favorability towards lighter skin has existed pre-colonial rule but was reinforced due to European colonization (Bettache, 2020; Dixon & Telles, 2017; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007) In South Asia specifically, there remains a lack of consensus amongst scholars on the historical significance of skin color in the region (Banks, 2015; Jablonski, 2012; Mishra, 2015; Khanna, 2020). In particular, the connections between skin tone and caste have been widely debated (Mishra, 2015; Jablonski, 2012; Jayawardene, 2016). The caste system, defined as a social organization that divided the population into four castes, ranked those in society from most powerful to least: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras (Murthy, 2018). The caste system continues to exist in present day India. Scholars have noted that inaccuracies in the relationship of caste and skin color given that those belonging to a higher caste can have a darker skin tone and those belonging to a lower caste can have a lighter skin tone (Mishra, 2015). Other scholars have differing views on whether skin color played a role in the social classification implemented by Aryan invaders in South Asia (Jablonski, 2012; Jayawardene, 2016). Additionally, the relationship between caste and skin tone has shown to become more intricately intertwined over time particularly due to European colonization (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Jablonski, 2012; Jayawardene, 2016). It is important to note that despite the debate amongst scholars and historians on the history of skin tone in South Asian, the pivotal

role European colonialization played in perceptions of skin tone where White/lighter skin tone was associated with power, privilege, and class is thematically present (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Khanna, 2020; Mishra, 2015).

Effects of Colorism

Researchers demonstrate that much like racism, colorism can function subtly or outrightly (Hunter, 2007). Although colorism is not talked about enough within and between communities of color, there is ample research to suggest that the phenomenon has detrimental effects. The term colorism does not appear often throughout the literature but related terms such as "skin tone" and "skin color" are more frequently used. Scholars have documented various areas which have shown to be impacted by colorism some of which include, the criminal justice system, educational level, physical and mental health, employment, salary, and perceived discrimination (Burch, 2015; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Monk, 2015; Ryabov, 2016; Stockstill & Carson, 2022).

Education

There is literature to suggest that colorism plays a role in the educational system. For instance, in a sample of Southeast and East Asian participants, those with darker skin were less likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to their lighter skinned counterparts (Ryabov, 2016). Further research to support this is shown through Grade Point Average (GPA) scores, with darker skinned individuals in a sample of Black, Asian, Indigenous, Latinx/é, and Multiracial students having lower GPA scores compared to lighter skinned students in the same sample (Thompson & McDonald, 2016).

Income and Employment

Income is another area in which colorism has shown to have an impact. When White participants were tasked to evaluate Black applications for a position based on work competency, likeliness of promotion, being hired, and salary recommendation, the darker skinned applicant was recommended less pay than the lighter skinned applicant (Stockstill & Carson, 2022). However, within the same study, other racial factors such as the name of the applicant influenced participants ratings with darker skinned applicants with a "distinctly Black name" (Stockstill & Carson, 2022, p. 906) were given a higher salary than lighter skinned applicants with an "indistinctly Black name" (Stockstill & Carson, 2022, p. 906). Thus, not only is there a colorism component present but prejudice by the name of an individual too. Additionally, Black male adolescents with a darker skin tone were less likely to have a full-time job after high school compared to medium and light skinned Black male adolescents (Ryabov, 2013).

Criminal Justice System

Additionally, studies done on the criminal justice system show that incarceration rates are significantly higher for dark skinned African American men than lighter skinned African American men, and African American males who are dark or medium skin receive longer sentencing than their lighter skinned counterparts (Burch, 2015; Monk, 2019). Similar results were found within a Latino sample where the association between skin color and conviction and skin color and incarceration was positive, with those with a darker skin tone having greater chances of being convicted and sentenced (Lanuza et al., 2021).

Physical Health

There is evidence to suggest that colorism and physical health are associated with one another with researchers showing that ingroup colorism was significantly associated with worse

physical health outcomes, specifically cardiovascular and cardiometabolic health (Monk, 2021). Moreover, studies conducted on various ethnic groups have depicted the disparities in physical health between darker skinned and lighter skinned individuals. For instance, Filipino-Americans with darker skin tone had lower physical health (Kiang & Takeuchi, 2009). Similarly, in a study exploring colorism in Puerto Rico, findings showed that darker skinned Puerto Ricans not only reported having lower general health but their accessibility to a medical plan was lesser than compared to lighter skinned Puerto Ricans (Caraballo-Cueto & Godreau, 2021). Moreover, for women of color, specifically undergraduate African American women, darker skin has shown to be associated with higher body mass index (BMI; Armstead et al., 2014).

Discrimination

Among Caribbean Black youth, having darker skin is more strongly associated with perceived discrimination for males compared to females (Assari & Caldwell, 2017). Similarly, in a sample of African Americans, perceived discrimination and unjust treatment daily was reported by those who are darker skinned (Monk, 2015). An example of a form of discrimination is microaggressions which has been studied in a group of Asian Americans and Latino/a adolescents who were either foreign or US born (Bozo et al., 2018). Researchers found that the Latino/a students who reported being more susceptible to microaggressions were also darker skinned compared to their Asian American peers, particularly if they were foreign born (Bozo et al., 2018).

Although it is evident that colorism has a negative impact on darker skinned individuals, it should be noted that lighter skinned individuals experience the impacts of colorism too. For instance, in a study of Australian Indigenous communities and intra-racial exclusion, colorism

played a large factor in their relationships with community members in that those who were fair skinned felt like they were ridiculed and excluded due to their fairness (Doyle et al., 2017).

Mental Health

Researchers have further supported that ingroup colorism has more harmful effects than outgroup colorism with Oh et al. (2021) finding that ingroup colorism was a predictor of substance use disorder, anxiety disorder, and eating disorder in Black American adults while outgroup colorism was only associated with anxiety disorder. Mental health outcomes are one facet which has been addressed within the colorism literature and scholars have found evidence to support the notion that darker skinned individuals are more likely to report having mental health issues (Monk, 2015). More specifically, depressive symptoms are overwhelmingly found to be the result of colorism with darker skinned individuals having higher chances of being depressed compared to the lighter skinned individuals in a sample of African Americans (Monk, 2015). Likewise, in a literature review of existing studies that explored mental health outcomes and life chances with perceived discrimination in the Latinx/é population, it was found that darker skinned Latino/as were more likely to exhibit higher levels of depressive symptoms (Araújo & Borrell, 2006).

Colorism and Women of Color

The insidious effects of colorism are clear. A notable finding in the literature, however, is the gendered differences between males and females when it comes to colorism. To provide a concrete example demonstrating this, researchers found that skin color had a stronger bearing on Black women than Black men, with Black women who were lighter skinned and perceived as more attractive receiving higher pay and have higher quality of jobs (Ryabov, 2019).

Scholars have noted reasons for the differences with societal beauty standards being the most significant, as it places skin tone as one of the defining features of beauty (Lemi & Brown, 2020). These standards are placed more definitively for women in that ones physical attractiveness is tied to their skin tone (Wilder & Cain, 2011). Encapsulated within these standards of beauty is the preference for lightness evidenced by lighter skinned women of color being more likely to be hired for a job, represented in media, and more likely to be chosen as a partner for marriage (Bahraini, 2021; Hunter, 2002; Reddy-Best et al., 2018). As one scholar denotes, lightness is not just associated with attractiveness but symbolizes an enriched quality of life overall (Wilder, 2010). The messages associated with lightness have been positive (e.g., "pretty skin"; Wilder, 2010, p. 190) and the internalization of these messages impacts women of colors' attitudes towards skin tone (Wilder, 2010). Thus, the finding from Hill (2002) study is supported where the author found that the association of physical attractiveness and skin color was stronger for women than for men. Therefore, one can conclude that the impacts of colorism tend to be more pronounced for women of color (Hunter, 2007; Wilder & Cain, 2011).

Additionally, for darker skinned women of color, there is research that has found ingroup colorism to be greater for medium to dark skinned Black women who reported lower self-mastery, which is defined in this study as the extent to which one believes they have control over their own life rather than it being due to fate (Uzogara & Jackson, 2016). Within the same study, dark skinned Black women reported more outgroup and ingroup colorism than those who were medium to light skinned (Uzogara & Jackson, 2016).

The standards of beauty that have been set for women, particularly women of color, have a profound impact on perceived attractiveness, marriage, and socioeconomic status (Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Wilder & Cain, 2011). To elaborate on this further, researchers have shown that

light skinned women are not only judged as more attractive, but they also have a greater socioeconomic status (Uzogara & Jackson, 2016). Further research that supports this idea was conducted by Hill (2002) who found that skin tone was more influential in attractiveness ratings for African American women than for African American men. Result showed that African American men were consistently more likely to rate a lighter skinned African American woman as more attractive compared to African American women and their ratings of attractiveness of African American men (Hill, 2002).

Watson et al. (2010) further supported these findings, with the results from their study showing that African American males were more likely to rate the lighter skinned African American female model in an advertisement for toothpaste and chewing gum as more attractive than the darker skinned African American female model in an advertisement for the same products. The preferences for lighter skin are not only demonstrated by men but women too. In a sample of Hispanic women, they desired tan skin as they viewed this as more desirable and attractive however, they did not express the desire to have dark skin nor did they associate it with attractiveness (Stephens & Fernández, 2012).

It is important to note that despite research showing that darker skinned women of color encounter more challenges, there is research to suggest that lightness is not yearned for. For example, in sample of African American, Afro-Caribbean, African, and bi-racial women, 285 out of the 328 women in the sample disagreed with the statement that they wish their skin color was lighter (Mucherah & Frazier, 2013). Further support is shown in a sample of African American women, who expressed their understanding of societal dark skin devaluation yet, would not want to change their skin color if given the chance to (Mathews & Johnson, 2015). Moreover, resistance to colorist ideologies have been shown in ninth to 12th grade girls through showing

appreciation for their Afrocentric features and associating it with beauty/attractiveness (Rosario et al., 2021). Further support for their finding is shown in college aged African Americans where those with darker skin were more likely to report positive regard beliefs about oneself when their skin color satisfaction levels were high (Maxwell et al., 2015).

Colorism and Family

Although societal standards of beauty have significant contributions to the colorism hierarchy, there is research to show that much of the earlier messaging on colorism derives from family members (Davis Tribble et al., 2019). Scholars have noted the harmful impact it can have on adolescents and children when families adopt a colorist mindset (Dove, 2021). Mothers and aunts have been cited as primary figures by women of color in delivering messages ascribing lightness with beauty, respect, and increased opportunity (Davis Tribble et al., 2019). Furthermore, in a focus group conducted with African American women, one of the participants spoke to the internalized script her family held about darker skin, resulting in them lowering their expectations of her capabilities, specifically her intelligence (Wilder, 2010).

Further support for this finding is found in a study by Wilder and Cain (2011) where maternal figures (e.g., mothers, aunts, and grandmothers) were primarily cited as the individuals who delivered their earliest messaging around colorism such that light was equated to goodness and dark equated to negativity. Previous research has shown that parenting styles differ between lighter skin and darker skin Black women with lighter skin women reporting that they received higher quality of parenting (e.g., warmth, decreased hostility, and fairer disciplining; Landor et al., 2013). Additionally, racial socialization has been explored as a moderator in the relationship between self-esteem and their skin color with research demonstrating that darker skinned Latinas

had lower levels of self-esteem when reporting lower levels of being prepared by the parents in coping with discrimination (Telzer & Vazquez Garcia, 2009).

Colorism and Mental Health/Well-being Outcomes of Women of Color

It is evident that colorism has a detrimental impact on individuals of color with mental health being one area that is impacted. Based on research exploring the relationship between colorism and mental health, depression, self-esteem, and suicidal rates are prominent (Louie, 2020; Perry et al., 2012; Thompson & Keith, 2001).

Depression

As per the DSM-5-TR, depressive disorders include some of the following: major depressive disorder, persistent depressive disorder, and disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Major depressive disorder is the most common depressive disorder and encompasses symptoms such as loss of energy, a reduced interest in almost all activities, sadness/hopelessness, difficulty concentrating, issues with sleep, significant weight loss/gain (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Within colorism literature, depression has been shown to be the most prominent mental health outcome, with several studies supporting this claim. For instance, Black adolescents with darker skin tone were found to have higher levels of depressive symptoms compared to Black adolescents with a lighter skin tone (Louie, 2020). However, when accounting for mastery, the impact of having a dark skin tone on levels of depression was not significant (Louie, 2020). Additionally, darker skinned Black women were more likely to experience higher rates of depression due to unemployment compared to unemployed Black women who were medium and lighter skinned (Diette et al., 2015). Similar findings have been represented in a study on young adults of color where women with darker skin tones had higher rates of depressive symptoms

(Perreira et al., 2019). In Asian American literature, there is research depicting that for darker skinned Asian American females, a relationship between depressive symptoms and prejudice was present where skin tone was a moderating variable (Tran et al., 2017). However, the same was not true for lighter skinned Asian American females (Tran et al., 2017). However, studies that have focused on women of color, specifically Black women, have showed that ones skin complexion has no direct or indirect (mediated by discriminatory experiences and mastery level) relationship with depressive symptoms (Keith et al., 2010).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is defined as the level of worthiness one sees in themselves (Donnellan et al., 2011). Self-esteem has been well documented in the literature in the context of colorism. To support this, Research conducted on skin tone and self-esteem found that for African American women, a significant positive relationship was reported where the self-esteem levels increased for lighter skinned Black woman in the sample (Thompson & Keith, 2001). In the same study, authors found that skin color did not influence Black women's self-esteem when they had higher income levels or were perceived as more attractive however, the opposite was true when they had lower levels of income and were perceived as unattractive (Thompson & Keith, 2001). Thus, self-esteem increased for lighter skinned Black women when they had low levels of income and were perceived as unattractive whereas self-esteem did not differ based on skin tone for Black women who were rated as more attractive and had higher income levels (Thompson & Keith, 2001). The findings are noteworthy as it demonstrates the importance of considering context in the relationship between skin tone and self-esteem.

Longitudinal research on girls of color shows that lighter skinned girls had higher self-esteem than medium and darker skinned girls in the fifth and seventh grade (Adams et al., 2020).

The self-esteem levels did not change for lighter skinned girls throughout the seven-year study, and while the self-esteem levels increased for medium and dark-skinned girls, the medium skinned girls had higher self-esteem levels than their dark-skinned peers (Adams et al., 2020). Researchers comparing US born Latinas and immigrant Latinas found that the latter had lower self-esteem and felt less attractive when they had darker skin compared to US born Latinas with darker skin in the study (Telzer & Vazquez Garcia, 2009).

However, researchers also have found that skin tone does not impact the levels of self-esteem for women of color. Empirical support for this claim is found in a study on ethnic identity and its role as a moderator in the relationship between skin color and self-esteem in Puerto Rican women (López, 2008). Researchers found that skin color and self-esteem were not directly related with one another but, instead, ethnic identity moderated the relationship (López, 2008). For both lighter and darker skinned Puerto Rican women in the study, those in each group with higher levels of ethnic identity displayed higher self-esteem levels compared to those in the group who had lower levels of ethnic identity (López, 2008). Supporting research is also found in a sample of African Americans were researchers hypothesized that lighter skinned women in the sample will have higher levels of self-esteem compared to darker skinned women. However, the results did not support the hypothesis and skin tone was found to not influence self-esteem levels (Mathews & Johnson, 2015).

Additional Mental Health/Well-being Outcomes

In addition to depression and self-esteem levels, there have been studies examining how colorism impacts other aspects of the mental health and well-being of women of color. Research has illustrated that colorism plays a role in the suicidality rates of medium to dark skinned African American who are low socioeconomic status as they have shown to be at a higher risk of

suicide despite experiencing similar levels of gendered racism to lighter skinned African Americans who are from low-income backgrounds (Perry et al., 2012). Additionally, a study conducted on African American men and women showed that when colorism, skin dissatisfaction, and internalized racism increased for women, their anxiety too increased (Alexander & Carter, 2022).

Based on the research presented, a relationship exists between colorism and mental health outcomes for individuals of color and in particular, women of color. The following study sought to explore how colorism shapes the mental health and well-being of South Asian women. The next section provides details on who South Asians are, what current literature delineates about this population, specifically South Asian women, in the context of colorism, and the mental health and coping mechanisms for South Asian women.

South Asians

The South Asian region is made up of the following countries: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Maldives (Kumar, 2020). In South Asia, there are over 30 languages spoken and various dialects (Ahmad-Stout & Nath, 2013). The rise of the South Asian diaspora has largely been attributed to indentured labor, however other forms of migration such as labor contracts, pursuing better educational and employment opportunities, and ultimately seeking a better future for themselves and their children are cited as reasons (Brown, 2006; Saran, 2015). South Asians make up a large population in the United States, United Kingdom, Middle East, Canada, South Africa, Kenya, and Australia.

