# Likes, Comments, and Colourism: The Construction of the Self and the Promotion, Maintenance, and Reproduction of Anti-Black Colourism on Social Media

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**Abstract.** Colourism— or the preferential treatment of people with lighter skin tones that occurs within and across racial groups— is a pervasive public issue. However, while colourism has become a social issue that is embedded within social institutions and hierarchies, it has gone understudied in academia. Social media platforms such as Instagram provide users with the ability to like, comment, and share content that they deem entertaining and worthy of attention while allowing these same users to carefully construct and manage a depiction of their self. The growing role of social media in everyday interactions and in the creation of identity becomes troubling when considering the presence of colourism on social media platforms. Colourism is a social issue that effectively reproduces cycles of oppression. Its presence and persistence on social media must be addressed and dismantled in order to establish true racial equity both online and off. By applying contemporary sociological theories to recognize the role of social media in the construction of our identities, examining the history of anti-Black colourism, and considering social media platforms as sites for the reproduction of colourism, this project suggests ways to fully deconstruct colourism on social media and work towards the eradication of the intergenerational harm that colourism inflicts upon Black communities.

**Key words:** colourism, identity, social media, Blackness, darker, lighter

# Introduction

Don't touch my hair.

This is a phrase that Black people are familiar with. I grew up in a suburb of British Columbia where I was one of the only Black people in my elementary school, high school, dance academy, and community. People really wanted to touch my hair. Some people would ask. Some would not. My hair could be up, out, braided, or straightened, and people would always want to touch my hair.

Black hair— like most other symbols of Black culture— is appropriated, fetishized, ridiculed, mocked, and used to deny opportunities to Black people. When Black culture, Black music, Black vocabulary, Black history, Black art, Black speech, and Black activism are appropriated and trivially appreciated, our hair becomes a visible way to reclaim and celebrate our Blackness. I am a mixed lightskin Black woman with type 3B/3C hair; my hair is not very kinky and can be made to look like what has been socially defined as "good (Black) hair". People do not immediately assume that I am Black, but once they make that discovery, I become the subject of allure and interest because my Blackness is light enough to make non-Black people feel comfortable. My lighter Blackness is more accessible to non-Black people and is easier for them to understand and relate to than darker Blackness. My hair and my skin tone are lighter compared to other Black people, but darker compared to other non-Black people. My hair texture and the relative lightness of my skin afford me privileges because I am not too Black, yet I am subjected to discrimination within society because I am Black enough.

It is not the state of being a Black person that is the source of my oppression or my privilege. Colourism— or the preferential treatment of people with lighter skin tones which occurs within and across racial groups— is a pervasive public issue that overwhelmingly harms those with more melanin both in physical spaces and on social media (Craddock et al., 2018). Although colourism is similar to racism, racism creates divisions between racial groups while colourism strengthens these definitions by creating divisions across all racial and ethnic groups. Colourism is, regardless, commonly viewed as a subsection of racism rather than as its own, independent, public issue. Consequently, colourism has been allowed to develop subliminally in physical, social, and digital spaces. Colourism does not only affect Black people or other racialized groups. Colourism— like other social issues— is intersectional in its impacts and produces harm and privilege for all social actors of all skin tones. Anti-Black colourism has created divisions within Black communities by attributing more worth, beauty, prestige, and value to those with a skin tone lighter than a paper bag, which, consequently, encourages discrimination against Black people with darker skin (Mitchell, 2020). Colourism allows me to have experiences and opportunities that are not awarded to Black people who have darker skin than me. At the same time, colourism obstructs me from other experiences and opportunities

because I am not white enough.

As social actors who require interaction and social relationships to survive, people have always pursued social validation from others in order to create and inform their own identities. While social interaction historically took place within the public sphere (e.g., the capitalist marketplace, the industrialized workplace, and spaces dedicated to bourgeois leisure), social media platforms have shifted these interactions into a highly meaningful, yet ephemeral digital space (Trigg, 2001). Social media platforms— such as Instagram— provide users with the ability to like, comment, and share content that they deem important, entertaining, and worthy of attention while allowing these same users to carefully construct and manage a depiction of their ideal self (Kang & Wei, 2020). The management of the self to appear as a whole and socially correct person— in addition to online interactions with others to confirm or deny performances of the self— are key elements of interaction that now take place on social media, and, therefore, on a global scale. Instagram has digitized interaction and has made the dependency on in-person social interactions for the creation and validation of the self less salient. Erving Goffman[1] popularized theories of the self, identity, interaction ritual, and face work (Goffman, 1959). The norms and practices that he once observed and scrutinized now effectively and meaningfully take place on social media.

