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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BLACK-ISH?: A GROUNDED THEORY EXPLORATION OF COLORISM ON TWITTER

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE GAYLORD COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This research examines the discussion of colorism that Twitter audience members posted after viewing an episode of ABC's *Blackish* which explicitly identified colorism as its central theme, and in response to the casting of light-skinned Black actors on Netflix's *BlackAF*. Colorism is a form of skin color stratification in which light-skinned people are privileged over dark-skinned people in terms of access to education, work opportunities, and perceived attractiveness (Hunter, 1998; Gullickson, 2005; Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Morfitt, 2020; Blay 2021; Martin et al. 2017; Norwood 2015; Russell et al., 2013; Void 2019; Wilder, 2010). Derived from critical race theory (CRT), critical skin theory (CST) was applied to this research as a guide to determine power structures in the media that perpetuate colorism. Specifically, critical skin theory poses that colorism operates as an extension of race as the new basis for discrimination whereby skin color stratification is used to promote and reinforce privilege. Rooted in colonialism, colorism is a complex phenomenon that stems from slavery and racism wherein colonizers maintain power and control, by using observable human characteristics of skin color as a metric for worth in society (Hunter, 1998). Past scholarly research has examined colorism in the media as it relates to models used in advertising but seldom has colorism in television been studied (Keenan,1996; Mayo et al., 2006; Meyers, 2008 & Frisby, 2006). Therefore, this study explored how television as a media power structure portrays and establishes colorism and how viewers use social media (specifically Twitter) to discuss these portrayals. A qualitative content analysis was used to identify themes in the Twitter discourse, then a grounded theory approach revealed how these themes were similar to and different from what CST proposes in the discourse about colorism. Through the exploration of colorism themes in the

data, the findings revealed audience members a) shared personal experiences of colorism, b) discussed representation in casting and c) shared how the Black experience isn't monolithic in response to Black-oriented media.

Key Words: *BlackAF*, *Black-ish*, colorism, Kenya Barris, Twitter, Critical Skin Theory

Table of Contents

Abstract ..... **iv**

Chapter I: Introduction **1**

Chapter II: Background and Significance **6**

Black-ish *8*

BlackAF *10*

Chapter III: Literature Review **11**

Critical Race Theory *11*

Critical Skin Theory *15*

Historical Background of Colorism *18*

Colorism in Advertising 20

Colorism in Television 23

Media as a Power Structure *27*

Role of Black-Oriented Media Content on Perceptions *30*

The Second Screen Effect *33*

Racial Discourse on Twitter *34*

Research Questions *36*

Chapter IV: Methodology **38**

Why Twitter? *39*

Unit of Analysis *40*

Measurement Categories/Initial Analysis *41*

Grounded Theory Approach *43*

Chapter V: Findings **46**

Shared Personal Experiences with Colorism. 48

Representation in Casting. 50

Shared How the Black Experience isn't Monolithic. 52

Chapter IV: Discussion and Conclusion **56**

Discussion of Experiences of Colorism. *56*

Discussion of Families Influence on Colorism/Internalized View. *57*

Discussion of Colorism Representation in the Media. *59*

Limitations of Research *60*

Future Research *60*

Conclusion *61*

References **63**

Appendix **78**

Chapter I: Introduction

"Colorism is born of racism. It is the daughter of racism"

-Lupita Nyong'o, Kenyan-Mexican Actress

The prominent Hollywood actress, Lupita Nyong'o's figurative statement offered a simple yet poignant assessment of colorism in modern society (BBC Newsnight, 2019). Colorism has been researched across disciplines since the term was coined by Alice Walker (1983), in her book *In Search of our Mother's Garden* which she described as the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on the color" (p. 291). Intraracial discrimination is prejudice within a racial group, as preference is conferred by the lightness or darkness of an individual's complexion in comparison to darkness of another's (Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Russell et al., 1993). Although the term is now widely adopted by researchers and scholars, the concept of colorism is historically rooted in American consciousness as a remnant of slavery. Historically, colorism arose from the enslavement (and rape) of Black people wherein lighter skin was created by intermingling of Black slaves and White slave owners (Hunter, 1998; Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018; Gullickson, 2005). Slavery served as an institution that allowed White "authorities" to exert control over Black persons and establish power structures that kept Black person from advancing (Hunter, 1998). Black persons who appeared closer to the "White European ideal" were allowed small affordances, to the detriment of those who were dark skinned. This study is important because colorism is often overshadowed by racism and seen as an issue that only occurs within a racial group however, Dhillon-Jamerson (2018) explained that colorism functions within interracial relationships as well but is often ignored and understated even though it contributes to inequality in the same ways as racism. Colorism is a global issue that functions to perpetuate racism by conferring that proximity to whiteness grants

privilege or preference (Harpalani, 2015). Furthermore, the implications of colorism are seen across various media wherein a skin color hierarchy perpetuates racist ideals (Erves, 2019; Leary, 2018; Frisby, 2006; Ducille, 1996; Neal & Wilson, 1989).