Colorism and South Asian Women

For women across South Asia, skin tone is a significant identifier for attractiveness with lighter skin being the most desirable (Ramasubramanian & Jain, 2009). As a result, there is a

booming industry for fairness creams and skin lightening products that are endorsed by celebrities and promote the idea that one's skin complexion will be lighter, more even toned (Shroff et al., 2018). Although men are consumers of these products, South Asian women are more likely to use these products, with women citing attractiveness and beauty as reasons for their use (Shroff et al., 2018). Furthermore, the use of these products can be attributed to feelings of empowerment as research has demonstrated that South Asian women who were disempowered were more likely to seek skin lightening products (Adbi et al., 2021). Within the study and others, disempowerment is typically characterized by the loss of control of ones ability to receive rewards, resources, and punishment (Adbi et al., 2021; Keltner et al., 2003).

Although existing research exploring colorism in South Asian women has been limited, the literature that does exist has shown that awareness of colorism starts as early as childhood. To support this, studies have shown South Asian children, the majority of them being girls, receive messages on staying away from the sun, associating beauty with fairness, and viewing darker skin as lesser than (Jensen, 2020). Further support for this idea is found in a sample of South Asian Indian women who reported that they gained awareness on the importance of physical appearance during their childhood and experienced incidents of colorism when they were children (Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016).

In a study on colorism and South Asian British women found that fair skin was equated to being more desirable, beautiful, and having increased chances of getting married (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011). In terms of marriage, researchers found that after analyzing four matrimonial websites that are popular in India, darker skinned women were rarely chosen as suitable partners with men more likely than women to have a skin tone preference (Jha & Adelman, 2009). The

following outcomes are just some examples of the detrimental effects colorism has on South Asian women.

Through quantitative data, research has explored body satisfaction and skin tone in South Asians with South Asian Canadians who were lighter skin were more satisfied with their body and medium skinned South Asian Canadians were least satisfied (Sahay & Piran, 1997). Additionally, South Asian Canadians in the study demonstrated a desire to be lighter skin with those who were darker skin in the sample expressing this desire more (Sahay & Piran, 1997). More recent research has shown that South Asian women who had increased body dissatisfaction and experienced teasing based on their appearance were discontented with their skin tone (Chan & Hurst, 2022). To date, there is only study that examines how colorism impacts the self-esteem of South Asian women (Sharif & Siddique, 2021). In a sample of Pakistani women, researchers found that colorism and self-reported skin tone was a predictor of self-esteem such that participants who rated themselves as being darker brown, were more likely to experience colorism and thus, have lower levels of self-esteem (Sharif & Siddique, 2021).

Although colorism has been documented in the South Asian diaspora, there are noticeable gaps that are present in the literature. First, existing studies have either focused on women who are Indian or Pakistani with little to no emphasis on other regions of South Asia such as Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Jensen, 2020; Jha & Adelman, 2009; Sharif & Siddique, 2021). Second, studies that have considered South Asian women from other regions have been conducted as quantitative research (Chan & Hurst, 2022). Third, while one study has explored the relationship on colorism and self-esteem in South Asian women (Sharif & Siddique, 2021), the study is quantitative in nature and only explores what this looks like for women in Pakistan. A study exploring the depressive

symptoms and skin tone surveillance was conducted where South Asian Indian women were more susceptible to symptoms of depression when they had increased rates of monitoring their skin tone (Prusaczyk & Choma, 2018). Despite it enhancing the literature on colorism, the study focus was on Indian women who were living in India and only considered depression. Finally, all the research done on colorism in South Asian have been conducted outside of counselor education. To reinforce the importance of this research, it is crucial to consider how mental health is presented in the South Asian community, particularly for South Asian women.

South Asian Women and Mental Health/Mental Health Coping

The South Asian diaspora experiences several mental health issues with depression being the most notable across multiple countries (Ekanayake et al. 2012; Gater et al., 2009; Karasz et al., 2016; Srinivasan et al., 2020). Other mental health issues that have been found within this population are anxiety, body image issues, and loneliness (Ali et al., 2021; Masood et al., 2009; Pallan et al., 2011). Despite there, research shows that the personal and societal stigma which exists around mental health within South Asian communities creates a barrier to seeking psychological treatment (Ahmad-Stout & Nath, 2013; Arora et al., 2016; Basri et al., 2021). However, there appears to be less resistance to seeking treatment from South Asian women as evidenced by South Asian men espousing more negative attitudes towards seeking psychological help (Arora et al., 2016). Additionally, other barriers that have been highlighted is lack of understanding of South Asian culture by mental health providers, a lack of knowledge/education around mental health, providers not being culturally sensitive, and insufficient representation suggested by the lack of South Asian mental health providers (Goel et al., 2023; Karasz et al., 2016).

South Asians have typically shown to seek out indigenous methods of healing, gratitude, and spirituality to cope with mental health issues (Ahmad-Stout & Nath, 2013; Kent et al., 2020). A study examined mental health outcomes and loneliness in a population of South Asians living in the United States. Researchers found that participants identified friends, family, and doctors as the point of persons whom they would reach out to discuss mental health related concerns (Ali et al., 2021).

For South Asian women specifically, the coping mechanisms are similar however, studies have shown there to be additional ones too. For instance, in a study examining how South Asian women cope with discrimination they experience in the United States found that there were differences generationally in how the women coped with first generation participants using religion, yoga, and family support and second generation using social support (Liang et al., 2010). Additionally, there has been research showing that similar coping strategies have been used with South Asian women living in the United Kingdom with a study by Hussain and Cochrane (2003) finding that South Asian women with depression used prayers/religion, crying, herbal remedies, talking to a counselor/friend, and places of worship.

Gaps in the Literature

Overwhelmingly, colorism has been explored in women of color who are of the African diaspora and Latinx/é community. Similarly, the mental health and well-being outcomes due to colorism have been well-noted with the literature exploring this primarily in Black, Latinx/é, and East/Southeast Asian women. Although researchers have examined the role colorism plays in South Asian communities (Adbi et al., 2021; Jensen, 2020; Jha & Adelman, 2009), there is a lack of literature on the impact colorism has on the mental health/well-being outcomes for South Asian women.

A plausible rationale for this trend could be that the language of colorism originated from the Black community, specifically the African American community, thus, most of the research is centered on Black women. Moreover, given colorism has origins in the transatlantic slave trade, African Americans have a distinct experience with colorism (Keyes et al., 2020; Reece, 2018, 2019) thus, most of the research is centered on this experience. However, there is evidence to suggest that women of color from other ethnic groups face colorism to a similar, if not the same, extent.

For instance, within South Asia, colorism has permeated the region causing harmful impacts on the inter/intra group dynamics of the people (Jayawardene, 2016). Moreover, within the South Asian diaspora, there is evidence to show that colorism is prevalent, particularly as it presents for South Asian women (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Chan & Hurst, 2022; Jensen, 2020). Presently, there are two studies, to the researcher's knowledge, that explore how colorism impacts the mental health of South Asian women (Prusaczyk & Choma, 2018; Sharif & Siddique, 2021). However, gaps were present in both as the focus was on one ethnicity (e.g., Indian and Pakistani), one mental health and well-being outcome (e.g., depression and self-esteem), and was conducted on South Asian women who were either living in India or Pakistan.

Although the quantitative studies produced by Prusaczyk and Choma (2018) and Sharif and Siddique (2021) serve as important literature on colorism and South Asian women, there is need for more research to be conducted to better understand how South Asian women across the diaspora experience colorism and how these experiences shape their mental health and well-being. Using the theoretical frameworks that are described in detail in the next section, the current study sought to bridge the gap in the research.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged in the 1970s and was formally brought to the forefront in 1989 (Bridges, 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT has its roots in radical feminism and critical legal studies and was first developed in law prior to spreading across disciplines (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Alan Freeman and Derrick Bell were law professors who were extremely distraught with how traditional methods of challenging and eradicating racism in the United States were resulting in slow progress and fewer gains for African Americans compared to previous years (Hall, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1999). CRT serves as a framework to interrupt the discourse on race and challenges the liberal definition of racism (Bridges, 2019). Pioneers in CRT discourse have spoken to how racial discrimination goes beyond the personalized unjust treatment of Black individuals (Bell, 1988). Rather, it is the mindset held by those who are White that they are better and more superior than Black and Brown people, arbitration of policy differences using white supremacy as a catalyst, and whiteness as property thus engendering racial superiority amongst poor White individuals (Bell, 1988). With this lens in mind, it allows one to view racism as systemic and institutional issue in addition to the individual acts of racial discrimination (Bridges, 2019). Additionally, it challenges one to think critically about the injustices that Black and Brown individuals bear the brunt of (Bridges, 2019).

Brown (2003) speaks to the five tenets that underlie CRT with the first being that racial stratification not only impacts the ability to survive and quality of life for racial groups, but racial stratification is commonplace and procreated in daily occurrences and experiences. The second tenet states how meritocracy and objectivity mask the privilege and dominance White individuals

hold which make understanding and eradicating racism challenging. The third tenet is the influence society holds in creating and maintaining racial categories. The fourth tenet is marginalized groups can articulate how racial stratification impacts them thus, there is validity and relevance in experiential knowledge. The fifth tenet is that social justice should be at the forefront of CRT advances more so than scientific and academic developments.

CRT challenges the notion of colorblindness as the answer to racial justice by stating that colorblindness causes more harm to those who are marginalized (Bridges, 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Colorblindness gives the impression that by ignoring race entirely, this will uplift barriers to opportunities once excluded and move marginalized individuals out of oppression (Bridges, 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Additionally, born out of CRT is intersectionality which posits that oppression is not unidimensional and is a lens where one gains critical insight as to how multiple identities function together rather than alone in causing social inequalities (Collins, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Based on existing literature, there is research to demonstrate how critical race theory has been used as a framework to explore colorism. For instance, Mitchell (2020) used CRT as a lens in a study on print media marketing to examine the relationship between the white washing of Black women's skin tones and colorism. Additionally, Burton et al. (2010) conducted a review through the lens of colorism and critical race theory examining studies that focused on families of color and colorism. The authors spoke to how critical race theory and colorism informed the methodological approaches, such as the research questions, used by scholars in the respective studies included in the review.

Whiteness

In the book titled *Whiteness as Property* Harris (1993) writes that whiteness is positioned as self-identity, personhood, and property that is both legal and recognized, with all three working sometimes together and other time alone. Whiteness as property is defined as access to economic privileges, security, and basic needs which ensured survival (Harris, 1993). The construction of whiteness as property is twofold: (a) the treatment of only Black individuals as slaves and thus, treated as property and (b) the sanctioning of genocide and conquest of Indigenous peoples by only validating and acknowledging land owned by White individuals (Harris, 1993). By converting whiteness from identity into property the author speaks to the interaction of race and property that allowed for racial domination of White individuals to occur whereby property establishment was dependent on race (Harris, 1993). Thus, occupation and ownership of land was only legalized and documented as the foundation for property rights when done by White individuals (Harris, 1993). In addition to this, assigning Black individuals as slaves and treating them as property and the genocide and colonization of the Indigenous populations all contribute to the establishment of whiteness as property.

Harris (1993) delineates how whiteness gains access to the functional property rights through: (a) *rights of disposition*, (b) *rights to use and enjoyment*, (c) *reputation and status property*, and (d) *the absolute right to exclude*. *The rights to disposition* state that typically, for property to meet this criterion, it needs to be transferable and under these conditions, Whiteness would not meet the criteria given its non-transferability. However, certain property such as government licenses for instance, which are traditionally not transferable, have under the law been recognized as property. Similarly, certain exceptions have been made under the law for non-transferable property to reserve the right to the specific criterion. Thus, despite Whiteness

not being transferable, the author states this could be an indicator of its high value rather than its disqualification as property. *The rights to use and enjoyment* delineate that Whiteness can shift from being part of one's identity but can also be an organization that controls and positions their power with the latter resembling the functions of a property. Thus, advantages afforded to White people due to their Whiteness were used and enjoyed by them thus demonstrating how Whiteness established itself as functionable property. *Reputation and status property* delineates that Whiteness was seen as a form of status property as Whiteness was recognized as having reputational interest due to the social hierarchy formed where calling a White person "Black" was considered a slander but not when it occurred the other way around. Finally, the *absolute right to exclude* delineated that those who were deemed White guarded Whiteness and the privileges associated with it by excluding those who were not White. Harris (1993) writes how racial subjugation and exclusion provides a foundation for Whiteness and through this, Whiteness is seen as unique and unparalleled.

Similar to racism, colorism preserves colonial strategies used by the Europeans through domination and exclusion (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018). To illustrate this, Dhillon-Jamerson (2018) asserts how lighter skinned African Americans can marginally access Whiteness but never gain accessibility in its entirety. Dhillon-Jamerson (2018) provides support for this by stating that lighter skinned African Americans gain more access to educational, employment, and financial resources compared to darker skinned African Americans, however, they are still treated unjustly due to systemic racism. Consequently, Whiteness retains and secures its superiority, power, and wealth both racially and in the context of colorism. However, Whiteness further complicates the issue of racism as it not only engenders racism but the limited accessibility that it provides for lighter skin African Americans causes friction amongst African Americans. The author writes

that privileges, actual or fictional, afforded to lighter skin African Americans through Whiteness negatively impacts the camaraderie between those of the same racial group (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018).

Womanism

Womanism is a culturally responsive approach that embraces and celebrates Black women and their entire being and identity (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Díaz, 2016; Sanchez-Hucles, 2016; Walker, 1983). In Walker's (1983) book titled *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, she identified four definitions of a womanist. The first definition is to be a Black or women of color feminist, to be more curious, critically think, is responsible and grown. The second definition is loves men and women sexually and/or non-sexually, commitment to survival, and appreciation for the strength and culture of women. The third definition is loving oneself and the pleasures of life. The fourth definition is where White feminism and womanism are distinguished through the metaphors of colors (Walker, 1983).

Womanism emphasizes the survival of Black women and distinguishes itself from feminism in that it sees the survival of Black women and the Black community as interconnected (Medwinter & Rozario, 2021). It is a decolonial framework that considers and articulates how racism, capitalism, and colonialism benefit and reinforce one another, a component that feminist theory lacks (Medwinter & Rozario, 2021). Additionally, scholars have denoted several principles that encompass womanism some of which include, the lives of women of color are shaped by intersectionality, women of color believe that all are connected, and they come from a unique blend of cultures and have a deep sense of what is important (Sanchez-Hucles, 2016).

To the authors knowledge, there is only one study in the literature that has used a womanist framework when examining colorism (Moffitt, 2020). Although the study provides insight into lived experience of colorism in a mother-daughter relationship, it is limited in that it provides the perspective of one individual. Despite this, the study is a clear example of how one can integrate womanism as a framework in understanding the role of colorism. Furthermore, womanism has typically been used as a framework for the Black diaspora however, research has shown that it can also be applicable for women of color regardless of their ethnic group (Wyche, 2016).

Summary

The chapter provided an overview of the existing literature on colorism. It described the roots of colorism by examining the relationship of colorism and racism and explored the historical underpinnings engendering colorism. The chapter focused on how colorism impacts Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities today and specifically addressed the impact it has on women of color. Additionally, mental health outcomes were explored in relation to colorism with research depicting that depression and self-esteem were the most notable for women of color. The gaps of the literature were presented to depict what remains missing in the current research and the significance of the authors current focus of the proposed study. Through this, literature on South Asians, colorism, and mental health is underscored, illuminating the importance and the need for this research to be conducted. Finally, the proposed frameworks of Critical Race Theory and Womanism were described to provide a theoretical understanding of the lens that will be used to understand and analyze the narratives that emerge during the interviews with South Asian women who have experienced colorism.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The following chapter defines and elaborates on the qualitative methodology that was utilized to address the gaps in the literature on colorism and mental health/well-being. The chapter provides the framework and paradigm that was used for the study. The qualitative design used in the study, the research questions, and my positionality as a researcher will be highlighted next. Finally, the methodology used in the study including sampling, data collection steps, and data analysis are delineated.

Theoretical Framework

An integrative framework was used for the following study which encompassed CRT and Womanism. The rationale for the theoretical integration is based on the premise that colorism and racism are intricately linked due to their colonial roots (Hunter, 2007) and colorism impacts women of color more detrimentally (Lemi & Brown, 2020). With the theoretical framework as a lens, analysis of the data will be conducted specifically with the a priori codes and making meaning of the findings generated.

Transformative Critical Theory Paradigm

A transformative critical paradigm will shape how the data collection and analysis of the study will take place such that the researcher will use reflexive methods (e.g., bridling) throughout and participants will be co-researchers in forming the final report of the data (e.g., reviewing the transcripts of interviews and analysis of the findings). Additionally, interview questions, research questions, and artifacts will be shaped by the paradigm employed in the study.

Qualitative Design

Given the lack of research exploring the phenomena of colorism in South Asian women and to better understand the impact of colorism on the mental health of South Asian women, the researcher conducted a qualitative study. Qualitative research provides a voice to individuals or populations who are under researched and empowers them to share their narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). Qualitative research accounts for individuals' emotions, actions, and experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012). Due to the sensitivity of the topic being explored, using this type of design allowed for the participants lived realities to be centered. Additionally, qualitative research espouses that multiple realities do exist (Hays & Singh, 2012). Thus, using this design will allow for various perspectives and experiences to be examined. Finally, qualitative research allows for a collaborative relationship between researcher and participants and serves to minimize the power differential between the two (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, this will likely allow participants to feel comfortable to share their stories openly on an issue that is rarely defined within the South Asian community in conjunction with mental health, which continues to be associated with stigma in the South Asian diaspora.