Social media has facilitated the sharing of knowledge, culture, and expression on a scale that was once thought to be impossible. Through processes of globalization— or the contraction of time and space— social media has become integral to the daily lives and interactions of individuals, collectives, and communities, and has, consequently, become essential to the development and presentation of their identities (Kang & Wei, 2020). The benefits from social media and the technological progress that it has allowed for cannot be underemphasized; it has allowed for the global sharing of ideas, cultures, and methods of thought. Unfortunately, social media platforms also present significant issues, as they are consistently used as a forum to share, expose, and ignite global outrage. The long-term impacts of social media on mental health, youth, globalization, communication, physical health, and society are unknown, as is the use of social media platforms in the construction of oneself (Jairoun & Shahwan, 2020). While the virtues of social media should be noted, social media— such as Instagram— have gained the capacity to meaningfully communicate, maintain, and reproduce social inequalities.

Through likes and comments, Instagram users are able to share their opinions and deem some bodies, identities, and groups to be more valuable than others. As the bodies and identities that draw the most attention, popularity, support, and user engagement are

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[1]Although Goffman made significant contributions to the discipline, his positions of racial-neutrality, removal, and ignorance is a personal problem that I continue to have with him. Sociologists, such as myself, can take his work and apply it to our own, but it is important to recognize that Erving Goffman was a painfully disappointing person, who's continued presence in the sociological canon signals immense white, socioeconomic, and gender privilege.

often white, homogenous, and heteropatriarchal, social media becomes problematic as it is used in the maintenance of colourism. Through social media, certain characteristics are socially constructed and reified as desirable, good, and virtuous, and this narrow stratification ostracizes those who are unable to fit into binary and homogenous categories. The deep entanglement of social media with the creation and performance of the self should draw critique and perhaps, even be a cause for alarm. Many social media platforms including Instagram (as well as Facebook, Tik Tok, and Twitter) have faced problems with body image, beauty standards, mental health, and the maintenance of social harm (Aalbers et al., 2019). Eurocentric conceptions of sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicity are all very present on social media, especially on platforms that are based on the sharing of images like Instagram. If social media is effective at maintaining social inequalities such as colourism, social media presents a threat to users with darker skin.

This thesis provides theoretically informed research into the history of colourism, the construction of identity, and the role that social media plays in the maintenance of both. While this thesis does not engage directly with quantitative, empirical, or qualitative methods, this work is necessary and meaningful; it seeks to fill a notable gap in the current sociological canon and draw attention to a social issue that has gone markedly understudied. The interconnected relationship of these three themes will, therefore, be assessed through an argument informed by historical methods and contemporary sociological theory. The questions guiding this thesis are as follows: Does colourism influence the construction of online identities? How might social media affect the construction of the self? How does social media reinforce colourism? In what ways does colourism on social media harm people with darker skin?

By examining the presence and the implications of anti-Black colourism on Instagram, this thesis aims to understand a largely overlooked social issue. It is academically and socioculturally important to make social media platforms such as Instagram more accessible, anti-racist, and safe, regardless of the skin tone and colour of its users. Colourism is a relevant, harmful, hateful, and derogatory social issue that effectively reproduces cycles of oppression. Its presence and persistence on social media must be addressed and dismantled in order to establish true racial equity both online and off. By examining the history of colourism, applying contemporary sociological theory to recognize social media in the construction of our identities, and considering social media platforms as sites for the reproduction of colourism, this project will identify the most effective ways to fully deconstruct colourism on social media and work towards the eradication of the intergenerational harm colourism inflicts upon Black communities.

# Colourism: History, Theory, and Present-Day Effects

Colourism targets identity by challenging and privileging certain presentations of Blackness over others; colourism strengthens divisions across and within groups and has played a key role in the institutionalization of oppression, discrimination, and prejudice for Black, Indigenous, and non-white people. The implications of colourism are pervasive and harmful, yet there has been little research on the history of colourism, its presence in technological spaces, and as a force for social stratification. Although there is little scholarship on colourism, much of the existing literature works to confirm the harmful effects of colourism on non-white groups and its effect in the maintenance of social hierarchies and cycles of oppression. The negative implications of colourism are ubiquitous and dangerous, thus the history of colourism and its continuation into the present day makes colourism a social issue worthy of immense scrutiny in both academic and non-academic spaces.