Studies have shown that there is a significant link between images in the media, racial identity, and informing perceptions about other races (Sullivan & Platenburg, 2017; Happer & Philo, 2013; Koch, 2010; Mutz, 1989). Nyong'o detailed her experience with colorism, growing up in Kenya, Africa where media imagery was saturated with only lighter skin women; there were no women with her rich dark complexion represented (BBC Newsnight, 2019). Nyong'o also disclosed an experience during an audition where she was told that she was "too dark to be on television" (BBC Newsnight, 2019) which reinforced what she'd seen growing up - that there was a preference in the media for lighter skin tones. Such prejudices are framed as preferences for lighter skin which then affects darker skin individuals' social mobility and quality of life (Hall, 2018; Hunter, 1998; Gullickson, 2005; Mathews & Johnson, 2015). These inequalities are rooted in history but perpetuated in media messages, that present images that reflect cultural values of what is preferred (Hunter, 2007). The existing literature places race as the central theme and does not clearly distinguish between racism and colorism (Hall, 2018). Thereby leaving a gap in what is known about colorism as a concept.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) established that race is embedded in social systems which include institutional power structures (Hall, 2018). Derived from CRT, Critical Skin Theory (CST) is a theoretical framework which argues that the presence of colorism operates alongside a racialized social system and institutional power structures that uphold these ideals (Hall, 2018; Reece, 2019). Hall (2018) created CST to unify past scholarship on Critical Race Theory (CRT) with focus on skin color hierarchies as a system of oppression. CST examined social, political,

and economic power structures that were based on race, but have evolved, and are now based on skin color. According to CST skin color takes precedent over race as a signifier of privilege (Hall, 2018). The present study will be extending CST to media, specifically television, wherein the power structures and institutions responsible for the colorism are media organizations, writers, and producers that control images and stories that viewers are exposed to (Happer & Philo, 2013).

Past research has focused on the representation of racially diverse characters in media and what affects the characters have on different diverse audiences (Banjo, 2013; Davis & Gandy, 1999). Media portrayals have been found to have significant impacts on perceptions (Banjo, 2013) because, "media representation plays an important role in informing the ways in which we understand social, cultural, ethnic, and racial differences" (Davis and Gandy, 1999, p. 367). Television is a powerful medium for spreading messages that has allowed researchers to explore more salient topics such as the way racially oriented media and skin color affects perceptions (Banjo, 2013).

This study examines two shows created by Black writer, producer, director and actor, Kenya Barris who has had a career spanning more than 20 years, in which he has accumulated 27 writing credits and 20 producing credits. Some of the programs he is associated with include *America's Next Top Model, The Game, Black-ish, Grown-ish, Mixed-ish* and *BlackAF* to name a few (IMDb, 2021). Barris is one of only a handful Black creators in Hollywood (i.e., Tyler Perry, Oprah Winfrey, and Ava Duvernay) in Hollywood who have power to control a narrative and the casting of characters. Additionally, Barris is someone who has been widely criticized by the media for colorism in his casting also has themes of colorism throughout his shows (Well, 2019; Essence, 2019). Thus, this level of power to control black-oriented programming and the fact

that the media routinely address the colorism themes present in his shows makes Barris' content worthy of study.

Barris has made it a point to address certain aspects of colorism in his shows such as in *Black-ish* and *BlackAF* (Erves, 2019). In his shows, Barris portrays conversations through characters surrounding colorism and purposefully places persons of diverse skin colors in the conversation. *Black-ish* addressed the issue of colorism directly in the episode "Black Like Us" and *BlackAF* addressed the issue indirectly through Barris' commentary on why he cast light-skin actors in the series. By creating "colorism" content and casting choices, Barris functions as a contributor to the media as a power structure.