Hermeneutical Phenomenological Design

A phenomenological design is defined as describing the shared meaning of a phenomenon based on the lived experience of several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The rationale for using this design is that it allowed for the construction of a common meaning for South Asian women who have a shared lived experience of a common phenomenon, in this case colorism (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More specifically, a hermeneutical phenomenology was used which allowed for the researcher to interpret and make meaning of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to understand and making meaning of the various

ways in which humans exist in the world (Crowther & Thomson, 2022). A primary rationale for using hermeneutical phenomenology for this study was that the researcher wanted to explore how participants understand and experience colorism within the context in which they live (Crowther & Thomson, 2022). In understanding how participants experienced colorism, the researcher was able to co-construct with participants and use CRT and womanism as the theoretical framework (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that the researcher cannot separate or bracket themselves from the data and thus, holds reflexivity as a core component in this approach (Crowther & Thomson, 2022). Given the importance of this topic to the researcher, it was imperative for the researcher to employ an approach that acknowledged that her beliefs, understandings, and perceptions are present in the process while incorporating strategies such as a bridling to continuously reflect and challenge these beliefs while conducting the study (Haskins et al., 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of study was to understand the experiences of colorism for South Asian women and how this has impacted their mental health and well-being.

Research Questions

Existing literature on colorism denotes that it does impact women of color, including South Asian women. In particular, the research has explored the impact of colorism on marriage suitability and desirability (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Jha & Adelman, 2009). Although the research has shown that a relationship exists between colorism and the mental health outcomes of women of color, the available research has mainly focused on Black, Latinx/é, and East/Southeast Asian women with little research exploring the mental health impact of colorism on South Asian women (Prusaczyk & Choma, 2018; Sharif & Siddique, 2021). Thus, the

following study was guided by two research questions: *How do South Asian women experience colorism? How do South Asian women's understanding of their colorism experiences shape their mental health/well-being?*

Researcher's Role

Researcher Positionality

The author's positionality is defined as the identities that the author holds and serves as trustworthiness tool to address issues of bias that are present in the proposed study (Hays & Singh, 2012). The researcher identifies as a cis-gender South Asian woman in her late twenties who has light to medium skin tone. The researcher is an international student who was born and raised in the Middle East, specifically in a GCC (Gulf Corporation Council) country. This is important to note as the role of colorism may have looked different where the researcher grew up compared to in the subcontinent. The researcher's earliest memories of colorism emerged in her friendships in school where skin tone and attempts to skin lighten were present. As the researcher got older, she encountered/heard conversations of family members mentioning and commenting on skin tone, unprovoked, of those within the community. What stands out from these memories is how fairness was celebrated.

In her own experiences with South Asian men, colorism was prevalent and was present subtly. Through these experiences, she was able to expand her understanding of colorism and how it presented in the South Asian community (e.g., fairness being equated to beauty and fairness being celebrated). It was through her readings and conversations with peers/friends, that the understanding of how anti-Blackness played a role in colorism emerged. The researcher believes that the colorism narrative is a driving force of the anti-blackness espoused both covertly and overtly in the community.

Bridling

With these experiences in mind, the researcher ensured to bridle her experiences. Bridling is a reflective and ongoing practice that allows the researchers to not completely cut themselves off from their understandings of the phenomenon being studied but instead, encourages the researcher to loosen their understandings by giving some distance to see the phenomenon from a different perspective (Dahlberg, 2006; Stutey et al., 2020; Vagle et al., 2009). Reflection in bridling is encapsulated in listening, attending, openness, and obtaining meaning (Stutey et al., 2020). Thus, for this study, bridling was maintained by a reflexive journal and the researcher positionality statement (Stutey et al., 2020). See Appendix A for excerpts of bridling journal.

Data Collection Procedures

The following section discusses the researcher's sampling, recruitment, and data collection methods used in the study.

Sampling

Qualitative scholars note the importance of using purposive sampling in qualitative research and delineate the various purposive sampling methods that exist (Hays & Singh, 2012). For the purpose of the study, a criterion and snowball sampling were used. Criterion sampling has shown to be best used for phenomenology and allows for having participants who have all experienced the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The rationale in employing snowball sampling was twofold: (a) it was anticipated that recruitment of South Asian women who have personally experienced colorism may be challenging given that colorism is not widely talked about in the community and (b) previous research has shown how beneficial snowball sampling has been in recruiting populations that are marginalized and difficult to reach (Woodley & Lockard, 2016). It was important that the researcher recruited women of South Asian ethnicity as

the study sought to explore how they experienced and made meaning of colorism. Additionally, participants were aware that eligibility to partake in the study could occur regardless of whether the personal experience with colorism had been beneficial or disadvantageous for them.

Age was not a factor in the sample as previous research that has explored colorism in the South Asian population have had participants ranging in age from 24 to 30 years old (Nagar, 2018), 30 to 53 years old (Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016), 28 to 48 years old (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011), 18 to 80 years old (Adbi et al., 2021), and in some studies, age was provided (Kukreja, 2021). In the studies where age was provided, there was no indication that it was a factor in how colorism played a role. Given this and because research is limited on colorism and its impact on the South Asian population, the researcher decided to keep the age range broad. By keeping the age criterion open, it is anticipated that this will provide a better understanding of the developmental arc of participants experiences of colorism.

Although the study was accessible to South Asian women from various continents/countries/cities, there is a lack of research on colorism within the South Asian community. Moreover, while the researcher is from the South Asian diaspora, her current place of residence at the time of the study did not allow for easy access to the South Asian community. As a result, the researcher anticipated that recruitment may be challenging and used snowball sampling as another method of recruitment. Snowball sampling allowed for existing participants and connections researcher had to share the study with their friends, family, and community members (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Generally, for phenomenological studies, scholars have suggested 10 participants as an ideal number to have (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). However, research has stressed that this guideline is not fixed and that it is more important to examine the paradigm

being used for the study and the intentionality behind your research to determine the size of the sample (Hays & Singh, 2012). Prior to recruitment, the researcher aimed for 8-10 participants. At the end of data collection, 14 participants had been interviewed for the study.

Participant Recruitment

The researcher used a combination of criterion and snowball sampling to recruit participants. A flyer (see Appendix B) was used as the sole method of communicating what the study focused on, eligibility to participate, and the requirements of the study. Participants were recruited via the researcher's professional network, social media (Facebook & Instagram), word of mouth, and organizations and associations both with and without a South Asian presence. During recruitment, it was made evident on the flyer used to promote the study that participants had to have personally experienced colorism to participate. At the time of recruitment, no incentive was provided to participants. However, once recruitment was completed, the researcher was offered a research grant for her dissertation. The funding provided was given to participants in the form of gift cards as a token of appreciation for their participation.

Participants

A total of 14 South Asian women (*N= 14*) were interviewed for the study. Participants were residing in the United States or the United Kingdom with four participants having spent their formative years in South Asia and the Middle East. The majority of the participants were of Indian ethnicity while the remaining were ethnically from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. All participants were above the age of 18 years old and were between the ages of 21 to 46 years old. Participants ranged in occupational positions and were living in various cities in the United States and United Kingdom. From the 14 participants, 4 identified as Hindu, 2 identified as Muslim, 3 identified as spiritual, 2 identified as Atheist, 1 identified as Agnostic, 1 identified as

Christian, and 1 did not state her religious/spiritual beliefs. In terms of self-identification of skin tone, two self-reported as very light or light, seven self-reported as medium skin tone, two self-reported as medium/dark, and three self-reported as dark. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms where used. See Table 1 for a review of participant demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Ethnicity	Self-Reported Skin Tone
Priyanka	Indian	Medium-Dark
Devika	Indian	Light
Naomi	Indian	Medium
Akshi	Indian	Very Light/Light
Tara	Indian	Dark
Amira	Pakistan	Medium
Shruthi	Indian	Medium
Maryam	Pakistani	Dark
Reshma	Indian	Medium
Nicole	Indian/Sri Lankan	Medium
Nikita	Indian	Dark
Aisha	Bangladeshi	Medium
Rishika	Indian	Medium/Dark
Aparna	Indian	Medium

Data Collection

The researcher first sought permission from the William & Mary Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to commencing recruitment and data collection. Once IRB approval was received, interview questions were devised and thoroughly reviewed for understanding and suitability with the dissertation committee. Recruitment of participants occurred based on the sampling methods illustrated in the section above. Once interest to participate was expressed, participants were sent an email to thank them for their willingness to participate, requesting availability to schedule the interview, and attached the Informed Consent (see Appendix C). The informed consent included details of the study and confidentiality measures taken. Participants were asked to review, sign, and send back the informed consent document prior to the interview.

Additionally, the email included that participants bring an artifact of their choice that symbolizes their experiences with colorism. As some participants were unclear of what the artifact could be, the researcher provided examples of what the artifact could entail. All interviews were audio and video recorded and were conducted via an online platform called Zoom. The artifact and interviews served as the two data collection methods in the study. At the start of the interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the recording, confidentiality procedures (e.g., storing and discarding of the recording), and that they can pause/stop recording at any point in the interview.

Interviews

Interviews with each participant were approximately 60 minutes long. The researcher used open ended questions to allow for participants to share their experiences with colorism authentically. Prior to the interviews, the interview questions were thoroughly reviewed for understanding and suitability by the dissertation committee (see Appendix D). Questions were

crafted based on the existing literature on colorism in relation to women of color. Interview questions consisted of seven open-ended questions out of which four questions include sub-questions/probes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants which offered both guidance and flexibility in collecting data (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Artifacts

Artifacts have shown to be a rich secondary sources of data collection and are defined as physical objects that communicate significance for the participant or setting (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Artifacts exist in the environment of the participant/setting already and can be in the form of gifts, pictures, awards (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the study, participants brought in an item of their choice that communicated their personal experiences with colorism. Items consisted of a razor blade, a long-sleeved sweater, foundation, an Oreo cookie, traditional Indian clothing item, an ornament of an elephant, pictures of themselves and/or family members, pet dog, ornament received from a family member, a utensil, and a dress. Participants were invited to talk about the artifact at the start of the interview using a guided prompt. In the analysis of the data, the researcher coded the artifact separately and the artifact served as a form of triangulation (Hays & Singh, 2012). See Table 2 for the summarized meaning of each artifact presented by participants.

Table 2

Artifacts

Artifact	Summarized Meaning of Artifact
Maybelline foundation	Difficulty in finding shades that suited me
Family Picture	Different shade ranges within immediate family
Mylanchi Outfit	Felt most beautiful in traditional sari for Mylanchi (pre wedding ceremony event)
Work Email	Tells coworker, who has been calling her by her last name, what her first name is, and coworker does not respond
Razorblade	Insecurity of body hair
Photo Collage	Childhood pictures of self and photos of mum who was the first person to make her understand what colorism was
Long sleeved sweater	Recognizing that her skin tone was different to others and hiding her darker skin tone
Cultural spoon	Peer at school commenting on the spoon she used to eat her rice with
Dress	Started to feel comfortable with skin tone when wearing this dress to her 8th grade cruise
Venus Razorblade	Noticing her skin tone lightened when she shaved the hair off her skin

Black Dog	Angered her when she noticed that everyone in South Korea had a white colored dog, so she got a black dog
Black and White cookie	Depiction of growing up with a younger sister who was fairer than her
Gift from neighbors in India	Felt warmth and acceptance from cousins and neighbors and was a contrast from her own family who were pointing out her skin color
3 Elephants	Three different shaded elephants (light, medium, dark) and messaging from mum that the light-colored elephant is the most special one

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research encapsulates the reliability and validity of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012), The researcher used the following criteria to determine trustworthiness for the study: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and ethical validation (Hays & Singh, 2012). Various strategies were employed to maintain each criterion (Hays & Singh, 2012). Triangulation was used to maintain credibility and confirmability. Member checking was used to maintain dependability, confirmability, and ethical validation. A reflexive journal and a peer debriefer were used to ensure ethical validation. Finally, a thick description was used to maintain transferability. The following section explains how each strategy for was used in the study in further detail.

Triangulation

The process of triangulation allows for substantiating evidence using multiple methods, theories, and sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used triangulation of data methods which promotes the use of multiple methods of data collection to identify themes across these methods (Hays & Singh, 2012). Thus, the artifacts and interviews served as the data collection methods for triangulation. These multiple data methods allowed for cross checking of the data which helped the researcher gain deeper insight into the experiences of colorism for the participants and strengthen the evidence that a theme existed (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). Through cross checking the data methods, the believability and genuineness of the study was increased.

Member checking

The process of member checking, which will also serve as a method of bridling in the study, has been viewed as an integral step in ensuring credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It involves having the participants review the researcher's interpretations and analysis and determine whether the conclusions drawn accurately reflect their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although there are various methods one can use to conduct this, the researcher primarily used two with the first being having participants review the interview transcripts and the second was having participants review the report of the findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). Participants provided feedback in each round and if changes were requested to be made, the researcher ensured to incorporate this.

For the former, participants were informed at the end of the interview that the transcript of the interview will be sent to them a week from the date of the data collection. Participants were provided instructions to thoroughly review the transcript and check if there were any errors

present. Participants highlighted the error and added a comment on what they would parts of the interview they would have liked to add/remove. For the latter, participants were given a week to review the final report of the findings and invited to provide feedback on the analysis. Engaging in this process allowed for the researcher to ensure consistency of the narratives, to limit any misunderstandings/biases on the researcher's part, and to empower the participants by centering their experience.

Reflexive journal

The reflexive journal allowed for the researcher to note down her thoughts/feelings as she was undergoing the research process (Hays & Singh, 2012). More specifically, the researcher used this tool to reflect on the different stages of the research process and how it was impacting her throughout the data collection and analysis process (Hays & Singh, 2012). The journal served as a one form of bridling in the study which allowed for the researcher to not cut herself off from her pre-understandings of colorism but to keep them at bay (Dahlberg, 2006; Stutey et al., 2020; Vagle et al., 2009).

Thick Description

A thick description was used to maintain the transferability of the data by providing a detailed description of the sampling method, participants, data collection, and data analysis. The rationale for providing a thick description was to not make the findings generalizable but to give readers the opportunity to determine if the results generated from the study can be applied to their own environment and experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Peer Debriefing

The peer debriefer served as strategy for ethical validation as it allowed for an expert in qualitative research to review the transcripts, coding process, and analysis of the study (Hays &

Singh, 2012). The peer debriefer not only provided feedback to the researcher but also challenged the findings and analysis process where needed (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was guided by hermeneutical philosopher's Gadamer's tenets, specifically the hermeneutic circle, fusion of horizons, and pre-understandings. Although there are various ways in which data analysis in hermeneutical phenomenology can be conducted (Crowther et al., 2017), the researcher's analysis aligned most closely with Alsaigh and Coyne (2021), where their analysis emerged from an integration of the analysis denoted in Fleming et al. (2003) and Ajjawi and Higgs (2007). This hermeneutical framework illustrated by Alsaigh and Coyne (2021) served as a helpful guideline for the researcher to analyze the data.

In accordance with Gadamer's pre-understanding, it was imperative that the researcher was aware of any prejudices around the topic studied due to her connection with the topic so as not to impact the horizon of understanding which entails not seeing the whole picture or being able to see in depth (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). The researcher did this through the researcher positionality statement which emerged through conversations with her dissertation committee. To continue to keep her pre-understandings afloat, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the data collection process. After conducting the one-hour long interviews, the researcher went through the transcripts, generated automatically through Zoom, while listening only to the audio recordings again to not only ensure accuracy of the transcripts but to gain a better understanding of the data. The coding process was then conducted whereby the researcher engaged in a priori and open coding of the transcripts. A priori codes were formatted on an electronic codebook and were based on CRT and Womanism literature. A priori codes were reviewed with the researcher's dissertation committee, who served as the peer reviewers, to

refine and modify codes to ensure accuracy in the coding process. To assist the researcher in identifying what would symbolize the code, a narrative from the interview was extracted to the codebook to showcase what the code would represent as an example.

Once a priori codes were approved by the peer reviewer, the researcher began using this to code the transcripts. The researcher then conducted the categorization process manually for each coded transcript where the open and a priori codes were grouped together to form sub-themes. Once sub-themes were finalized, themes were generated. The generation of the themes involved the researcher to move between part of the text (themes) and whole text (meaning of experiences conveyed by participants) to elaborate on the themes. Finally, the theoretical framework was used to deepen understanding of the themes and subthemes and this was illustrated in the results section of the study.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher wanted to ensure that participants were protected throughout the study. Authorization from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at William & Mary, where the researcher attends as a student, was obtained. For authorization to be received, the researcher submitted a proposal of the study inclusive of the informed consent and methods that will be used to conduct the study. Prior to interviews being conducted, participants received an informed consent document via email detailing purpose of the study, confidentiality of the data, the right for the participants to withdraw from the study at any point of the process, and that a copy of the transcripts and the findings will be sent to them for review. To ensure confidentiality of the participants identity, the informed consent addressed that pseudonyms will be used in reporting the findings. Participants were notified in the document that if the results of the study were to be

published, a draft will be sent to them for review. Participants were requested to review, sign, and return the informed consent prior to the interview being conducted.