Mitchell (2020) provides an excellent discussion on the history of colourism and the practices of skin lightening and whitewashing that it would go on to produce. Mitchell writes that "colourism, interracial and intraracial racism" are heavily based in American enslavement where white slave owners would rape enslaved Black women (Mitchell, 2020). The children would have one white parent and one Black parent and would gain privileges over other enslaved Black people because of their lighter skin. The resulting division between light and dark enslaved Black people is what is seen as the basis of colourism by many scholars, as "some light skin tone house Negros [sic] began to look down on the Black dark skin tone field Negros [sic]" (Mitchell, 2020). This idea of a "better than Black elite status" (Mitchell, 2020) is a racist construction heavily informed by colourism that still exists today, where some Black people will look down on other Black people for being the "wrong" type of Black person (Kendi, 2019). Although colourism has been informed by a variety of events across history, the role of colonialism and enslavement in the perpetuation of colourism is fundamental.

Mitchell (2020) continues that after the Civil War, divisions between Black people continued; lighter Black people would "establish their own clubs, churches, and other organizations, known as the Blue Vein Society. They did not let dark skin tone Black people into their spaces" (2020). The gatekeeping of public spaces after the American Civil War encouraged white people to deny Black people in their entirety, and, consequently, for lighter Black people to deny darker Black people. The paper bag test and the brown door test, for example, were used by lighter Black people to discern which Black people were light enough to enter their spaces (Mitchell, 2020). Mitchell (2020) suggests that these practices occurred largely because lighter Black people began to treat their skin tone as social capital; light skin should be sought after and used to gain privileges that are not afforded to darker Black people. Most notably, Mitchell argues that "colourism would determine if someone were socially accepted based on the colour of their skin. Once a

person was socially accepted, they were considered superior over darker skin tone individuals" (Mitchell, 2020). Mitchell's study confirms the relationship between colourism, identity, self-worth, social acceptance, and how this has effectively divided Black communities for centuries.

Phoenix continues the work of Mitchell and describes the history of colourism as an academically unexplored feminist issue and the effect that it has on women and girls of colour (Phoenix, 2014). They examine pop culture to identify how colourism produces intergenerational harm through its effective mechanisms of division and by constructing colourism as an issue that can only be solved by people of colour. They remind us that colourism exists across ethnicity in Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, South America, Africa, and around the world; the preference and privilege awarded to people with lighter skin is not constrained to Black communities nor to North America (Phoenix, 2014). Phoenix confirms that while there may be "no singular history of colourism," anti-Black colourism can be irrefutably identified in "the preferential treatment given to enslaved people with light skin who were the product of slave master rapes of, or 'relationships' with, [B]lack slaves" (Phoenix, 2014). They recognize that colourism may predate colonialism and enslavement, but that the influence of colonialism on the expansion and entrenchment of colourism is significant (Phoenix, 2014). Phoenix confirms the findings of Mitchell and the long-term effects that slavery has imposed not only upon the institutionalization of colourism, but upon every aspect of society.

Phoenix cites Hunter and Glen to argue that in countries colonized by Europeans, "white skin and associated features were accorded high status and dominance" and that this connotation would continue into the era of segregation and beyond (Phoenix, 2014). After the formal abolition of slavery in the United States, terms such as "passing" and the enforcement of the "one-drop rule" preserved colourism in the post-abolition period. The one-drop rule classified "those with a single drop of [B]lack blood or any known [B]lack ancestry as [B]lack," but many Black people with "skin light enough to 'pass' as white" chose to assume white identities and leave their families during this time (Phoenix, 2014). Renouncing one's Blackness to avoid persecution created extreme divisions within Black communities, and, today, Black people who are "white passing" experience similar privileges and sociocultural separation. The work of Phoenix can be assessed in relation to Mitchell to confirm the complex and widespread origin of colourism and how its presence both institutionally, online, and cross-culturally makes colourism an issue that will be difficult to dismantle.

# Theories of Colourism

Mitchell (2020) provides an analysis of theories that have been used to explain colourism and defines colourblindness and Critical Race Theory. Colourblindness is the belief that differences in race do not have any substantial meaning and should not be acknowledged. Colourblindness assumes that race, shade, or colour do not impact one's experience and that everyone has equal access and opportunity (Mitchell, 2020). Colourblindness, as an ideology, has grown in popularity because it allows for racism to be expressed more easily and with more subtlety. Colourblindness is more covert than previous practices of racism by relying on microaggressions to indirectly perpetuate oppression. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is at the forefront of current anti-racist discourse. In relation to colourism, CRT can be assessed to further explain the relationship between colourism and colourblindness and how this relationship presents problems for Black people with darker skin. CRT exposes how many people, both white and non-white, believe that society has reached a post-racial state and that neither racism nor colourism are systematically reproduced in social structures (Mitchell, 2020). CRT has become a controversial topic in legislation, education, and in anti-Black colourist discourse, particularly in the United States. However, CRT is relevant to the discussion on colourism because the belief that racism and colourism no longer exist is detrimental to the progress needed to counteract and deconstruct racism and colourism.