Emphasis was placed on Barris' shows that center around the Black American experience, how viewers discussed colorism in the show, and casting of characters. Barris' sitcom was the first to make its debut on ABC and its success established Barris as a power player in television. This resulted in a stream of spin-offs inspired by his actual family including *BlackAF,* a more realistic and uncensored version of *Black-ish* on the media streaming site Netflix. *Black-ish* has become one of the more popular shows on cable television garnering 3.1 million viewers as of 2020 (Porter, 2021). Although *Black-ish* is considered Black-oriented media the show has a diverse viewership which consists of 58% of white (non-Hispanic) viewers compared to 28% Black (non-Hispanic) viewers as of May 2018 (Stoll, 2021). This trend falls in line with a report by Nielsen in 2017, that found that Black-oriented shows attracted substantial non-black viewership (Nielsen, 2017). Although Netflix does not release viewership data, *BlackAF* has recently been renewed for a second season following a 75 percent viewer rating (Goldberg, 2020). The significance of these viewership demographics as it regards this study is

that it gives substance to how colorism is perpetuated in the media and how non-minorities understand the skin color hierarchy.

Audience members took note of Barris' choices and took to social media to discuss what his choices meant. Social network sites are designed for audience member experience, while also allowing audience members to express and communicate their identity with cultural exchanges authentically through an online platform (Maragh, 2018; Lovelock, 2016). Twitter is a primary social media platform for this type of exchange. More specifically Black audience members have become a significant presence on Twitter earning the moniker "Black Twitter" in which this subcategory of audience members can be observed frequently discussing "Black American Culture" and relevant racial topics (Florini, 2014, p. 225). It should be noted that the race of individual audience member was not coded in this study, nonetheless Black Twitter audience member often guide conversations relating to social issues like colorism on social network sites (Florini, 2014).

In addition to being a primary source of "Black" information and dialogue Twitter is important to this study because audiences are consuming television content and using social media to create a social viewing experience by posting and replying with their reaction simultaneously as the shows air (Cameron & Geidner, 2014; Smith & Boyles, 2012). Thus, Twitter allowed the researcher to explore how individuals identified and deal with the intraracial concept of colorism within Barris' show as conversations occurred in real time. Thus, the present study examined audience posts on Twitter about the colorism episode of *Black-ish* and the casting choices for the show *BlackAF.* This fills a gap in the literature as prior research established that colorism exists and has been internalized in power structures but did not examine how colorism is discussed unprompted on social media (Webb & Robinson, 2017).

The two research questions guiding this study are: 1) how the discourse about colorism is being framed by Twitter audience members based on their conversations regarding content created by Kenya Barris, and 2) how are power structures discussed in regard to Barris himself as the creator of these shows, the networks that air his shows, and the writers of these shows. A qualitative content analysis method was used to code and analyze tweets and explore themes related to colorism discourse surrounding the shows. A grounded theory approach was then applied for data analysis that allowed the researcher to examine how these themes were similar to and differed from CST and other theories (Martin & Turner, 1986). Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) grounded theory allowed the researcher to approach the topic with an open mind and let the theoretical framework emerge from the data (Martin & Turner, 1986). The common themes that emerged about colorism provided rich data for theoretical grounding and expanding the concept.

Findings from this study are important because they support existing data on colorism that poses that light skin individuals are given preference and privilege over those with darker skin. Additionally, the preference for lighter skin can be observed in television portrayals that inspired viewer discussions on Twitter about how television networks, producers, writers, and directors are responsible for casting actors of diverse skin colors (Leary, 2018). This is important because colorism is a subtle manifestation of racism that if gone unchecked contributes to the discrimination and misrepresentation of people of color with dark skin.

Chapter II: Background and Significance

The present study looked at Twitter conversations related to colorism content and casting on the shows *Black-ish* and *BlackAF* produced by Kenya Barris (Wells, 2019; Essence, 2019). Additionally, Twitter was where Barris addressed criticism of colorism to which Twitter

audiences responded (Wells, 2019; Essence, 2019). These Television shows were specifically selected because media messages on television shape perceptions, especially when it comes to how Black-oriented media affects how other racial groups view Black people (Sullivan & Platenburg, 2017; Vickers, 2018; Banjo, 2013). Colorism in the media has predominately been studied in advertising and film but has seldom been studied in relation to television (Erves, 2019; Leary, 2018; Frisby, 2006; Ducille, 1996; Neal & Wilson, 1989).

While some in Hollywood prefer the story to take precedent, producer Kenya Barris takes on race directly, specifically how the Black experience is portrayed in his various shows (Vickers, 2018) . While Barris has attempted to address the issue of colorism directly and responsibly, he has not been exempted from facing accusations of preference for "lightness" in the casting of his characters as well as criticism of how colorism was addressed within the shows (Wells, 2019; Essence, 2019). Barris received great criticism of colorism accusations when the cast photo was released on Twitter for *BlackAF* (Essence, 2019). Barris' response to criticism of colorism in the casting of his shows prompted discussions to ensue on Twitter and a callback to the colorism episode of *Black-ish* by audience members. Barris tweeted and later deleted his rationale for casting.