Distribution of Results

The results obtained from the study were presented through an oral defense to committee members and those belonging to the institution, where the researcher attends as a student. Results will also be presented at national/international counseling conferences. Additionally, the study will be submitted as a qualitative piece to a counseling journal and any seminal pieces drawn from this work will be submitted in a manuscript format to a professional counseling publication.

Summary

The chapter illustrated how the theoretical framework and paradigm will be used in the study, delineating the hermeneutical phenomenological design, the purpose of the study, research questions, sampling and participants, data collection methods, trustworthiness of the study, and the analysis of the data.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of the following study was to understand the lived experiences of colorism for South Asian women and their mental health and well-being. The research questions that guided the study were: *How do South Asian women experience colorism? How do South Asian women's understanding of their colorism experiences shape their mental health/well-being?* Through an integrative lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Womanism, a hermeneutical phenomenological design was employed to explore the research questions posed. The researcher used both theoretical frameworks to analyze the data and to form themes that emerged from the data produced. The following chapter will describe the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews and the artifacts participants brought in. Additionally, using CRT and Womanism, the researcher will explore how South Asian women experienced colorism and how these experiences shaped their mental health and well-being.

Themes

As noted in the introduction, the research questions of the study were: *How do South Asian women experience colorism? How do South Asian women's understanding of their colorism experiences shape their mental health/well-being?* The experiences of colorism for South Asian women encompassed: (1) Perceptions of Beauty Standards (2) Understanding Colorism vs. Racism (3) Engagement in Strategies to Maintain/Modify Skin Tone (4) Learned to Navigate Colorism Experiences. The themes chosen to align with this research question as participants shared experiences of messages they received, whom they received it from, how they navigated colorism, and their understanding of those experiences. How the experiences of colorism shape the mental health/well-being of South Asian women included: (5) Prominence in

Shaping Self/Well-being (6) Prominence in Shaping View of Others. The themes align with this research question as participants shared the impact of colorism on how they viewed themselves, how they viewed others, and how it affected their mental well-being. See Table 3 for the subthemes under each theme.

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Perceptions of Beauty Standards	Fairness as the Beauty Standard
	Family as Influential Sources
Understanding Colorism vs. Racism	Skin Tone Discrimination with South Asians
	Internalized Anti-Blackness
	Racialized Experiences
	Understanding One's Privilege
Engagement in Strategies to Maintain/Modify Skin Tone	Avoiding Sun Exposure
	Engaging in/Learning About Skin Lightening Behaviors
Prominence in Shaping Self/Well-being	Negatively Shapes Sense of Self
	Emotional/Mental Well-Being
	Learned to Embrace Self

Learned to Navigate Colorism Experiences	Self-Directed Support Strategies
	Reliance on Formal Supports
	Friendships as a Source of Support
	Seeking Support
Prominence in Shaping View of Others	Changed View of Others
	Advocating for Others

Perceptions of Beauty Standards

An overwhelming number of participants spoke to the beauty standard perceptions in terms of messages they received pertaining to fairer and darker skin and the influence of family as the bearer of those messages. Specifically, participants shared narratives of messages they received either directly or indirectly and/or how they internalized such messages. Within this theme, three subthemes were present: Fairness as the Beauty Standard, Family as Influential Sources, and Peers as Influential Sources.

Fairness as the Beauty Standard

Through the narratives, there was an understanding that fairness and whiteness is the beauty standard. For example, Rishika, who self-identified as medium skin tone, spoke to the "binaries" she sees in colorism by sharing the following:

> I feel like there's sort of shades of what's acceptable in terms of skin color. You can still be somewhat darker, if you're just kind of a light tan color but ultimately, being White is the goal and I don't want that to be the goal. I just want it to be like you are who you are,

> and it doesn't matter how dark your skin is- again, that doesn't determine who you are as a person.

Participants shared how the association of Whiteness/lighter skin to beauty was communicated to them by the South Asian community. Aparna expressed the messages she received from the Indian community she was a part of and how lightness needs to be maintained in different ways:

> I think that I wasn't light enough right that in a way, I was never going to be light enough to be seen as beautiful, to be seen as typical, to be seen as successful, I think that that's really, again the message that I receive from my Indian community. To wear makeup, always wear sunscreen and don't go out in the sun, carry an umbrel- like those kinds of things that really restrict how you can engage with your environment in the world, and to essentially say, never go out and be proud of who you are in your own skin but to find another, to modify your skin or to find the skin that is seen as more acceptable, that you can present to the world.

Reshma's narrative reinforced the significance of fairness as a beauty standard in the Indian community, as this messaging had been pervasive in her life since the time she was born:

> Though within India that's a different story that started really early on from the day that you're born, and as you grow older it becomes a little more intense in making sure that you keep up with certain rituals that will keep you fair, even if you're into sports or other things so that's been, it's been ongoing for 26 years now.

Fairness as the beauty standard also emerged from what participants heard about how darker skin was discussed. Aisha not only reported on how the messages she heard about darker skin began at an early age, but also shared what she gleaned from those messages:

> You know so at a very early age, those ideas were kind of put into your head that being dark is not a good thing. It's not that people who are dark are bad people but it's just overall, not a good attractive thing to be, and being light skinned is better attractive, considered more beautiful.

Nicole added to this as she associated darker skin with ugliness after seeing how her sister received compliments:

> So, growing up, I have an older sister, and she is a lot more fairer skin than I was. So, growing up people would always say, "Oh, your sister is so beautiful" "She's so fair skinned" and blah blah, and I always just thought I was ugly because I was darker skinned.

Tara spoke to how her lighter skinned sister is viewed as the "prettier" one in their community and how this messaging impacted how she viewed herself and her overall well-being:

> I know when I'm compared- because me and my sister are 2 completely different skin color, so she's always been known as the prettier one. I think it's because people know that she's lighter skin- I mean they see that she's lighter skin, she has nice hair like blah blah blah.....So that affected me a lot because I noticed that in our community and I would be able to feel that and hear that indirectly so when I did hear that I'm just like "Okay I know, but it's fine whatever"

Additionally, fairness as a beauty standard was brought forth as participants spoke to preserving fairness, associating fair skin with luck, and the desire to be fairer. Devika spoke to how her body was changing during her teenage years. It was during this time she received the following message from her parents: "God has given you everything, God has given you a good skin color,

you just have to change your body, and you can't waste the things that God has given you." She shared the impact of this message on her:

> It's like oh, it's a blessing that I have fair skin, and it's like I have to preserve it, I have to make sure nothing happens to it I need to protect it, because it's a blessing, cause I'm lucky, you know and obviously, again I'm on the privileged side, of it but it still hurts, it still makes me feel uncomfortable.

Naomi also spoke to messages she received for being lucky that she is fairer skinned: "Comments on my beauty, or whatever, because I'm fair and so those I guess are how I got that message that I'm lucky for not being part of the rest of them if that makes sense."

Other participants spoke to how the internalization of this standard of beauty resulted in their desire to be lighter and/or White. Amira shared: "It was easy to kind of fall into that cycle of "Oh, I have to look really fair", and I remember as a kid thinking, I wish I was lighter. I wish I was lighter skin. I'd look so much prettier if I was lighter skin." Shruthi's narrative also demonstrated support for the desire to be White:

> For a really long time, I feel like- my best friend actually she is White and Caucasian and so something for the longest time I would tell her when I had thoughts about this is, "I wish I was White", and in saying that I was striving for an impossible outcome (laughs) cause I will never be White, and you know that really hurt.

These narratives demonstrate how pervasive whiteness is as participants had the understanding that White/lighter skin was seen as something one should achieve. The excerpts from the participants supports the notion of whiteness being reputation and status property where Whiteness carries reputation and hierarchy thus making it valuable (Harris, 1993).

Family as Influential Sources

Family was an important influence on the messages that participants received about beauty and skin tone. Participants shared in their narratives either directly or indirectly how their family members were bearers of colorist messages. Based on the narratives, direct messages were defined as ones where family members explicitly stated it to the participant and indirect messages were defined as ones were participants heard family members talk about skin tone around them or about others to the participant itself. Family members consisted of uncles, aunts, parents, and grandparents. The family members that were most notable were maternal figures, specifically mothers and aunts. The messages participants received from family members varied, but they primarily focused on stating who the sources were and comments made about their skin tone or about other's skin tone.

Although many participants shared that family members were primary sources in communicating messages on skin tone, some participants shared how family members were the only source. Maryam expressed the following to support this:

> I definitely think it's a generational thing. Nobody of my generation has ever said to me "You're quite dark today" "You're quite fair today" or "You look fairer." It's always been upwards so indirect comments from parents from aunts, uncles like that- just in that generation, it's never been in this- in my generation, or even from a non-Brown person. No one who's White or English has said to me "You're quite dark" I've *(laughs)* never got a comment like that…

Rishika shared similar experiences to Maryam in that she experienced direct comments from family members and other Indians, but skin tone was not commented on by those outside of her family and community:

> I didn't hear colorism that much because I wasn't around people who would discuss that specifically. That I really only got from family and other Indian people that we knew, and I generally didn't hear it from people outside of my family. No one ever said anything to me directly though I'm sure there were conversations being had about that.

Participants shared how their grandparents' messages on skin tone were influential in their behaviors and in their way of thinking. Reshma shared her grandparent's displeasure at her darker skin tone due to being outdoors and how this changed the way she looked at physical activity:

> So, by the time winter came, and you kinda took a break from these sports because they were all outside, I was tanned and really dark, which *(pause)* not everyone was happy with starting with my grandparents…. It kind of ruined the aspect of enjoyment for me, just because to me, it was something that I love doing, and you're putting skin color into it which kind of ruins it. Just because I'm dark doesn't mean it's bad.

Akshi also shared how her grandparents messaging on fairness was passed on to her:

> Going over to my grandparents house and they'd always be like oh, you know 'so fair' like 'gori, chitti' whatever and I'm just like you don't realize it but that is definitely something that then gets carried through and you perceive fairness, as beauty, which is a super common trait in South Asian families of people thinking that.

Correspondingly, participants indirectly learned from their parents about how fairness was viewed. Maryam's narrative demonstrates how she recognized the significance of fairness through her parents messaging on her brother's skin tone right after he was born:

> My brother was born, they say oh, "Well when your brother was born, he was so dark, he was so dark, he was so dark, he was just- why is he so dark?" He's the opposite now and

> they always comment how fair he is and the same with my sister when she was born, "She was so fair when she was born, like a princess, like a doll."

In a similar vein, Aisha's experience was of hearing her parents praising other women in the community for their lighter skin tone:

> This is before my sister was born, you know, I remember, at very early age, my parents saying and making comments very casual comments, like, "Oh, she's so beautiful, she's so fair" you know, and they would say all of this in Bengali.

Maternal figures, who were the most cited, were spoken about as having a significant influence on how participants viewed beauty and in turn, how it impacted their own behaviors/thoughts. When asked who the sources of these messages were on skin tone, participants shared "mainly my mother" and "It was all Indian people, it was my mother, it was the aunties at the temple. It was my maashi's in India." Amira added the following when talking about the photo collage she brought in as her artifact:

> So basically, my mum was the kind of person who was very conscious about her looks, so she was always done up and really pretty, and everything. Basically, she was the first person in my life who kind of made me understand colorism and what it was through her own insecurities, and I remember that vividly, being a conversation like having with her when I was very young.

Reshma added:

> But all the sources within India and outside, come to think of it, have all been women which has been very telling. So, sources are from schools, like my aunts, my maasi's, my grandmums also said a few things sometimes.

Aparna shared that in her early twenties, her parents created a marriage profile for her, and her mother told her about the following on what skin tone she should put on the profile: “You know so um I think that they- like but my mom was like, if we put you as anything darker no one will be interested in you.” Aparna expressed later in the interview how the messaging she received on fairness from family members but specifically her mother impacted her:

> But these standards of beauty I think, are still very pervasive, and you see it in sculptures and you see it in the stories that mothers and grandmothers tell you about what it means to be successful as- and for, for me as a Bengali woman, what it means to be successful and I think that they kind of live in you right, they just always stay in you and you wonder if you're not meeting somebody because you're not light enough or are you not getting that center position in a dance troop because you're not light enough.

Nikita shared that as a little girl playing outdoors during summers in India, she received comments made by her mother on her skin tone: “It was like to the point where I remember she'd be looking at me in Gujarati and she would be like, “Oh, my God, you're so dark it's like disgusting.” Nikita went on to share she still heard the comment from her mother and how that messaging from her mother has impacted her today: “To this day I still put on a lighter foundation color no kidding. I can't step outside without make up on because of the verbal abuse when I was younger.”

Based on these narratives, it is evident that family members had a pivotal role to play in how participants understood what it means to be fairer and darker skinned and how those messages have carried through them. Additionally, many of the participants expressed maternal figures as a source of learning about colorism. The finding speaks to womanism which tends to the well-being of families and communities where “generativity” is a central aspect (Comas-Díaz

& Bryant-Davis, 2016, p. 280). Encompassed in this, is how integral maternal figures are in how women of color learn about their identities and learn how to endure in society (Comas-Díaz & Bryant-Davis, 2016). Thus, this speaks to the findings obtained in the study where maternal figures in the South Asian community hold a large influence in the well-being and thriving of South Asian women.

Understanding Racism vs. Colorism

As participants spoke about their experiences with colorism, many of them reported that their experiences primarily occurred within the South Asian community they were a part of. As a result of those experiences, participants named how anti-Blackness was present for them. Participants also shared experiences of discrimination that occurred with White peers/students. However, they often understood it as colorism rather than racism as evidenced by the description of their narratives. Despite reporting painful stories of their colorism experiences, some participants acknowledged their own privilege of being lighter than other South Asians. Consequently, four subthemes emerged from the narratives: Skin Tone Discrimination with South Asians, Internalized Anti-Blackness, Racialized Experiences, and Understanding One's Privilege.

Skin Tone Discrimination with South Asians

In reflecting on their experiences with colorism, participants shared stories of their skin tone being targeted or remarked on amongst other South Asians. Priyanka shared a distinct memory she had when she was in the sixth grade and how this experience has continued to stay with her:

> In the sixth grade, one of my best friends at the time, I don't know why she said this, or what the context was, but she's just like "Priyanka, you're one of the prettiest girls in our grade for your skin tone" and I was just like, "All right, what was that supposed to mean?

> Was that a compliment or not?" and that was supposed to be my friend who looked very similar to me as well so I was like, I don't what is this? and I feel that's something that I maybe…. I shouldn't remember that so clearly because it was the sixth grade and I am 25 but that's definitely something that I feel like was a very marked instance in my life that has probably just stuck with me.

Akshi named that her experience of colorism looked different where she was ostracized from other South Asians due to her lighter skin complexion:

> My personal experience, growing up is kind of weirdly in the reverse in the way that when I was at school and growing up I actually, I'd say most of my experiences with colorism were from other Asian children, They actually used to single me out and didn't let me spend time with them, because my family is quite Westernized and I'm quite light so I used to be called a coconut all the time, they'd speak in Punjabi and Hindi around me, because my language is exceptionally limited.

As Reshma spoke to the sources of the messages she received on colorism, she described an experience she had with her South Asian dance teacher in college while at practice:

> So, my dance teacher was one of them for sure. I would come into class just super tan and not enough time to be light enough for performance, so she actually switched my position from being right in the front to right at the back, just because I was so tan and that changed like everything, everyone had like 3 weeks to rehearse, which wasn't enough.

Likewise, Tara noted that during one of her practices in a South Asian dance group in the university she attended, her team members and her were split by skin tone shade. She shared this experience and how it impacted her emotionally:

> One of my dance practices that we were like "Let's split into groups of light skin tone versus darker skin tones" and this is an Indian dance group or whatever we had and I was on the darker skin side which makes sense for me but I remember I was really upset about that for like a week, because I was just like, "Why did, why did that even need to happen? That didn't make any sense."

Consistent with the other participants, Maryam emphasized the impact of receiving colorist comments from those within the South Asian community:

> But the harsh part is going back to what I said before which is that it's not colorism from a white colored person, it's colorism from the Brown being the darker people, discriminating against their own darkness and that's what I think hurts the most for me with it.

The narratives recounted by participants demonstrate that family members were not the only bearers of colorist messages. Teachers and peers, in particular, were influential in how participants experienced colorism within the community.