# Colourism and Skin Lightening

As the previous section makes clear, colourism is not a new issue. It is one that has been deeply informed by historical events to reproduce ongoing privilege and oppression in modern spaces. The progression of colourism over history and its modern-day expression takes many forms, but an example of colourism that illustrates its historical legacy is skin lightening. This is discussed by Craddock, Dlova, and Diedrichs in their examination of how colourism affects adolescents in a variety of modern milieux. Craddock et al. note that colourism can affect people through pop culture, in perceptions of beauty and body image, and in educational, criminal justice, and occupational spaces (Craddock et al., 2018). Craddock et al. explain this disparity through their expert examination of skin lightening, which "has been identified as a serious, yet overlooked, public health and social justice priority due [to] its negative health outcomes and intersection with colourism" (Craddock et al., 2018). Skin lightening is one of the most prevalent examples of modern day colourism and is highly informed by historical and ongoing forms of colonization and imperialism. Although colourism creates negative experiences regardless of gender or sexuality, colourism most commonly harms women of colour. Global standards of beauty have constructed the lighter female body as worthy of more social capital and

beauty capital (Craddock et al., 2018). Lighter Black women are seen as more desirable, sexual, beautiful, and genteel, which leads to significant "prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination as a consequence of colourism" (Craddock et al., 2018).

Craddock et al. further recognize the specific dangers presented by colourism, as skin lightening and colourism threaten "the health, wellbeing and life opportunities of adolescents of colour" by associating their worth with the lightness and darkness of their skin (Craddock et al., 2018). They note how "research indicates that skin lightening product use is also correlated with negative mental health outcomes" and that depression has a significant correlation with skin lightening (Craddock et al., 2018). Craddock et al. conclude that "given the systemic nature of colourism, intertwined with issues of race, sex and class… advertisement regulation, education and employment policy" is necessary to combat the global influence of colourism (Craddock et al., 2018). Craddock et al. confirm the harm that colourism presents to people of colour in modern contexts and illustrate how colourism— as a reified source of social subjugation— has evolved over time and become entrenched into society.

Like racism, sexism, ableism, and other social issues, colourism is embedded within the institutions and structures of societies. Colourism, however, does not seem to be considered as problematic. Colourism works to divide groups, and because the groups that colourism presents the most harm to are groups of colour, colourism becomes an issue of colour and, therefore, one of little consequence to dominant groups. Colourism is seen as a personal problem that only impacts Black people with darker skin, and because colourism has been constructed in this way, it is not deemed an important social issue for dominant social forces to care about or deconstruct. Colourism makes the white European body the ideal body, thus it upholds white supremacy and white matrices of power. Colourism divides by denying and accepting certain identities, and if colourism continues to be disregarded and seen as a "Black" issue, colourism will continue to reproduce harm on generations of Black people. Much of the existing literature focuses on external conceptions of beauty, skin lightening, and self-worth while there is less research on how colourism informs identity. Further, if colourism is present throughout all types of media, and social media acts as a conglomeration for multiple media forms, colourism becomes concentrated in all aspects of social media (Craddock et al., 2018; Laybourn, 2018). By examining the work of scholars to examine the history of colourism, relevant theories, and the modern example of skin lightening, a working definition of colourism— as a large-scale social problem and an understudied concept— has been established.

# The Social Construction of the Self and the Creation of Identity

Social media has become significant not only in the perpetuation of colourism, but as a space for the construction and verification of identity. Websites, apps, and accounts have gained increased importance in our lives and especially among young generations, placing self-worth in social identities and creating new ways to construct oneself. As technological advancements are made and as globalization continues to expand the world, we have sought out new and meaningful ways to present ourselves, and social media has proved effective in this endeavour. Goffman's theory of the self is one of the most notable theories to be developed in the field of sociology, and can therefore present a highly applicable praxis to examine the maintenance of colourism on Instagram and how the constructed reality of the self may be revealed. Goffman's theory of self— in addition to theories of control, face work, performance, interaction ritual, self-management, and symbolic interactionism— can be applied to understand why popular social media platforms are effective at constructing the self and integral to the maintenance of colourism on social media.