> "I'm…not gonna make up a fake family that genetically makes no sense just for the sake of trying to fill quotas. I LOVE MY PEOPLE," Barris tweeted "[And] everything I does [sic] reflects that love. But to cast people like some kinda skin color Allstar game would actually do more harm than good" (Essence, 2019). "These kids look like my kids. My very Black REAL kids & they face discrimination every day from others outside our culture and I don't want them to also see it from US" (Essence, 2019). "I'm going to say

this and then let what happens happen…Colorism is a divisive tool used by the powerful to separate the truly powerful" (Meara, 2019).

Black-ish

Black-ish was the first of a stream of shows created by Barris, which were inspired by his family (Wells, 2019). Premiering on September 24, 2014, *Black-ish* garnered 7.4 million viewers from the ages of 18-49 providing ABC with the boost in ratings needed for their primetime television slots (Kissell, 2015). As the show has continued Barris has addressed a vast array of issues through the lens of his experience as a Black man in America while maintaining a strong, diverse viewership resulting in comparisons to *The Cosby show*. While inspired by *The Cosby Show* Barris approached *Black-ish* in a different way where "race is not treated as an incidental background detail but part of the show's identity" (Khaleeli, 2017, para. 2). After its initial airing, many critics expressed concern with the name *Black-ish* claiming that the name was off-putting to white audiences and divisive (Vickers, 2018). However, as the show continued to air many critics switched from criticism to praise as the name *Black-ish* became clear as race emerged as a primary narrative in the show (Harris, 2015).

Recognizing that his children were growing up in a different era, Barris wanted to explore conversations about race today - lamenting that his children had become privileged making them '*Black-ish*' instead of Black (Gross, 2016; Vickers, 2018). The "Black Like Us" episode of *Black-ish* tackled colorism, a taboo subject that has seldom been portrayed in mainstream media. In a guest column for the Hollywood Reporter, executive producer Peter Saji noted that the topic was no approached lightly, and that the producer knew that if the subject wasn't approached correctly, they would get "dragged on Twitter" (2019, para. 6). The reference

to “dragged” is a colloquial term meaning to face large amounts of criticism on the online social platform (Griffith, 2016).

The “Black Like Us” (season 5, episode 10) episode aired on ABC on January 15, 2019. The conversation about colorism in the episode began when the character Diane (Dré and Rainbow’s daughter) showed them her school picture in which she can’t be seen due to lighting that is uncomplimentary to her dark skin tone (Butler, 2019). The family then explored several points of contention surrounding the topic of colorism. Before, the discussion went further Dre, (played by Anthony Anderson), broke out into a narration paired with animations that explained the historical context of colorism (Butler, 2019; Barris, 2019). As other members of the family went on to discuss their issues with colorism Diane exclaimed, “No one in this family is as dark as me” (Butler, 2019, p.1; Barris, 2019). As Diane (played by Marsai Martin), explained her ostracization from the family she pointed out how society reinforces that light skin is preferred followed by a montage of her experiences.

The episode continued with the characters confronting colorism within their family unit, as members of the family detailed how it impacted them. At the end of the episode, the narration continued with Dré, calling for more discussions of colorism to take place. In the final narration, Dré laments, “Colorism is our secret shame and the pain it causes keeps growing because we rarely talk about it. But as I looked at my multicolored black family, I realized that because we talked about it, our wounds could finally start to heal as we learn to love ourselves out in the open. Because nothing gets better in the shadows” (Butler, 2019, p.1; Barris, 2019). Thus, the selection of *the Black-ish* episode “Black Like Us” provided a basis for audiences to continue conversations regarding colorism.

BlackAF

The Netflix show *BlackAF* premiered on Netflix on April 17, 2020, and is a mockumentary sit-com starring Barris as himself and actors as his family. The inception of the show *BlackAF* followed Barris' departure from ABC upon having a *Black-ish* episode that criticized Donald Trump shelved by the network in the fourth season (Rose, 2018). According to the Hollywood Reporter, the shelved show was Barris' breaking point and prompted his departure from the media conglomerate Disney, which owns ABC (Rose, 2018). Seeking more creative freedom Barris ended his newly signed four-year contract with ABC Studios and took his talents to Netflix for a $100 million deal in 2018 (Lynch, 2018). The freedom at Netflix allowed for *BlackAF* to be created with a more realistic and satirical representation of Barris' family similar to *Black-ish*. At the time of this study, *BlackAF* provided the most recent insight into colorism discourse compared to the *Black-ish* "Black Like Us" episode which aired a year before *BlackAF*.