Internalized Anti-Blackness

Participants shared how the messaging they received on skin tone impacted how they viewed darker skin and darker skinned people. Aparna spoke to her uncertainty of where her favorite choice of elephant, the artifact she brought in, stems from:

> I think that whether or not it is something that is active, it's something that always exists as part of who I am, is that recognition that I could be better, but how am I better if I could be whiter, right. And that is a message that's you know I'm not gonna lie, this is my favorite elephant, and I would like to think that it's because it's the fanciest elephant but part of me is like is it because it's the lightest elephant. I don't know right.

Amira shared how her preference towards fairer skin meant that she had a bias towards darker skin:

> As I was growing up, I had a lot of bias towards fairer skin people, I'm not going to lie about that because I did. I had a bias against darker skin people, because that's what I grew up with and it was never an outright I hate dark skin people, but it was more I had a preference towards fairer people.

Nicole had a similar narrative to Amira but spoke to it in terms of how she viewed attractiveness and skin tone: "This is so horrible to say as well but I used to look at other people who are my skin tone or darker than me, and think "Oh, they're not that pretty."

As Shruthi shared how she felt lesser than those who were lighter skinned, she explained her previous view on darker skinned people and how this perspective made her feel greater than:

> At the same time I will be honest with you people darker than me were on a lower pedestal than me, so it kind of reinforced not only this idea that I was lesser than people, but that I was greater than people as well which is the hard thing that I feel a lot of people don't want to admit when they talk about this stuff, but I'll be the first to say it right I probably was colorist to a lot of people.

The excerpts above demonstrate candidness in how these messages impacted participants view of darker skin. Moreover, it aligns with the Black-White binary that CRT speaks to, illustrating how marginalized groups are often pitted against one another by White society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In the process of being up against one another, a marginalized group can often heavily identify with White individuals at the cost of another group. In the context of this subtheme, Eurocentric beauty standards is the divider whereby participants are

conditioned to follow this standard and therefore, the desire to be accepted by those who are lighter skinned while simultaneously looking down on those who are darker skinned is evoked.

Racialized Experiences

Participants shared discriminatory experiences they encountered in childhood that were described as colorism but were in fact, more race-based experiences of discrimination as the perpetrators were White. Within these race-based experiences, participants were the only student of color in their classroom, school, or neighborhood. The excerpts from these narratives demonstrate that participants were not only understanding their experiences of racism as colorism but were defining it as such too. For instance, Tara described "a lot of instances where they're trying to relate to you but they're indirectly saying something that doesn't make sense" where "they" encompass the individuals in her predominately White neighborhood and "instances" encompass comments she received from the same individuals. She provided the following example to illustrate this idea:

> One of the girls was like "Oh, we're in the same skin"- they're Italian, and she was very tan and she's like "Oh, my gosh! We're the same skin color, I'm trying to get as tan as you have, you're so lucky that comes really naturally for you" and I was like "That doesn't make any sense, what you're talking about? But okay, thank you" it's like they're trying to be nice and stuff I get that but at the same time, you don't know what you're talking about, don't say stuff like that.

Akshi shared an experience at the university she had attended where she was tokenized:

> Another one just come to my head, when I went to university, indirect colorism for me was- cause I went to university of _____ so very North England, I got a lot of "Oh,

you're my first brown friend", "You're my first Asian friend", and I think again like lack of understanding.

Amira also reported on the microaggression she received at the university she had attended where a White peer made a comparison of her skin tone with Amira's:

> She used to be the kind of girl that used to self-tan like spray tan and stuff like that. And she had this very annoying habit of- she put her arm next to mine and be like "Oh, ha ha I'm darker than an Asian", and it's a bit like you don't get what you're saying, you don't get how loaded that is what you're doing…… I think it's crazy if White people were darker, they're seen as more attractive but if we do that, then we're ugly and no one is ever gonna love us.

Aisha recalled a specific memory of her receiving comments on her skin tone in a class full of White students:

> Because I was the only Indian kid, and there were no Black kids in my class, and everybody else is White, everybody else's picture turned out great except for my photo which you couldn't even see my face because I was dark. The picture actually printed, completely Black, and I remember I saw that and I was like "Oh, my picture didn't even show up because it's like completely black." I remember, I overheard these kids talking, and they said that "Why is Aisha's picture all black?" and then another kid right in front of me, I can't remember if it was a little boy or little girl said, "Well, Aisha is Black" and I kind of felt really ashamed at that moment, actually, and I didn't know why I think it was not because someone is mistaken me for someone who's Black, I think it was because I was just different from everybody else.

Similar to Aisha, other participants recalled events that occurred at school where they were the only student of color in a class of White students. Reshma described recognizing the pigmentation of her skin due to being excluded by her classmates who were White:

> I've always been on the darker side but didn't think I was that dark till I first went to Europe, for school. I was really small, but even then there as a child you could see the differences as well, and the way you were treated, even in school by other kids, and how I wouldn't be invited to certain parties that everyone else was because I was the only Brown kid in the class so everyone else was White and blue eyes and pretty, and I was the only Brown kid. So I guess it started really early on where I'd be excluded from groups based on my color.

Shruthi expressed how she attended a school that was primarily White and how the kids in the classroom would point it out and make comments about her darker skin tone. She was also one of the few participants who named that her experiences were racist:

> I faced a lot of direct colorism and racism and obviously I was darker I didn't have like blue eyes, which apparently was some crazy thing everyone around me had blue or green eyes, or some pretty color, and I obviously had darker skin color and people pointed that out. They were really open about that, especially young kids, you know, they like to point things out like that like "Oh, your food smells weird" and 'Why are you darker than me?'

Nikita shared how she received a discriminatory comment on her skin tone from a White student in her middle school class:

> In middle school, this White guy wrote me a note, and he said, "I'm the color of poop" and this is when I was young in the United States. This was what? Back in, maybe oh, my

> gosh maybe early 2000 like 1999, 2000 something like that but can you believe it? *(laughs)* The ignorance of some people.

The discriminatory and racist experiences participants shared largely fall under the bracket of microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Additionally, it is important to note that peers were often the perpetrators in the discriminatory and racist experiences that participants recounted.

Understanding One's Privilege

Although participants reported numerous negative experiences with colorism, many recognized the privilege they have either due to them having lighter skin or not being as dark skinned compared to other South Asian women. In both instances, participants shared narratives of acknowledging their privilege, the impact of recognizing their privilege, and recognizing their experiences may not have been as severe as someone darker skinned than them.

Devika acknowledged her privilege and continued to name her privilege of being lighter skin throughout the interview:

> Before even anything else I want to acknowledge my privilege of having a lighter skin tone, and the privileges that come with that being in India, being in a South Asian community, I think, having a lighter skin tone, is a big privilege.

Naomi highlighted her discomfort with the privilege she has of being lighter than members of her community:

> I recognize that I have an advantage that I am privileged, and it's just made me kind of uncomfortable with myself, because I realize that I am lighter than a lot of our Malayalee

> people and so yeah, it's been something new that I had that I had to recognize that I am privileged.

Rishika who self-reported as medium/dark skin tone shared her privilege by speaking to the difference in experiences for darker skinned individuals, both inside and outside the South Asian community:

> I have relative privilege, in the sense that I'm not that dark skinned, and so I think it would be different for another Indian person or any person whose just darker skin than me, and you know possibly dealing also with, you know, I thought a lot about caste stuff, you know, casteism as well, and how sometimes skin color plays into that also.

As Shruthi shared how she came to realize that she was on the "lighter side skin tone spectrum," she spoke to her recognition of her privilege and the reality of how South Asians are impacted by multiple isms despite their skin tone:

> I realize that even though I've faced so much internal and external oppression because of my skin color, I'm actually quite privileged to be someone that has a lighter skin tone. I mean, all of my Indian friends, they do have darker skin than me, and it probably was a factor in their childhood more so than it was mine. But I think it just shows that, race, racism, colorism, they really do contribute to, unfortunately, to the South Asian experience no matter if you're on the darker side, or the lighter side.

The acknowledgement of skin tone privilege conveyed by participants supports the tenets of Whiteness and White privilege that CRT denotes, where Whiteness is positioned as the norm allowing for those who are White to be placed in a position of power and privilege (Bridges et al., 2019; Harris, 1993). Although these tenets are discussed in the context of race, the same can be applied to skin tone. Despite participants encountering harmful experiences due to their skin

tone, the recognition that their lighter skin tone encompasses privileges (e.g., praised for skin tone in the community, difference in the intensity of experiences) demonstrates their understanding that to some extent, they have access to the advantages afforded to White individuals due to their lighter skin tone.

Engagement in Strategies to Maintain/Modify Skin Tone

Due to the messages participants received on skin tone, participants reported engaging in behaviors that maintained or modified their skin tone. Thus, the narratives fell under two subthemes: Avoiding Sun Exposure and Engaging in/Learning about Skin Lightening Behaviors.

Avoiding Sun Exposure

Although there were various ways in which sun exposure emerged as a subtheme, the underlying message was to avoid the sun, so participants did not get dark or darker. Avoiding the sun to preserve fairness was depicted through the following narrative where Devika described the comments she received on protecting her skin when she would be exposed to the sun:

> Growing up in _____ and school was used to be very hot and you know we weren't as educated about you know wearing sunscreen and covering and you're gonna get tanned in _____ it's gonna happen when you're gonna spend long hours outside in the sun, and every time I would get tanned or you know I would have acne, or whatever that causes pigmentation on my skin, my parents, just like immediate family members would just sort of be, you know, "When you were born, you were like Snow White", and this and that, and you know "You have to protect your skin", "You're really lucky to have a lighter skin tone, and you know you need to protect it."

Some participants spoke to the messages they heard on exposure to the sun while other participants shared engagement in specific behaviors to avoid the sun or heat as a result of the

messages, they heard on sun exposure. For example, Tara shared how the messages she received from her community had an impact on her in terms of being in the sun. She reported the following memory when in nursing school:

> The Brown community there is such a stigma of lighter skin people versus darker skin, like "Don't go out in the sun, you're gonna be tanning so much", and there was a time when I was in nursing school me and 3 of my girlfriends who were all White, we went to the beach, and I was covering myself with a towel on the beach, literally head to toe just laying there while they were sunbathing and they thought it was crazy and I was like "Oh, my gosh! I don't want to get dark."

Akshi shared a similar experience to Tara except she received the message on skin tone and sun exposure from her grandparents and how this impacted her:

> Obviously being fair and being Indian it's perceived as a really good thing so it was almost glorified in a really bizarre way, to the point where, if we go on holiday, not necessarily my parents, but other people in my family it's like "You shouldn't tan." I was on holiday a month ago, so I'm tanned, and I'd say like 6 years ago, I'd literally just avoid tanning because I'd be like "Oh, I shouldn't darken my skin color" because it's so ingrained in me from such a young age.

Participants like Aisha were "being told to not play out in the sun so much you're gonna get dark" by her family members and Amira who "used to get told off by my aunties and my mom for being out in the sun and being really Brown." Aparna shared her mums fear and protective behaviors around Aparna being in the sun:

> She got really worried about me being outside all the time, she wanted me to wear sunscreen or hats, or stay indoors. I was in my mid-30s when I came to ____ and she

said, oh- when they came to visit they're like "Oh, the sun is so strong!" my mom was like, "Carry a parasol around with you everywhere."

Rishika shared the "resentment" she felt towards what others would say to her from being out in the sun: "I remember it just used to make me angry, that whole thing cause I can't help it, I have to play sports, I can't hide from the sun I don't want to and I felt a lot of resentment about that, too."

The narratives illustrate where the messages conveyed about sun exposure stem from, portray the importance for preserving fairness in the South Asian community, and demonstrate how impactful it has been on how participants themselves view being out in the sun.

Engaging in/Learning about Skin Lightening Behaviors

The second subtheme was engaging in and learning about skin lightening behaviors. Participants shared what skin lightening behaviors they engaged in or saw in the South Asian community. Naomi shared the following: "I used to put like lemon juice on my skin when I was in middle school to make my skin lighter so these White boys would like me." Amira shared how she was given ways to remove the dark spots on her skin:

> I remember my auntie saying to me "Oh, you need to get rid of the dark spots under your arms because they're so ugly," "Oh, do this remedy of lemon and soap", or whatever it says to make sure to scrub that away, you know, so that you won't have these really dark spots and stuff, on your face and I'm like, "yeah, yeah" *(laughs)*

Nicole's artifact, the Venus Razorblade, was used to describe the vivid memory of her skin lightening after she shaved:

> I remember the Venus Razor was the first ever razor I used to shave. And what I got out of the shower I was, I was a very hairy child growing up *(laughs)* so then when I got to

> the shower, and I finished shaving and waxing, it's like my skin tone just lightened up and I remember the first thing I thought when my skin tone lightened up was, “Oh, I’m light skin too” like I’m not as dark as I thought which in hindsight like thinking back I’m like that's so horrible to think that way that I’ve lived my life thinking oh I’m dark and I’m ugly and then I’m light skinned and beautiful now.

Like Nicole, Shruthi shared how shaving was used in her life as a commonly used method to lighten skin tone:

> You know the fact that I had hair on my skin and I have, like you know I have facial hair, and I have hair all over my arms and all over my legs that's just something that *really* really bothered me all the time, and I would always beg my mom to let me shave or wax it. Just get the hair off of me because I thought it would make me look lighter if I didn't have that hair. It's such a sad thing.

Other participants spoke about skin lightening in terms of how it showed up in skin care treatment. Priyanka shared an experience she went through when she received a facial in India and how that influenced her:

> I mean in India, when you go for a facial, half the time they're just adding bleach, and their trying to lighten your skin, even when I’ve explicitly told them I do not want my face bleached, I just want it exfoliated like please just do your job. So when you're literally having people shove products down your face, that are telling you kind of *(pause)* I don't know, look a certain way or look a different way that's something that I kind of experimented with at some point.

Maryam shared how she views her skin tone after applying sunscreen:

> I noticed myself, I've not even said this out loud before -so it's an internal thought but when I put suncream on my face, I know my face goes a bit lighter and I'm like "Oh, I feel a bit glowy now" and I feel a bit more complete. And it's weird because it's just suncream, I'm just putting it to protect my face but I noticed that difference or lightening almost.

The stories participants shared showcase different methods of skin lightening behaviors that were used, how skin lightening behaviors are pervasive in the South Asian community, and their internal thoughts when they notice how their skin has lightened.

Prominence in Shaping Self/Well-being

Participants reported on how colorism impacted their sense of self, how their emotional/mental well-being was affected, and how they came to embrace themselves and their skin tone. Three subthemes emerged out of their narratives: Negatively Shapes Sense of Self, Emotional/Mental Well-being, and Learned to Embrace Self.

Negatively Shapes Sense of Self

Participants shared how colorism negatively shaped their sense of self particularly their "self-confidence," "self-worth," not feeling "beautiful," and feeling "ugly". Tara, for example, expressed how cultural standards of beauty shaped how she saw herself in terms of attractiveness:

> I feel I've made myself think that I was downgraded like I'm just not where I'm supposed to be, that I'm just here while everybody else who are lighter skin tone are up here a little bit more, so I feel I will never be classed as "pretty" in Indian standards culture because of my deeper skin tone.

Similarly, Nicole shared how she did not feel like she could achieve the cultural standard of beauty that was set and how this emerged in the differential treatment between her and her sister:

> After the ceremony we're having this sort of after party at my family's house, and everyone, was gathered around my sister, and talking to her, and kind of ignoring me and I remember there's this picture of me sitting in the corner just reading a book *(laughs)* because, I don't know, I think it's always just been this concept of beauty that just made me feel like I wasn't beautiful, or I could never really attain that level of beauty

Amira shared how colorism impacted how she viewed herself, evidenced by her expressing the following "It definitely led to a lot of self-hatred, and insecurities especially about being desi because I always felt like when I was growing up, I always felt I was so ugly." In addition to this, she remarked how colorism impacted her sense of belonging to her culture:

> In regards to who I am, I know- I don't think I ever felt Pakistani, and in a way I don't think I will ever feel I'm fully Pakistani either. I always feel there will be a part of me that people will disapprove of whether it's going to be my skin tone, or the way that I have my hair, the length of my hair, or how I talk, and things like that.

Other participants, like Shruthi, discussed not having a sense of self based on their skin tone experiences: "I feel I didn't have a sense of self, I feel I really just did not know who I was, and what my purpose here was, and I just always felt really, really bad for myself all the time." The lack of skin tone representation on TV contributed to how Nikita's view of self was shaped:

> I would watch shows like *Saved By The Bell* - you know the original *Saved By The Bell* and *Full House*, and then I would watch, you know Indian, like our Indian stuff, and it's like everybody's the same color, you know um it, it really- my self-worth really was affected and this caused my trauma later on in my life too.

Nikita continued to share how her view of self has been negatively impacted by colorism but that she has not let it stop her from achieving/engaging in things she wanted to:

> I still have this very bad image looking in the mirror, I wish I could change my skin tone that is something I've always wanted to do. But at the same time, after my spiritual awakening, I have not let it stop me. In fact, I've never let it stop me, if I have to, I'll put on like a lighter foundation but I will do everything that a lighter skin girl has been able to, and I did. I never let it stop me and I- even when I knew I was the darkest girl in the room.