Goffman discusses how humans engage in both conscious and subconscious face work when interacting with others in social situations. Goffman writes that we, as social actors, are committed to the maintenance, reproduction, and presentation of our own face in addition to the preservation of the face of others (Goffman, 1967). We are motivated to pursue successful interactions and will modify our behaviour to enact a successful performance. Goffman defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [sic]" (Goffman, 1967). Face work, therefore, suggests the continual reproduction of our self by creating, wearing, and then presenting a mask during interaction (Goffman, 1967). Through interactions with others, the mask we construct and display becomes a conglomeration of the characteristics that we have come to value, and, most importantly, is designed to embody the traits that we assume others will value as well. Notably, Goffman suggests that because we act to maintain a face that must be constantly verified, our face is not ours. Our most personal attribute— our face— is only "on loan to [us] from society; it will be withdrawn unless he [sic] conducts himself [sic] in a way that is worthy of it" (Goffman, 1967). Therefore, face and face work are meaningful social constructions that determine the content, success, or failure of our interactions. As actors who are constantly constructing our own faces, we have the ability to imagine ourselves in the position of others; when a performance of the self proves insufficient, is exposed, or is disrupted, we will act to save the face of others (Goffman, 1967). Most relevantly, a mask will be donned during online interactions as well, with the hope that the intended audience will overlook the more variable and realistic self that lies behind this mask (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Social media, thus, acts as a modern embodiment of Goffman's theory; we engage in a performance that we hope will be successful and it is only through

a successful performance of self that we gain verification from others, such as through likes and comments.

Goffman writes extensively on how the self is a performance of practiced norms, contending that a metaphorical mask is worn during these performances and will become noticeable if the performance is disrupted or challenged (Goffman, 1959). By managing the mask to align with the face, masks will represent our most valued attributes, embody the characteristics we believe others will similarly value, and communicate our self (Goffman, 1959). It would be nearly impossible to discern the true self from what has been imposed upon the self through processes of socialization and repeated interaction. Thus, this mask that can never be fully removed is completely constructed from feedback, reactions, and responses from others; there can be no true core self if the self is constructed externally to the individual.

## Symbolic Interaction

No object— physical, social, or ideological— possesses inherent meaning. The ascription of meaning onto objects is work that is constantly done and redone by humans seeking to give meaning to their lives. Symbols acquire meaning through consensual agreement and the reproduction of shared values, and when acted or oriented toward, develop a symbolic significance that is truly meaningful. The assignment of meaning onto objects establishes valid, influential, and real significance for individuals, collectives, and institutions. The social consensus that was used to originally ascribe meaning onto symbols is forgotten over time, and the meaning behind such symbols becomes seen as innate and permanent; the reification of objectified symbols provides them with their continual meaning. Thus, symbols take on socially constructed yet significant meaning— especially when given collective attention— that can then be mobilized and acted toward to greatly inform the construction of self.

By teaching us that interaction has significant implications for the creation of our self, symbolic interaction theory recognizes the malleable and highly constructed nature of identity. Symbolic interaction is defined by Blumer as processes of interpretation and identification— rather than simply reacting— that occur during interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). Blumer suggests that the interpretation of meaning will greatly inform the nature of human beings and their association and coordination with others; the interpretation of symbols and meaning mediate human interaction (Blumer, 1969). Blumer thus illustrates how symbolic interaction plays a central role in group organization and suggests that society is composed of individuals who have a self and are able to meaningfully deploy it during interaction (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interaction can, therefore, be defined as the collectively-agreed-upon placement of meaning onto inherently mean-

ingless objects— such as like buttons and comment sections— in order to effectively and appropriately construct the self and participate in society.

Symbolic interaction is, evidently, highly correlated to the functional and experiential production, maintenance, and performance of the self. As explained by Goffman, humans do not possess an innate core self; we, as actors in pursuit of a well-received performance must actively construct a mask to symbolize and define our self (Goffman, 1959). Strauss— in his extensive discussion on the transformation of identity through development— expands upon this and recognizes the connection between symbolic interaction, demeanour, and the self (Strauss, 1962). Strauss writes that "...the stability of a given social structure rests largely upon a proper preparation" for the performance which composes interaction (Strauss, 1962). As the self is fully constructed through the social environment and processes of socialization, we are forced to locate and attribute meaning to all aspects of our life in order to feel whole. For example, our skin tone is not inherently symbolic, but as we engage with others and institutions through interaction, we come to construct our self through consensual, agreed-upon meaning; our colour becomes integral to our constructed identity, face, and mask.

Further, Turner— who discusses the function of social roles— provides expert analysis on the importance and influence of roles in the construction of self (Turner, 1978). Turner describes the process of merging to illustrate how the wide array of social roles that we perform become internalized and deeply informative to the self; roles will be compartmentalized, and behaviour will seek to sustain and reproduce this role performance (Turner, 1978). Through agreement, reproduction, and reification, certain elements of social life take on meaning, and through these interactions, come to take on constructed yet meaningful social significance. The meaning provided by symbolic interaction is, therefore, essential in constructing, enhancing, and sustaining the self.

## Interaction Ritual and Impression Management

Goffman suggests that impression management consists of both external and individual constraints which greatly inform interaction. He indicates that the external constraints on impression management are scripts, actors, props, and setting, in addition to the individualized performance frequency, emotional distance, and use of expressive equipment (Goffman, 1959). These constraints are used to control and manage impressions for the individual to perform their best, most accurate, or most relevant self. As the impressions that we provide and distribute are controlled both consciously and subconsciously, the theory of impression management is, therefore, used to define the factors employed to monitor the self we choose to convey (Goffman, 1959). In order to effectively manage impressions, we engage in "...a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery,

false revelation, and rediscovery" to inform and perpetuate our consolidations of face (Goffman, 1959). The impressions we give off on social media will either be verified or dismantled— such as through likes, comments, or engagement— by those we interact with, and may become rigid and fixed to consistently reproduce the portrayal of an accurate depiction. Additionally, interaction rituals will include the significant sources of social solidarity that are used to bind society together; micro-interactions provide us, as actors, with the emotional responses needed to engage in effective interaction. It is through interaction rituals that worth, respect, and meaning are communicated, internalized, and utilized in the construction of the self. Goffman continues that through the repetition and practice of ritual, we are expected to mobilize as self-regulating participants in social encounters (Goffman, 1967). Further, Goffman suggests that we will experience embarrassment or shame when "in wrong face or out of face," which will prompt us to seek face-saving tactics to regain support and validation (Goffman, 1967). When an interaction exposes or threatens our constructed image of self rather than validates our performance as we have come to expect, we feel bad, and will act to repair our inadequate performance; if our face is not confirmed by others, we must work to fix it.

The performance of self is, clearly, a labour-intensive process, and it can be questioned why humans have been conditioned to allocate such effort towards the appropriate and effective performance of self. The answer to this question, as illustrated by Goffman, is deference. Deference is the ritualized elements of conduct that are meant to communicate an appropriate amount of respect during interaction. The accumulation of respect and prestige occurs through exchanges of deference within interaction rituals; touching, eye contact, and avoidance all meaningfully communicate the amount of deference owed and expected. When engaging in interactions, we expect to receive a certain amount of respect, and, conversely, provide an amount of respect to the other. The amount of deference one is awarded will therefore be contingent upon the symmetrical or asymmetrical power dynamics present during the interaction; the internalized expectations that we rely upon establish an understanding of the deference that is to be expected. The exchange of deference communicates status relationships and social hierarchies, thus greatly and meaningfully impacting the construction of self, impression management, face work, and the creation of appropriate masks. As actors on a highly stratified stage, rewards are sought after and behaviour, masks, and impressions are constantly managed, altered, and reshaped to earn the appropriate amount of deference. On Instagram, users are able to cultivate and expand their amount of positive social value by constructing their self in a way that earns them the most positive feedback, verification, and, most crucially, deference. Thus, the exchange of deference in interaction plays an integral role in the communication of status relationships and in the design of social hierarchies.

# The Construction of Identity Through Social Media

As illustrated above, the construction of the self is a complex, important, formidable, and deeply personal experience, and the development of social media platforms may provide people with the tools to do this elaborate work with ease. Instagram was launched on October 6th, 2010, with the goal of sharing pictures and photography on a global scale (Evans, 2018). Since then, Instagram has amassed 1 billion monthly users and is one of the largest social media platforms worldwide (Dean, 2022). Instagram is predominantly a photo and video sharing app that allows users to share pictures, gain likes, and read through comments from their peers or from the broader Instagram user base. Instagram offers a way to refine an online identity and present only the aspects that a user wants to share; users can like and comment on the posts of other users and can post and edit nearly any picture they desire. Comments, followers, engagement, and likes all continue to contribute to the significance that Instagram has gained in the creation of online identities and in the affirmation of oneself. Social media such as Instagram have become commonplace in the daily lives of many, yet the long-term implications of social media on mental health, body image, communication, relationships, physical health, and identity, are quite unknown. Instagram has become a predominant way for people to create an identity that is truly significant and meaningful, and the possibility for Instagram to simultaneously produce harm by providing tools to confirm and deny identities is incredibly relevant to this discussion on colourism.