Akshi's sense of self was impacted by how she was perceived by her extended family due to her lighter skin tone:

> I think a massive impact when I was younger in terms of my sense of self, and understanding not what I identify but who I am, because even in my family, my wider family, I've always been regarded as the White child *(slightly laughs)* almost because of skin color like the way I've been brought up, naturally my personality traits even compared to my brother, I'm a lot less, as one would say "cultured" just because of what I've been exposed to and the fact I've never been able to speak Hindi or Punjabi or whatever.

Likewise, Akshi continued to share how her experiences with colorism impacted the way she saw herself and her cultural identity. She shared this specifically in the context of her peers, and what led her to be more Westernized:

> I almost took it, and thought well, you're not gonna accept me so I'm gonna go and you know be almost not more Westernized but as in I took it as like well this is my

> personality trait like, and you won't recognize me for being Indian, I'm gonna go off and just you know be westernized and I'm going to do this and I'm gonna do that.

Participants explain how their experiences of what they understood as colorism affected how they saw themselves in terms of attractiveness and their cultural identity. Some participants described the impact of their view of self on their behaviors. One participant shared how she did not let her thoughts of wanting to change her skin tone stop her from pursuing her dreams. The other participant shared how became more Westernized due to the impact on her sense of cultural identity that the skin tone messages she received had.

Emotional/Mental Well-Being

Participants reported that experiences with colorism caused or were contributing factors to their emotional/mental well-being. "Depression," "anxiety," and "trauma" were commonly spoken of in response to how colorism impacted their mental health/well-being, how it impacted their mood, and how it weaved into their narratives as they spoke about their experiences. Amira shared what led to her feeling depressed and insecure:

> I was very depressed and insecure for a really long time, because I always thought that I was really like- that no one would ever love me, or that I was really unattractive and ugly and no one would want to be friends with me because of that, either. Yeah, it definitely led to a lot of insecurities and doubts, *(small pause)* and it did eventually lead to some bad mental health decline when I was in my mid--teens like around 15 and stuff.

Shruthi shared how attempts to fit in with her White peers made her feel depressed and anxious:

> It impacts my well-being because I was just always sad, I was always depressed, and anxious, on how people would see me and I tried so hard in high school to dress like the White girls, and talk and engage with what my White peers were doing and it was- it's

> silly it sounds so, so silly now, because I've moved so past that. But yeah, it definitely didn't do any good for me.

Nikita and Devika both shared narratives of being traumatized due to colorism, though they experienced it differently. Nikita shared the traumatizing impact her mother's words had on her:

> Listening to my mom put me down all the time that was traumatic you know, because it, it's still with me I mean this is so bad, I waste so much time worrying about this even though, you know it's probably not as bad as I think in my head you know.

Devika shared how seeing her loved ones experience colorism inflicted vicarious trauma for her:

> But just having my own family members being hurt because of it, and having friends being hurt because of it and just being in a community where you need to witness that is, I would say, vicariously traumatizing in some capacities to just know, know that we're always being discriminated based on how we present which is not even in our, in our control.

Present in participant narratives was also how experiences they had with colorism impacted their well-being such that feelings of "anger" "othered" "frustration" and the "internalization" of messages given on colorism emerged. Amira reported that the comments she received because of her skin tone while attending a predominantly White school made her feel othered:

> Cause I was so Brown at the time I felt like I stood out too much from everyone, and yeah, and it invited people to say things like that to me, and I'm like- I think for me, my skin color has always made me feel so othered from, from people when I feel I'm very much a normal person, and I don't, I'm not different from you at all, I'm not different from people here at all.

Aparna shared similar sentiments “I think that on a larger scale, it made me think of myself always as other, whether I was in an Indian space or a White space right.”

Participants like Akshi shared feeling othered in a different way to Amira and Aparna and expressed frustration at being misrepresented:

> I say like externally to be fair it's almost the fact that- sometimes I get frustrated that I get misrepresented because people don't think I am Indian, so they're quite happy to make comments about people of color but I’m kind of sitting there being like “Well like, I'm of color” *(laughs).*

Naomi shared how she felt anger and triggered when hearing colorist comments:

> I don't like that it makes me wanna choke anyone who says anything to my niece or my sister about their skin color. I get really angry about it. It's a bit of a trigger for me….. It's definitely a sensitive topic, and I do get angry at people when I hear any kind of colorism comment.

Shruthi reported on how seeing boys she went to school with being attracted to lighter skinned South Asian women and White girls and how this experience caused her to internalize certain messages on her skin tone:

> It really crushed me because a lot of these boys, I found, were always attracted to either White women or really light colored like people of color, and I think that is genuinely something that I internalized in myself. Even though, like I said, I recognize my privilege, I am a lighter colored Indian, but there are people with lighter skin tones than me that are still Indian and like, why were they always the girls that got the guys right like? Why was it always the White girls that got the guys and I feel that that's something that I internalized because I’m not White enough or my skin color is not white enough

Unlike the examples noted above, some participants shared that their experiences with colorism *did not* impact their mental health, well-being, or mood. For example, Maryam shared:

> It's never got to the point where I felt it's affected by mental health. I think there are other things that affect my mental health more like stress, or juggling too much, but none of those have ever been contributed to by colorism so yes, probably not for me.

Maryam went on to the explain what may have led her to not letting those experiences impact her mental health and well-being:

> But I think for me- that's why I think I'm always quite naive to it but I don't let it get to me or don't overthink, I don't dwell on it too much, whereas I know friends who have had a similar situation to me like this Namaste thing that I mentioned to you it's made some of my friends, really quite angry. We talked about it for a very long time but it just hasn't affected me in the same way.

For Aisha, colorism did not impact her mood severely however, envy was evoked for her as a young girl when she would see a lighter skinned woman:

> I don't think it's really affected my mood too much. I think, you know, when I was younger, I think it would definitely- if I saw another woman or another girl who is my age, who is very, very fair, and also attractive, I think it would make me feel a little kind of a little envious, you know. Not that I would do anything bad to anybody but just kind of feels like, oh okay, like here's another person where she's been blessed and born with this very fair skin tone, and with this in these incredible looks and she just has an easier life and better life than me *(laughs)* so that might be the extent of how it might have affected my mood.

Priyanka shared how her mood was not altered by colorism at the time the experience occurred but when reflecting later on, on the experience, she would recognize how it may have impacted her mood:

> It's never been in a more overt way I think it's always just been kind of subconscious where later on I've probably reflected on something and I was like "Oh, okay, that's why I was probably feeling like this" or felt a certain way. I don't think it's necessarily been something that's triggered a mood change per se in a certain situation, but it's always been in a reflective manner. It's kind of like a slow burn essentially.

Participants' own understanding of their colorism experiences, whether it occurred to them personally or seeing their loved ones encounter it, had a significant impact on their mental health and well-being. Some participants shared how their mood or mental health was not negatively affected by the experiences they recounted. However, different emotions for them were evoked or they recognized later that their mood might have been influenced by a specific experience.

Learned to Embrace Self

Despite colorism having a profound impact on the sense of self and mental/emotional well-being of participants, many spoke to how they feel about themselves and their skin tone now has changed. Participants spoke to how they used to see themselves and how they now see themselves, including naming what helped them get to this point.

Tara recounted how she used to question her skin tone and ethnic identity but now has embraced it:

> Before I think it was a horrible thing, like oh "Why am I this color?" "Why am I Indian?" It would have been so much better if I was a different skin tone, I wouldn't be treated the way that I was but now I feel it's so different now. I'm embracing it a lot more and being

> proud of it. I'd rather be this than to be somebody who's judgmental especially with everything that's going on with America right now.

Nicole shared "regret" at how she looked at herself when she was younger but how differently she looks at herself now:

> It made me feel, yeah, it made me feel a lot stronger in my sense of the way I perceive myself now, and like it's, it's so corny but sometimes I look in the mirror, and I'm just like "Oh, you're so beautiful!" And then I *(laughs)* I leave the bathroom and I go about my day. I've come a long way from looking at myself in the mirror in high school versus looking at myself in the mirror now.

As Priyanka expressed her own "journey of like getting shit from people that you love" and how she had to deal with it in a "slow but painful way," she also spoke to being at a place now where she is happy with herself:

> It's nice to kind of be able to get through all of that, and be like, Okay, cool f*ck you all, anyway, I'm happy with who I am and this is - I don't care about what you say anymore. So it's been kind of nice that way to come into my own and be at this point."

A commonly cited word that emerged in how participants embrace themselves now is "resiliency" and "strength." To support this, Shruthi reported the following:

> I'll take that back, it didn't do any good for me in the moment but now I feel I'm a stronger person because of it. I feel like if I didn't go through that I wouldn't have been as courageous and strong and just so confident in who I am, and where I come from. If I hadn't faced that now obviously that doesn't mean I'm happy cause I'm not *(slightly laughs)* I definitely wish I grew up without colorism and racism affecting every part of my life but um you know there's one bright side that I can find.

Through embracing themselves, participants also began to embrace their skin tone. Reshma shared her experience of the first time she felt comfortable in her skin tone in reference to the dress she brought in as her artifact to the interview:

> I've had it since eighth grade it's been a really long time, and I guess I brought this dress in because I moved to the United States when I was in sixth grade, and was the second Indian in middle school, so there were two of us and I was the only other one, and I guess it was never- never felt pretty or just didn't feel like I was a part of anything in middle school considering my skin tone and when I put that dress on for the first time that's when I felt like "Alright, everything's great" that was the first time that I felt not completely comfortable, but maybe starting to feel comfortable with my color in a country where I'm considered darker skin tone and it's not really looked at as attractive sometimes.

Nikita shared how her experience with colorism has "definitely made me be an advocate" and has led her to embrace her skin tone:

> So now I embrace my tone, and I embrace the colors that were beautiful on this tone, and I embrace when I get a compliment for my tone these days, you know sometimes I do like you know, like in America, I get compliments for my tone and other countries I visited I've gotten compliments.

Rishika shared how she used to desire being lighter skinned but how she is happy with her Brown skin tone:

> I was never like I don't want to be Indian but I wanted to be lighter skinned definitely and now I'm like no I feel good being Brown you know, where people can tell that I'm a person of color. For me that's very important and I don't see it as something to feel bad about.

Amira spoke about her acceptance of being out in the sun and her skin getting darker through the photo collage she brought in as her artifact for the interview:

> Now, I'm okay with being out in the sun and getting dark, I like being my natural color, because the thing is, I know my own experience is I'm quite fair skinned for a Pakistani but to other Pakistanis, to some of them I might seem too dark, which is crazy to me *(laughs).* But yeah, so that was just me coming to terms in fact, I'm okay with being dark, and like doesn't bother me as much as it used to.

Embracing themselves and their skin tone supports the tenet of loving oneself that is encompassed in womanism (Walker, 1983). Womanist theory posits that loving oneself is an act of resistance, particularly in a culture that is dismissive of one's existence (Bryant-Davis & Adams, 2016). In a culture where darker skin is devalued, the act of participants embracing themselves and their skin tone is one that is radical (Bryant-Davis & Adams, 2016).

Learned to Navigate Colorism Experiences

Participants shared what helped them to navigate their experiences with colorism. Within this theme, four subthemes emerged that participants spoke to: Self-Directed Support Strategies, Reliance on Formal Supports, Friendships as a Source of Support, and Seeking Support in Others.

Self-Directed Support Strategies

In answering what participants used to navigate their experiences with colorism and weaved throughout their narratives in the interview, various strategies helped participants process or cope with their colorism experiences. Strategies named were either protective or maladaptive in nature but ultimately, were beneficial in coping with their experiences. For instance, Nikita recounted how she used humor as a protective mechanism:

> So my whole life yeah and even like- among my friends who were all lighter, they were from different regions also but among all my friends, like I- it became a joke just that would come from me, you know, and I did it to make sure I wouldn't- it was kind of a trauma response. I did it to make sure that nobody else could put me down.

Reshma shared her "wall of steel" as a protective strategy that helps her navigate experiences with colorism. She explains her rationale for doing this:

> Learning how to separate color from my entire being, and just making sure that I'm excellent at my job or whatever I'm doing cause that kind of compensates for how they treat me so putting up that separation and just having like a wall around me helps navigate these things because I don't let people get too close, and if they aren't too close then they can't hurt me that's the way I look at it.

Nicole shared how she used academics as a strategy to navigate the emotions that were evoked for her when she had experiences that did not make her feel pretty:

> I guess I would just channel it into something that people could praise. If they won't praise me for my beauty at least they'll praise, me for my smarts like oh "Nicole got into a specialized high school, she's so smart" and that made me happy…..I felt my grades were something that was within my grasp. I can control my grades versus my concept of beauty at the time was being fair skinned and being not hairy and so when it came to that, I was just like I don't know how to control that.

Aparna shared how she uses disconnection as a strategy and named how it is "maybe not a positive strategy but that is a strategy":

> I do think that I disconnect a little bit more as soon as I hear things around the color of my skin or my appearance in any way. I'm gonna just, give less importance to this word,

> I'm not gonna pay as much attention to it, I'm gonna not engage with them, and I think that sometimes that means that you cut a conversation short and you dialogue less with the person and I think that, that's really sad in some ways because that's how we connect with other people and build relationships with other people and I think that I'm quicker to kind of not do that.

Positive strategies were also named by participants with Tara and Shruthi naming "social media" as one that helped them get through, primarily following accounts that cater to the South Asian experience and Brown women who talk about colorism. For Naomi, learning about her cultural background shifted how she viewed her identity: "I think the more I started trying to understand my culture from a historical perspective, it made me feel better about where I'm from, and it didn't make me dislike being Malayalee." Rishika shared how self-reflection has been a useful tool for her to navigate her experiences with colorism: "I've been really sort of investigating in my own ideas about color and attractiveness and the anti-Blackness side of it. Really questioning that in myself."

Although there was a mix of protective, maladaptive, and positive coping strategies participants used, these were strategies that helped them or continue to help them navigate their challenges experiences with colorism.

Reliance on Formal Supports

A recurring subtheme that emerged was participants sharing that they have never received formal support for colorism. Formal support here was primarily discussed in the context of therapy. Statements such as "you know, I don't know if I received a whole lot of formal support" were narrated often by the participants. Participants like Nikita however, shared how thankful she was to discuss her experiences for the first time in a therapeutic space that the

current study offered: “I could never talk about this. I could never bring this up. Never. Until now, thank you!” Those who did attend therapy shared that they were able to discuss and process colorism experiences while others either could not or did seek counseling for colorism. Participants did not explicitly state why they were unable to discuss colorism in therapy. Maryam shared how beneficial her therapist has been in navigating experiences of colorism:

> I go to weekly therapy sessions and I found that even though the therapist I work with is of a White background or White color, she's quite open to learning about different- I'm using color and culture in like inter-interchangeably, I’m using them interchangeable but I think it's because of the fact that she's so open to learning about culture, it’s never stopped me from talking about color in our sessions, and that can often be quite valuable.

Reshma shared that she received no “institution” support and did not experience support in therapy either: “None of my therapists understood that either. They were all- yeah, none of them were able to even ask the right questions to help me navigate the relationship, and how to go through situations that way.” Aparna shared how she has “not received any formal supports” and noted her uncertainty in bringing up colorism when she attended therapy. Additionally, she shared her confusion at the question of formal supports:

> I don't know that I would ever even bring up colorism. Unless that therapist was Indian, I don't know that I would ever even bring that up and you know for the sake of your narration I’m very confused right now, I don't even know what formal support for colorism mean *(laughs)* yeah, that's, that is beyond me so I don't know.

The absence of formal support and the belief that it may not ever exist for colorism was expressed by Amira:

> I've personally never seen any kind of formal support for anyone like us, especially in regards to colorism, and I don't think they ever will make they ever will be one, and if there is, then I hope I find it because I'd love to reach out to them if I need to but also just especially give them to my friends who need them the most.

Numerous participants voiced that they have not received formal support for colorism. Formal support was largely spoken to in the context of therapy and participants had differing perspectives on how it played a role in their issues of colorism.

Friendship as a Source of Support

Friendships/peers were largely cited by participants as a source of support for them. It was expressed how it was their friends or peers either at specific time in their life or presently that have helped them navigate their challenging experiences with colorism. Akshi shared the power of having peers who understand and support you:

> I'd say when I was younger, I actually had two really close Asian friends that were at the same school as me but similarly, they didn't they weren't pocketed in the group of Asian kids, and I feel like one of the things that's not recognized is the amount your peers can support you. I know that when these comments were made, my friend would just be like, oh "Their obviously just, you know, deflecting something that's going on with them," it kind of gave me faith that obviously I had Asian friends that were obviously my background, and they were the same to me.

Reshma also shared how impactful it is to be around those who are people of color and understand cultural nuances:

> There have been times where I felt great about being the color that I am and that's unfortunately been in groups of color so I'm either with Black people or Brown people

> and they understand and there's just like a sense of comfort that comes from that and that's when my mood's been great cause people understand certain cultural connotations, the humor is so different, and it's just easier to sit with them and not have to worry about saying something that might impact someone else.