Kang and Wei provide an excellent assessment of the role of social media in the construction of the self, and employ Goffman's theory to Instagram and "finsta" accounts. A "finsta" (or fake Instagram) is a secondary account held by the same user that is far more casual, realistic, and low barrier when compared to the highly tailored and monitored main account. Kang and Wei suggest that Instagram can be viewed as the front stage, as this space showcases the identity cues that are relevant in fostering the desired self-image (Kang & Wei, 2020). Goffman's theory of the front and backstage— or dramaturgy— is deeply connected to the theory of self; the front stage is where performance takes place while the backstage is where the performance is determined, informed, revised, and most vulnerable. Kang and Wei continue that because "we are highly motivated to present our best self (i.e., one's identity that consists of positive, socially desirable attributes) to other individuals," we will only showcase our controlled front stage in order to have our performances of self verified by others (Kang & Wei, 2020). We aim to present our best self at all times, and social media have created accessible, meaningful, and incredibly effective methods to achieve this.

Social media provides users with the agency to construct their self in whichever way they please. Users make conscious and subconscious choices in order to present a constructed face that we expect will bring the most deference and verification. This is well-discussed by Wiederhold, who analyzes the impacts of Instagram accounts on

teens. Wiederhold suggests that the main Instagram accounts of respondents were highly correlated to "the identity they choose to share with the larger world" and were highly informed by the "pressure to present a tailored representation of one's life" (Wiederhold, 2018). Although the finsta account allowed for respondents to begin the construction of their identities, Wiederhold discovers that "the pressure to receive likes, comments, and followers can culminate in high anxiety and social pressures" that can accurately "detect early signs of mental illness" (Wiederhold, 2018). In comparison to other social media, Instagram presents the most negativity in regard to body image and appearance, and notes that Instagram is particularly effective at setting "unrealistic expectations, feelings of inadequacy, and low self-esteem" (Wiederhold, 2018). Individuals must constantly monitor their presentations of self and judge these presentations based on their mass reference groups. By putting such a large amount of significance into receiving verification from others on Instagram, identity is highly informed by this social media platform, and the performances that are considered desirable (e.g., white, normative) are effectively communicated.

Instagram has notoriously promoted unhealthy body standards through edited and unrealistic images and generally seems to reward and recommend content that features whiteness or white traits. Peterson conducts a study on the experiences of a Muslim Instagram user named Leah, who acts as a social media interrupter by using her influence to facilitate discussions on racism, colourism, body image, injustice, and the marginalization of voices on the platform. Peterson finds that Instagram is home to popular feminism, a branch of feminism that largely caters to and uplifts women who are "white, straight, middle class, and cis-gender" (Peterson, 2020). Leah remarks that while some women and some bodies are celebrated on Instagram, any "expressions that critique patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence are obscured" (Peterson, 2020). The embodiment of white supremacy and imperialism on social media reinforces racist stereotypes of non-white inferiority (Peterson, 2020). Peterson further discovers that on Instagram, the female body is highly surveilled, monitored, reprimanded, and remodelled to align with positive feminism, thus promoting judgements based on white heteronormativity (Peterson, 2020). By identifying and reinforcing characteristics that are seen as good, some performances of self will gain more verification than others. These performances are often limited to whiteness, and thus Instagram contributes greatly to the construction of self and to the maintenance of colourism.

Baumann and Ho— who write about cultural schemas in media— note how all forms of media play a key role in the reproduction of "stereotypical depictions of social groups, including racial groups, that are shaped by dominant cultural schemas of identity" (2014). It seems that old and new forms of media may be intrinsically linked to issues of inequality, and the relevance of social media in our daily lives makes the problems presented by Instagram particularly troubling. Instagram provides users with the ability to comment on, share, engage with, and like content that they enjoy and understand as deserving of praise while simultaneously encouraging these same users to surgically

manage an account that subjectively portrays them in the ways that they desire. Instagram users seek out deference, verification of their presented self, and affirmation of their identity by managing their account and their self in the ways they think are the most valuable. Although users can present their identity as authentically or inauthentically as they wish, Instagram accounts can never be more than a stage upon which identity is performed. Problems arise when the performances and identities of people with darker skin are awarded less deference; colourism will emerge when identities are valued unequally and when social media platforms support this imbalance. If colourism problematizes identity and identity is meaningfully created on social media, social media plays an integral role in the maintenance of colourism, and social media platforms must therefore make sweeping changes to prevent this.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with all sociological research, this thesis contains several limitations. A key limitation of this work is the absence of qualitative or quantitative analysis. The above research has outlined a detailed theoretical and historical argument that can be applied to further studies into this area. Interviews, surveys, or the analysis of data gathered from Instagram will all be important and valuable additions to the existing body of work. Originally, this thesis was going to conduct a survey of Black Instagram users to identify their experiences of colourism on Instagram, and this could be an effective secondary step in my research. This thesis has constructed a persuasive theoretical justification for future research into colourism and identity construction on social media, and hopefully this work can be used to inspire and situate further quantitative or qualitative research.

Another limitation is the scope of this thesis. This research examined the construction of identity through the work of one key theorist (Goffman) with little critique, and is thus limited to one episteme. Further, this research discussed anti-Black colourism in a North American context on Instagram. Colourism can be examined throughout societies and within all social structures, thus the possibilities for research into colourism are expansive. Further, my own position, privileges, and identities as a lighter Black woman from Canada, effects and affects this work in a myriad of ways. Thinkers who do, and do not, look and think like me, must be included and encouraged in the continuation of the sociological study of colourism, social media, and identity.

A notable example of colourism that was not included in this research is colourism in rap music. Misogynoir— a term coined by Moya Bailey and Trudy— recognizes "the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience," and this framework could contribute to a more comprehensive theoretical assessment of colourism (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). Colourism in music that targets Black women is a primary method for the re-

production of colourism outside of social media, and so should be included in future research. Hierarchies of hair texture are also a predominant way for colourism to be identified; Black hair is separated into socially constructed and inherently colourist categories, where "good hair" is defined by straightness and is often viewed as preferable to thicker, kinkier, natural, and coiled hair. Future studies should take into closer account the immense cultural and historical significance of Black hair, the continued cultural appropriation of Black hair, and how hair within the Black community is often used to preserve and reproduce colourism.

In order to make social media platforms safer spaces for darker Black people, education on the history of colourism and on the externality of the construction of the self must occur. Colourism is a vastly understudied phenomenon, thus comprehensive and intersectional education on colourism, its history, and its present-day modalities, must be supported. Colourism on social media contributes to the continued subjugation of historically oppressed groups; it will be necessary to diminish the role of social media in the construction of our self to establish true structural equality. In addition to education, social media platforms must recognize their unprecedented role in the construction of identities and in the mediation of interpersonal interactions. Instagram should seek out information about how colourism is impacting its platform and how colourism's presence is significant and harmful for Black users with darker skin. Several changes must occur in order to make social media more equitable, and this will begin with education on the topic of colourism and the harm it presents to darker Black people.

## Conclusion

By providing a historical overview of colourism, investigating Goffman's theories of identity and the self, and examining the role of social media in the reproduction of colourism, this project has successfully demonstrated the danger that colourism presents to identities on social media. Structural changes and education must be established in order to make physical, social, and digital spaces accessible and safer for darker Black people. The above literary research strongly suggests that colourism will influence the construction of online identities by placing significance into the successful performance of the self and one's online identity. Social media can affect the construction of the self by awarding some with more deference than others and can reinforce colourism through the use of likes and comments. Colourism on social media can therefore harm people with darker skin by devaluing their identities. Social media reproduces, maintains, and perpetuates colourism because colourism is an issue that challenges identity, and identity is significantly informed by social media.

The implications of colourism must be taken seriously and the harm that it presents

to Black people with darker skin should be considered a source of social stratification. It is with hope that this work could be used to inspire future research into the formation of identity and the presence of colourism on social media. The harm that colourism presents to the identities of darker Black people on Instagram is significant, but, hopefully, changes can be developed and implemented to eradicate colourism in all spaces and contribute to the creation of racial, ethnic, and colour equity.

To deny my privilege as a lighter Black person would be to deny the institutional struggle faced by darker Black people. I face discrimination and prejudice because I am Black, but I am privileged by this same Blackness. My experiences with racism should not be dismissed or invalidated, but I must recognize how my lightness awards me opportunities, advantages, and safety that are not awarded to others. Colourism will continue to impact me, Black people, and all other people unless institutionally informed changes are developed to combat it and dismantle it. The deconstruction of colourism both online and off will not be an easy endeavour, but the creation of spaces that validate all identities is an important and worthy pursuit. Colourism will continue to create barriers for some and open doors for others. My skin and my hair will continue to privilege me, and my skin and my hair will continue to disadvantage me. The significance and cultural omnipresence of colourism is extensive and permeative, and by centering the experiences of darker Black people, it is possible that the dangers of colourism— both online and off— can be prevented.

Don't touch my hair.

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