The finding speaks to the importance of seeking support in community that emerges in womanism (Sanchez-Hucles, 2016). Friendships/peers helped participants survive in their challenges with colorism (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Díaz, 2016) and made them feel seen and safe.

Seeking Support

Seeking support from others and community was commonly reported by participants. Finding people who "make you feel good," who don't make "you feel any less or separate from everyone else," and finding "one or two other people to be able to kind of share with that lightens the load" were statements described by participants. Amira acknowledged the difficulty in navigating colorism when it is prevalent in the community and shared the following as a recommendation for those experiencing colorism:

> You know if your own community in your old culture is discriminating against you, based on your skin color, find a community and culture that doesn't do that even if that means making friends and marrying somebody outside of that. If that's what you have to do, then do it. I would say, find the people who are not discriminating against you.

Shruthi shared how similarity in experience can be helpful when seeking support to navigate colorism:

> I would recommend them to one obviously seek support whether that's from other people of color um you know they might have experienced very similar things, even though they

might have not readily talk about it with you. I would just say, know that you're never alone. A lot of situations can feel isolating and can lead people to feel like they're the only ones that will ever go through this.

The narratives demonstrate the importance of community in navigating challenges with colorism and speak to how integral this was for participants themselves in their own experiences. The significance of community is integral to womanism such that community support fosters connection between women of color, and it is a method of fighting against oppressive systems that serves as a tool for healing (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Díaz, 2016; Sanchez-Hucles, 2016).

Prominence in Shaping View of Others

In addition to the strategies participants used to navigate colorism, they also described how their personal experiences with colorism have instilled qualities in them that have shifted how they see others and the world. Participants recounted how their colorist experiences have made them more of an advocate on issues of colorism. As such, two subthemes emerge: Changed View of Others and Advocating for Others.

Changed View of Others

Participants used words such as “awareness,” “empathy,” “appreciation,” “openness,” and “empower” within their narratives when sharing their experiences of what colorism has taught them. Devika shared how her increased awareness has impacted how she shows up for her clients and those she meets:

> In terms of perceiving colorism and perceiving others, I think I am, I’m just more aware of how it impacts people and their experiences and their lives based on which context, they are obviously…… because I have so much more awareness about it, because I’m so

> much more educated about it, and I understand it much better now. I am able to show up for my clients more. I'm able to broach those things with people I meet.

Amira discussed her biases against darker skin individuals and how as she got older, she "learned that your skin color literally does not matter at all" and it "does not make any impact on who you are as a person." As she shared this, she expressed how she views the world now and displayed honesty in how her biases are still present:

> Like I've started to view the world more kindly and more favorably, and the thing is, I have had better relationships with people and better friendships once that I, once I work through that bias and I'm not gonna lie even now, sometimes those old biases they're still there. It's either that initial first reaction that you have, and then you you're like, "Wait a minute, why did I think that? I don't actually believe that" you know, and I still have those biases and I still work through them.

Aparna shared that her experiences with colorism has made her challenge the messaging passed down to her about darker skin and how this has allowed her to appreciate darker hues:

> I think that I have had to grow to appreciate darker skin tones, I don't think that that is something I naturally was inclined to do right. That I was, I was taught that if you're darker you're less attractive, and that's something that I had to like de-program in myself, so that I could be like she is beautiful for who she is.

"Openness", "sensitivity", "solidarity", and "appreciation" were other terms used to describe how participants have changed the way they look at those with different skin tones to them and their experiences.

Advocating for Others

In response to recommendations that participants would provide for those experiencing colorism and in their narratives of how colorism has changed them, participants spoke to advocacy. Participants shared how going through their own experiences with colorism and seeing others experiences with it made them more of an advocate. Naomi shared how her advocacy for speaking up about colorism emerged:

> I've noticed I do get really angry when I when I hear colorism, because it just- I know what it was like, and I can't imagine for people who are definitely deeper skin, how much more it affects them. So yeah, it's definitely changed me in a way for sure I definitely speak up more about that kind of topic.

Nikita shared advocacy in the form of empowering the next generation:

> I would probably share my stories and tell them how lucky they are because they're entering or hopefully like a younger gen who can hear these stories and know that they're in a world that's not as bad, that is shifting. And I would motivate them to hopefully you know like use this so that they don't repeat that same thought or mindset or perspective, like the limited perspective.

Akshi shared how she would advocate for those experiencing colorism:

> Acknowledge pain, acknowledge discomfort or acknowledge resentment. Reinforce the idea that they are not to blame and address the systemic factors that play a role in perpetuating these comments that trigger insecurities.

Advocacy is a central component in womanist literature as womanists seek to cultivate change and strive for the wellness of their communities (Bryant-Davis & Adams, 2016).

Speaking up, storytelling, and dissuading blame away from the individual who is experiencing colorism demonstrate ways in which advocacy was demonstrated by participants.

Summary

The chapter illustrated the themes and subthemes generated from interviews with 14 South Asian women. Through a CRT and Womanist lens, the findings demonstrated how Whiteness and loving oneself and others were at the forefront of the experiences narrated by participants.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The following chapter reviews how the research questions of the study were addressed through summarizing the findings illustrated in the previous chapter. The overarching ideas are discussed and connected to existing literature and the CRT and Womanist framework. The chapter also highlights the limitations, implications, and directions for future research.

Discussion of Findings

The current study sought to understand the lived experiences of colorism for South Asian women, including how it impacted their mental health and well-being. The rationale for the study emerged from a gap in the literature on colorism. Although there is existing research to demonstrate how colorism impacts South Asian women (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016), the research on how colorism impacts the mental health and well-being of South Asian women is limited (Prusaczyk & Choma, 2018). The research questions that guided the study were: How do South Asian women experience colorism? How do South Asian women's understanding of their colorism experiences shape their mental health/well-being? The subsequent sections highlight the core areas underlying the themes that emerged from interviewing 14 South Asian women. The core areas are: Societal Beauty Standard, Sources of Skin Tone Hierarchy, Understanding Colorism Experiences, Changed View of Others, Sense of Self, Emotional Well-being, Loving Oneself, and Strategies to Cope. The section illuminates the core areas through the two research questions.

Research Question: How do South Asian women experience colorism?

The first research question encompassed four overarching areas: Societal Beauty Standard, Sources of Skin Tone Hierarchy, Ingroup and Outgroup Colorism, Changed View of Others.

Societal Beauty Standard

Research highlights how skin tone is one of the defining features of what is deemed beautiful, such that lighter skin is typically associated with attractiveness, positive reputation, and value (Hill, 2002; Lemi & Brown, 2020). In South Asia specifically, skin tone is a marker for attractiveness where the desired skin tone is light or fairer skin (Ramasubramanian & Jain, 2009). Participants narratives supported this notion as many of them shared the understanding that fairer or lighter skin is the beauty standard set by society. The understanding emerged from the messages they heard from those in the South Asian community, which consisted of complimenting/praising fairer skin, endorsing behaviors to avoid getting dark, and associating darker skin with unattractiveness. The finding is consistent with the historical underpinnings of how colorism emerged in South Asian when whiteness was positioned as superior (Mishra, 2015).

Fairness was maintained, or attempts were made to achieve it, through skin lightening behaviors and avoidance of the sun. Within the messages received by participants on lighter skin, was the avoidance of the sun which emerged from preserving fairness. The finding is in alignment with previous research on colorism and exposure to the sun, where African American college students recounted the messages received from family members to avoid the sun for fear of them getting darker (Chen & Jablonski, 2022). In another study by Lunsford et al. (2018), it was found that Black participants in engaged in skin protective measures to avoid their skin

getting darker rather than to protect themselves from risk of skin cancer. To some extent, the finding reflects what was found in the current study where participants shared instances where they avoided tanning because of the ingrained messaging to not get dark.

Skin lightening behaviors emerged as another strategy that participants used to modify their skin tone. Skin lightening was shared in terms of creams, home remedies, shaving, and make-up. While home remedies and creams have been portrayed in the literature as methods of skin lightening (Nadeem, 2014; Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009), the use of shaving and make-up as methods to skin lighten is not highlighted in the literature. Hair removal has largely been attributed to making one feel attractive, groomed, and feminine (Stone et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008) and to the researcher's knowledge, and has not been discussed in skin lightening or colorism literature. Moreover, research on hair removal has primarily been conducted on White individuals and not within communities of color. As such, this is a novel finding in the researcher's study and engenders further scholarly exploration.

Globally, the use of skin lightening products has been well documented. Although several reasons have been cited for their use, the research in South Asian literature posits the desire for lighter skin to be the commonly cited reason amongst the population (Adbi et al., 2021; Jagadeesan et al., 2021). Engaging in skin lightening behaviors alters the melanin in the skin by reducing it (Yu et al., 2022). The desire to be lighter as the rationale for the use of skin lightening products is consistent with the rationale expressed by participants in engaging in skin lightening behaviors.

Overall, the functions of whiteness that Harris (1993) delineated support the idea of fairness being the standard of beauty in the South Asian community, as conveyed by the participant. Harris (1993) wrote that whiteness exercises its right to exclude those who are not

deemed White from accessing the privileges tied to whiteness, and because whiteness is not transferable, it is highly valuable. In the same vein the use of skin lightening to become fairer and avoidance of the sun to not get darker can be used as examples of the Black-White binary that CRT speaks to, where those who are marginalized and fall in-between the binary can evoke desire for these marginalized groups to identify as White to reap the benefits awarded to White individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Sources of Skin Tone Hierarchy

A common thread throughout participants stories was the significance of family in shaping their understanding of colorism, particularly in the perceptions of skin tone hierarchy (light vs. dark skin). Family members mentioned were grandparents, parents, uncles, and aunts, with maternal figures being the most notable. The finding supports previous research on how families are an integral source of defining women of colors' understanding of colorism particularly in view of self and others (Wilder & Cain, 2011). For example, colorism literature on South Asians has shown how darker skinned South Asian brides who hold different identities as their spouses (e.g., caste, religion, region) are subject to colorist insults from their spouses' family and community members that create a negative psychological impact on the bride (Kukreja, 2021). Consisted with previous research that have cited maternal figures as being prominent in instilling colorist messages (Davis Tribble et al., 2019; Wilder & Cain, 2011), the current study found that maternal figures, particularly mothers, aunties, and sometimes grandmothers, were identified as the main bearers of colorist messages. The finding aligns with womanist theory which speaks to the role maternal figures play in the well-being of communities and families, a central aspect of the theory (Comas-Díaz & Bryant-Davis, 2016).

Family were not the only sources cited by participants as bearers of messages associating darker skin with unattractiveness and lighter skin with beauty. Peers too were referenced in the stories participants shared. Classmates and boys comprised the peers that participants spoke of who contributed to their understanding that darkness was devalued. The finding aligns with existing research that demonstrates how peers have contributed to the messages Black women have received on skin tone particularly on perceptions of a desire for lighter skin tone (Davis Tribble et al., 2019).

Ingroup and Outgroup Colorism

Colorism was spoken about in terms of both ingroup and outgroup experiences. However, as participants described experiences of the latter, it was evident that all experiences were discussed in the context of them being the only person of color in a specific setting. Participants shared discrimination, tokenization, and microaggressions they were subject to at the hands of White classmates and peers. This is consistent with previous literature depicting how South Asians experience microaggressions and targets on their racial/ethnic identity in classroom settings (Unni et al., 2022). Although, these experiences were more race-based, they were understood and described by participants as colorism. Although racism and colorism hold similarities due to their colonial roots, it is important to note that while racism is concerned with ethnic/racial identity, colorism is focused on skin tone (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018; Hunter, 2007).

Participants were aptly able to identify their ingroup experiences as colorism as they described skin tone comparison experiences with lighter skinned South Asians and how comments received on their skin tone made them feel like they did not belong within the community. However, due to the proximity of colorism to racism, it is possible participants have understood colorism to mean the same as racism in their inter-racial dynamics. Additionally, it is

important to consider the context of where participants were geographically located as issues of race are more visible compared to colorism. For instance, participants who only lived in the United Kingdom and United States were more likely to speak to racist experiences despite expressing it as colorism. Moreover, it is possible that in these experiences with White perpetrators, aspects of colorism were present given that all participants shared these experiences as occurring because they were darker than their peers. Nevertheless, this is a novel finding in the colorism literature as it demonstrated how the South Asian diaspora make sense of colorism when it occurs inter-racially.

As a result of the messaging participants received on the skin tone hierarchy both from ingroup and outgroup experiences, internalized anti-blackness was present. Receiving the message that darker skin was devalued and lighter skin was beautiful supports the anti-black narrative that exists in South Asia where white/lighter skin is associated with beauty and power and dark skin is associated with being ugly and inferior (Khanna, 2020). Internalized anti-blackness manifested in this study as the fear of getting darker, preference for lighter shades, viewing darker skin people as less than. Anti-blackness has been defined as the dehumanization and rejection of Black people and what constitutes Blackness (Costa Vargas & Jung, 2021). Scholars have proposed that within North America, antiblackness is ever present in South Asian communities (Upadhyay, 2019). In accordance with CRT, the finding symbolizes the Black-White binary where White society pits marginalized groups against one another evoking desire from one or more of the marginalized groups to identify and aspire to Whiteness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The acknowledgement of privilege was also observed as participants either stated one of the following: (a) they have a lighter skin tone which comes with benefits or (b) naming that

although they have a medium skin tone, they recognize that they still have privileged experiences that would differ from a South Asian who is darker than them. Thus, although participants identified as South Asians, their lighter skin tone awarded them privileges and benefits due to their proximity to Whiteness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The awareness from participants that their lighter skin tone awards them privileges aligns with how whiteness is positioned and constructed in society as CRT denotes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Though there is dispute on the underpinnings of where colorism stems from within the South Asian region, the notion that whiter or lighter skin is seen as desirable in South Asian is consistent in the research (Banks, 2015).

Changed View of Others

As a result of their experiences with colorism, participants shared how it impacted their view of others. Specifically, it built their awareness of the issue, led them to appreciate darker hues more, and made them more open towards other cultures. Advocating for others in the context of colorism was shared by participants in terms of calling out/educating those who engage in colorist acts and empowering those who struggle with colorism. The finding is in alignment with Womanist theory as it speaks to being "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (Walker, 1983, p. xi). Womanists are concerned about community well-being and humans overall (Bryant Davis & Comas Díaz, 2016). The use of advocacy demonstrates the determination to fight against the issue of colorism to help those within the South Asian community and beyond. The determination to advocate for the community has not been raised in previous studies on colorism and women of color, making this is a novel finding in the research. However, two participants shared their difficulty in being able to advocate, one due to issues of safety when speaking up

and the other being burned out from having to teach what is and is not right to others. Considering that advocacy has not emerged as a finding in colorism literature, the finding can be attributed to existing research on racism where individuals of color often feel tired of having to speak up and often do not feel safe to do so, a phenomenon referred to as racial battle fatigue (cite).

Research Question Two: How do South Asian women's understanding of their colorism experiences shape their mental health/well-being?

The second research question encompassed four overarching areas: Sense of Self, Emotional Well-Being, Loving Oneself, and Strategies to Cope.

Sense of Self

Participants shared narratives of having low self-worth, feeling ugly or not feeling beautiful, and lack of self-confidence. Self-esteem explored in colorism research demonstrates that women of color who are medium or darker skin are more likely to report lower levels of self-esteem (Abrams et al., 2020; Telzer & Vazquez Garcia, 2009). However, contrary to studies such as Thompson and Keith (2001) where lighter skinned women of color had higher levels of self-esteem, the current study found evidence to suggest otherwise. One lighter skinned participant shared how her sense of who she was, was impacted because she was viewed as the "White" child in her family and experienced teasing and exclusion from her South Asian peers due to her lighter skin tone and "Westernized" upbringing. The finding supports research by Hunter (2005) who found that lighter skinned women of color may have to prove they belong to their ethnic community and are ostracized from their own community if they are not ethnic enough (e.g., not speaking one's mother tongue). Such nuances may explain results conveyed by

Mathews and Johnson (2015), where self-reported skin tone did not have an impact on the self-esteem of African American women.

Emotional Well-Being

Emotional well-being was portrayed by mental health concerns that resulted from the participants' experiences such as anxiety, trauma, and depression. Indeed, previous research has shown that the depression and anxiety levels increased because of colorism (Alexander & Carter, 2022; Thompson & Keith, 2001). Additionally, the finding expands research by Prusaczyk and Choma (2018) where authors found that depression levels increased for Asian Indian women as skin tone surveillance increased. However, a novel finding that emerged from the current study was trauma. Although scholars have proposed how traumatic stress reactions can be stimulated due to colorism experiences (Landor & Smith, 2019), the model was conceptual in nature. The finding that participants were traumatized due to their experiences with colorism supports the skin tone trauma model that was proposed by Landor and Smith (2019).

Participants spoke to other emotions that were evoked for them due to colorism, including anger, frustration, resentment, shame and feeling othered. Shame has been brought forth in colorism literature yet, the context in which it has been highlighted has been in regard to one's use of skin lightening behaviors (Saraswati, 2012). Although these feelings have been expressed in research exploring individuals of colors' experiences in various contexts (e.g., academia; Han et al., 2021), there is no research depicting similar expressions of feeling/emotion in colorism literature at large. Of note, a novel finding that emerged from the study was that some participants shared how their mood or mental health has not been altered or impacted as a result of colorism. Although one participant explained further that her ability to not overthink or let situations get to her protected her from letting these experiences impact her mental health, the

other two participants did not share reasons for why this may have occurred. To some extent, the findings elicited from the study support previous research that has shown skin tone to not have an impact on the relationship between discrimination and mental health for women of color (Hamler et al., 2022; Keith et al., 2010).

Loving Oneself

Despite the experiences encountered with colorism, participants spoke to how they have come to embrace themselves and their skin tone. The finding reflects research on Black women and their process of learning to embrace their skin tone and their hair (Davis-Tribble et al., 2019). The notion of embracing oneself expressed through participants' narratives that spoke to confidence, comfort, happiness, appreciation, and acceptance, fall in line with the Womanist tenet of loving oneself (Walker, 1983). Lemons et al. (2019) writes that a Womanist is not tied down when she loves herself without the validation of society, which may be the case of the participants in the current study.

Support Strategies

Integral to what aided South Asian women in their journey to overcome their experiences with colorism was friendships. Friendships guided participants in navigating the challenges they encountered with colorism. The finding aligns with Womanist ideology where "sisterhood" is one of the core components (Bryant-Davis & Comas Díaz, 2016, p. 5; Smith, 2009, p. 8). Amongst research on women of color, friendships have been cited as an important source of support (Jackson et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2013). The importance of seeking support in others and building community was conveyed as a recommendation for those experiencing colorism by several participants. Additionally, strategies that were either protective or maladaptive were recounted. Humor, disconnection, putting up a wall, and immersing oneself in academics

reflected the protective or maladaptive nature of the strategies expressed. Positive strategies that were named consisted of social media, learning about their culture, and unpacking the anti-Blackness that presents in colorism. Although there is research depicting how women of color, including South Asian women, cope with discriminatory experiences (Spates et al., 2020; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016), there is little research to date exploring the strategies women of color use to cope with their experiences of colorism (Davis-Tribble et al., 2019).

Some participants discussed receiving formal mental health care to address the lingering impacts of colorism (and perhaps other issues). However, participants generally did not receive therapy for colorism, or they were hesitant to initiate such due to the belief that therapists would not have the capacity to help them navigate such. This is a significant finding from the study as it provides support that counselors may not understand colorism which makes it difficult for them to initiate and dialogue in conversations with clients (Hairston et al., 2018).

Implications

The current study is the first to explore the impact of colorism on the mental health/well-being of South Asian women across the diaspora, and it is the first study to be conducted in the field of counselor education and supervision. The findings contribute to the literature on South Asians and expand on existing literature on colorism.

Implications for Counseling

The current study depicted how the mental health and well-being of South Asian women were affected due to colorism. It is important for counselors to understand how to address issues of colorism in a therapeutic space and what colorism looks like particularly for the South Asian community. Research has documented barriers that exist with seeking therapeutic services, some of which include stigma towards therapy among those who receive therapy, mental health

practitioners not understanding South Asian culture, a lack of South Asian therapists, the belief that counseling is not an active form of receiving help (e.g., no advice, just listening), and the lack of normalization of therapy (Goel et al., 2023; Karasz et al., 2016; Moller et al., 2016). To further expand on this, the current study found that many South Asian women in the study received no support through therapy or did not receive formal support at all. Counselors first need to gain awareness of the barriers South Asians encounter when it comes to therapy. Attaining this understand may allow counselors to see the importance in developing knowledge of the South Asian community while keeping in mind that issues may present differently based on region, upbringing, and personality of the individuals. Encompassed in these issues is colorism and counselors can use the following study to gain an understanding of colorism and how it presents in the South Asian community.

Often, clients of color feel that the burden falls on them to educate the counselor on issues of oppression. In the South Asian community, the values of reverence and non-confrontation, and keeping personal issues within the family (Das & Kemp, 1997), may pose as a challenge for South Asians to initiate conversations on how colorism presents in their counselor-client dyad. Despite efforts to minimize the power differential in the counselor-client relationship, South Asian clients may have trouble discussing colorism in therapy, as research has shown that it is not a topic that often gets discussed within the community (Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016). Day-Vines et al. (2007) define broaching as inviting the client to assess and discuss how the client's identities (e.g., race, class, sexuality, gender, etc.) are impacting their presenting concerns. Broaching facilities openness and safety in the counseling relationship as the counselor takes responsibility to initiate conversations on the influence of sociopolitical factors with clients (Day-Vines et al., 2007). Through broaching, counselors can be the first to

initiate the conversation around colorism to a) let clients know that the counselor is willing to discuss these topics and b) to give clients the space to engage or not engage in conversation around colorism in the therapeutic space.

It is evident from the study that standards of beauty are rooted in fair skin being equated to attractiveness and darker skin being equated to undesirability. Counselors need to understand how the standards of beauty have manifested and continue to operate in the South Asian community. Gaining this understanding will better equip them with discussing colorism with their South Asian clients and effectively incorporate strategies that reframe and empower South Asian women to feel confident and attractive in their skin tone. Elements of relational cultural and womanist therapy may be useful in affirming the colorist experiences South Asian women endure, drawing on the strengths for South Asian women and building rapport for South Asian clients to feel safe in the therapeutic space (Jordan, 2018; Sanchez-Hucles, 2016). Counselors may benefit from providing therapeutic services through a group counseling approach to allow for South Asian women to feel that they are not alone in their experiences with colorism. Support for this idea is shown through previous research on group counseling for South Asian women (Singh & Hays, 2008), where South Asian women who were intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors noted at the end of group that they found the space helpful and if the opportunity arose, would participate in a similar format.

Implications for Training

Although counseling students of color are privy to colorism, there is a lack of understanding of this phenomenon amongst White counseling students (Hairston et al., 2018). The finding demonstrates that colorism is not widely discussed in the counseling profession and those who do understand it are ones who have directly or indirectly experienced in their

respective community. Amongst counseling and counseling psychology programs, the multicultural courses will likely focus on racism however, it is unclear whether colorism is addressed within this topic (Pieterse et al., 2009). For counseling students to be able to address colorism in the therapeutic space, it is imperative that colorism is discussed in the classroom. Thus, it is the responsibility of counselor educators to not only incorporate colorism in the courses they teach but to educate their students on the complexity of the topic (e.g., skin tone viewed differently in different cultures). An approach to assessing students understanding of colorism is through case studies which serves as an experiential and contextualized learning tool that allows students to apply the knowledge acquired in a course to a tangible issue (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). Here, counseling students can begin to critically discuss colorism in a clinical context and understand the importance of this issue for marginalized clients they serve.

According to the ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2014, Section F.7.c), it is the responsibility of the counselor educator to integrate issues of multiculturalism into all counseling program courses. However, issues of multiculturalism are not often integrated adequately in the program where counseling students feel that faculty are incorporating it to fulfill a criterion or feel that the onus is on them to be teaching faculty members about their experiences/culture as there is a lack of representation of it in the curricula (Haskins et al., 2013; Hilert et al., 2022). To integrate the issue of colorism not just in the multicultural course but across all counseling courses, counselor educators and supervisors need to cultivate knowledge on colorism and engage in their own personal development for them to see the value in integrating colorism and other issues of multiculturalism into the curricula. A course which colorism can be integrated in is the techniques course in counseling where counseling students can practice the skill of broaching using colorism as a topic in the practical activities (e.g., role

plays; Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2011) utilized in the course. The techniques course, also known as counseling skills course, is foundational in counseling programs (Hill & Lent, 2006). The course teaches beginner counselors knowledge on micro counseling skills to foster client-therapist relationships and allows students to practice them (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2011).

Implications for Research

Colorism has been explored extensively in other communities of color and have produced both quantitative and qualitative studies to portray how colorism manifests, particularly with women of color across cultures. Though there is research to show how colorism presents in South Asian communities, this is the first, to the authors knowledge, to examine how it impacts the mental health and well-being of South Asian women. There is opportunity for the field to continue to invest scholarly interest in the topic of colorism within and outside the South Asian community. For instance, future research can explore how colorism manifests for South Asian men and how it impacts their mental health and well-being. Research has shown the promotion of fairer skin equating attractiveness through advertisements for skin lightening products catered to South Asian men (Mukherjee, 2020), demonstrating that the standards of attractiveness transcend to South Asian men. Thus, it is plausible that South Asian men may experience impacts on their mental health and well-being as a result of these standards. Although participants shared that their mental health, emotional well-being, and sense of self was negatively affected due to their experiences of colorism, many of them shared the lack of formal supports that exist to address colorism or expressed the lack of support they received to talk about it in therapy.

Existing literature has provided conceptual models and approaches for clinicians to use to address colorism (Adames et al., 2016; Crutchfield et al., 2020; Napoleón, 2021; Tummala-

Narra, 2007), however, none of these approaches/models have been empirically tested to examine the effectiveness of addressing colorism in the therapeutic space. Future research can further explore the relationship between trauma and colorism both within the South Asian population and in communities of color overall. While only some participants spoke to trauma in the study, it provides insight into the importance of exploring this in depth. Researchers can examine the applicability of these models/approaches with women of color, including South Asian women, and investigate the effectiveness of addressing colorism with these populations. In the current study, many participants expressed how family members were influential in their understanding of colorism. To better understand how colorism presents in the South Asian family, it might benefit researchers to conduct a qualitative or quantitative study that explores the generational pattern of colorism. For instance, researchers can consider conducting a study where data can be collected across three generations of South Asian women (grandmothers, mothers, and daughters) to examine the similarities and differences in how colorism presents across this lineage. Previous research has studied how African American adolescents experience colorism (Abrams et al., 2020; Dove, 2021), however no research has been conducted on South Asian adolescents. Given that the current study examined what this would look like for South Asian women above the age of 18, future research can explore how South Asian adolescents experience colorism.

Limitations

The current study produced noteworthy findings and contributed to literature on the South Asian population by demonstrating how colorism plays a role in the mental health and well-being of South Asian women. However, the study is not without limitations.

First, asking participants about their self-reported skin tone in the study may have acted as a limitation. Participants were asked to self-report their skin tone where some participants asked if they should rate their skin tone based on perceptions of South Asian community or perceptions of everyone. The researcher shared that participants can self-report based on what felt most authentic to them. Given many who reported medium expressed their own privilege, it is possible that they may have considered themselves lighter skinned when asked how they would rate their skin tone compared to other South Asians. If so, this may have impacted the results differently specifically in terms of their emotional/well-being outcomes where lighter skinned individuals of color have shown to have more anxiety (Bijou & Colen, 2022), a finding that was present for South Asian women who did report that they were medium skinned and acknowledged their privilege.

Second, the sample primarily included South Asian women who were ethnically from India and Pakistan, had limited participants who ethnically represented Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and involved no participants from Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan, and Afghanistan. Although the study did not explore the differences in colorism between ethnicities, having participants representing the latter countries would have yielded robust conclusions on how colorism plays a role in the South Asian diaspora. More importantly, it would have been a first to see these countries be represented in scholarly literature as research on South Asians has largely focused on India and Pakistan, and minimally on Bangladesh (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Sharif & Siddique, 2021; Jensen, 2020).

Third, participants were residing either in the United States and United Kingdom. Although four of the participants reported that they spent their formative years in the Middle East and South Asia, participants had overwhelmingly grown up in the United States or United

Kingdom. Thus, the findings are limited to the experiences of South Asian women living in these two countries. The inclusion of South Asians living in other parts of the world would have allowed for more representation in the sample and further strengthened the data obtained in the study.

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Appendix A

November 1st, 2022

I met with Dr. P today and shared with her what I've been noticing about the two interviews. From both the interviews, I noticed how much overlap there was between racism and colorism in their narratives. There were times when they shared where it felt like they were talking more about racism than colorism. Another thing I noticed was the anti-blackness in their narratives and it made me think how this could be a separate study entirely. Additionally, it was also interesting to see how much overlap there was in their experiences despite growing up in two different countries.

Nov 13th, 2022

In the midst of reflecting, something that has also come in my participants stories of colorism is their struggles with body hair which I found fascinating. I've always known body hair was significant in the community but hadn't thought it to be connected to colorism. It's making me think about future research exploring how body hair and colorism might be connected for the South Asian community.

Nov 18th, 2022

I had my first participant who described herself as light skin. It was really interesting and powerful to hear her experience. Her sharing her story made me think of how we often do not consider how lighter skinned women of color may feel in the community.

Appendix B


RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS
THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COLORISM & ITS IMPACT ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN
ELIGIBILITY TO PARTICIPATE:
• Women of South Asian descent
• 18+
• Personally experienced colorism
STUDY DESCRIPTION:
• 60-90 min Zoom interview
• Artifact of your choice that represents your experience with colorism
ALL INTERVIEWS ARE CONFIDENTIAL & PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY
If interested in participating, please email anambiar@wm.edu
This project was approved by the W&M protection of human subjects committee (phone 757-221-3966) on 10/10/2022 & expires on 10/10/2023

Appendix C

Good morning/afternoon/evening,

Thank you for expressing interest in the study! My name is Aishwarya Nambiar, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education & Supervision program at William & Mary. I am exploring the lived experiences of colorism and its impact on the mental health of South Asian women. Colorism is defined as one's skin color being the basis for discriminatory or preferential treatment amongst individuals of the same race (Walker, 1983).

Interviews will be between 60 to 90 minutes long. You will be asked questions related to your personal experiences with colorism and their impact on your mental health. You are not obligated to respond to all the questions and please know that at any time, you are able to withdraw your consent and to discontinue your participation. Additionally, you will be asked to bring in an artifact that represents your experience with colorism. The artifact can be anything of your choice. The artifact will be addressed in the interview and will not be given to the researcher to keep.

After this interview has been transcribed, the audio/video recording will be destroyed, and the transcript will be returned to you to review before data analysis. You will be invited to participate in the data analysis part of the study but not obliged to do so. You may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. At any time of the study, you can request that the investigator destroy your data or that the investigator exclude your data from any analysis. Your participation will not impact your educational or employment status and will not be discussed in any evaluative manner.

The recordings will be stored in a HIPAA compliant SharePoint folder. Any identifying information from the recording you share with will be removed. We will utilize a pseudonym for your responses and in the results of the study. Additionally, password protected files will be used to keep your personally identifiable information confidential. If the results of the study are published, your name or any identifying information will not be used. Results will be presented in summary form only and a draft will be sent to you prior to publishing. We will make every effort to keep your personal information confidential and conceal your identity throughout the process. If at any point during or after this interview you have any questions about this, please contact lead investigator, Aishwarya Nambiar (anambiar@wm.edu) or supervisor of the investigator, Janise S. Parker (jparker@wm.edu).

To the researcher's knowledge, there are no anticipated risks in participating in this study. However, given the sensitivity of the topic, the researcher acknowledges that there may be heightened emotions as you share your story. The researcher intends to create a secure and open space for the participant to share their vulnerabilities. By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to express your thoughts/feelings on an important topic and help develop a research line of inquiry about this subject matter.

Please fill out one the following:

I have read the document and I agree to participate ☐

I have read the document and I do not agree to participate ☐

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Once you have provided your response, please return this document back to the researcher via email (anambiar@wm.edu)

Appendix D

Name:

Pronouns

Ethnicity (Where in the South Asian region you & your family call home?):

Age:

Occupation:

Religion/Spirituality:

Location (Which country and city are you currently residing in):

Skin Tone (How would you define your skin tone? e.g., very light, light, medium, dark, very dark):

Questions

a. Tell me more about yourself and the artifact you brought in
b. How do you define colorism?
c. What are your experiences (direct & indirect) of colorism?
    1. What has colorism looked like for you in your specific region/country/city?
d. What messages from society did you receive on skin tone/color?
    1. What were the sources of these messages? (e.g., family, friends, religious communities, partners)
e. How have these experiences with colorism impacted your mental health & wellbeing?
    1. How has colorism impacted your sense of self?
    2. How has colorism impacted your mood?
f. What strategies have you used to navigate this?
    1. Tell me about formal supports you've received to navigate any challenges you've experienced with colorism? (e.g., family, friends, counseling, or spiritual support)
g. What recommendations would you give to someone who is experiencing colorism?

Additional follow-up questions:

- Can you give an example of how these experiences have impacted you?
- How has colorism changed the way you see yourself?
- How has colorism changed the way you see others?
- How are you different because of the experience?

Vita

Aishwarya Nambiar, MS, NCC, LPC-R

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

anambiar@wm.edu

Education

Doctor of Philosophy, Counselor Education **2023**

CACREP Accredited

William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA

Master of Science, Clinical Mental Health Counseling **2020**

CACREP Accredited since 2021

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD

Bachelor of Science, Psychology Honors **2016**

University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent

Professional Certification/Licensure

National Certified Counselor (NCC)

Licensed Professional Counselor - Resident (LPC-R)