The show portrays Barris' family as they navigate race and culture as a new successful Black family in Hollywood. Initially titled *#BlackExcellence* the discussion of the show *BlackAF* began with audience member's reactions to the cast photo (Jones, 2019). The cast photo comprised of primarily lighter-skin cast members which then spawned audience members to accuse Barris of colorism (Jones, 2019). In response, Barris defended the casting of the characters because of their likeness to his actual family (Essence, 2019). However, many critics also believed the outrage was due to the expectation that *BlackAF* would be a departure from his other shows like *Black-ish*, which is also loosely based on Barris' real-life family (Jones, 2019).

Veronica Wells (2019) of Madame Noire critiqued Barris' response to colorism stating he avoids the issue by scapegoating those shows are about his family. Even with the success of his

various shows, viewers and critics alike found an issue with Barris' casting of characters, noticing that there are very few darker-skin actors and actresses portrayed in the shows (Wells, 2019). Wells (2019) pointed out that the issue is not as simple as Barris claimed it to be, and that his role as a producer in Hollywood is to make room for those who have not been given the same opportunities as those with lighter skin. The criticism by viewers supports Leary's (2019) study found that viewer's want those who control the media to be held responsible and understand that the casting of characters according to skin tone matters just as much as racial diversity (Leary, 2018).

Overall, these shows provide evidence of colorism that audience members responded to – most vocally on Twitter where Barris is active. Shows like *Martin* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* have tropes of colorism but producers, directors and writing staff do not enjoy the same status as Barris (Sorella Magazine, n.d.). An exception is Shonda Rhimes' *Bridgerton* that also faced criticism of colorism by audience members because the character with lighter skin on the show were portrayed in nobility positions compared to darker skin actors as the antagonist villains (Oliver, 2021).

Chapter III: Literature Review

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a multi-dimensional approach to assessing how race affects multiple components of one's life through power structures made up of social organizations, systems, and institutions (Burton et al., 2010, p. 442; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvii; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Brown, 2003). CRT was derived from the work of American legal scholars of the 1960s and '70s who were examining how the law and legal institutions served the interest of the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the poor and marginalized (Hall, 2018).

CRT emphasized equitable treatment under the law for all races was not true and challenged the theory of legal “color blindness” (Hall, 2018). According to Hall (2018), the basic premises of CRT are that; 1) race is socially constructed and socially significant, 2) race is embedded within American systems and institutions, 3) any gains or decisions, legally, tend to serve the interest of the dominant white group and 4) members of minority groups are subject to racialized negative stereotypes depending on the needs or interest of whites. CRT recognized that the systemic nature of racism is primarily responsible for reproducing racial inequality (Hall, 2018). CRT asserted the relevance of including the experiences of people of color in scholarly research (Hall, 2018).

Developed by interdisciplinary scholars and activists, CRT attempted to challenge, "the relationship between race, racism, and power" (Hall, 2018, p. 2138). Though initially based within the context of law, critical race theory has expanded to include intersectionality lamenting that racism is a multifaceted system that affects multiple aspects of life through power structures (Hall, 2018). CRT provides a basis for researchers to bridge together how social systems affect groups with race as a centralized component of the research (Burton et al., 2010). Although usually combined in American references, race and skin color operate separately and have different implications regarding how power structures and institutions affect individuals (Harpalani, 2015) .

Among the early researchers who adopted CRT outside the context of law, Brown (2003) drew a link between CRT and mental health issues, explaining that social structures have a significant impact on an individual’s psychological health. Brown (2003) posed that because CRT focused on how racial stratification operates in society, the theory can also explain how racial stratification contributes to emotional problems. Racial stratification is due to a system of

oppression that causes mental health problems wherein stressful circumstances and can cause emotional distress (Brown, 2003). The research poses that the mental health of Black people is compounded by race-related experiences along with regular life stressors. Although there is limited conceptualization and measurements of how discrimination affects mental health, many researchers have focused on the experiences of Black individuals to gauge mental health. In the first wave of the National Study of Black Americans (NSBA) it was found that perceptions of racial discriminations correlated to high levels of psychological distress and a lower level of life satisfaction (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000; Williams et al, 2019). Brown (2003) concluded that future researchers should advance scholarly research by explaining why certain racial phenomenon impact mental health. Additionally, Brown (2003) examined how structural barriers impact people of color interpersonally, other scholars used CRT to understand how racial stratification affects individuals socially.

Burton and colleagues (2010) researched on families of color by synthesizing relevant research on critical race theories and colorism literature. In their review of decades of literature Burton and colleagues (2010) found a gap in the literature that indicated that past researchers have used elements of critical race and colorism perspectives but lacked a robust incorporation of the elements together. To synthesize this literature Burton and colleagues (2010) characterized multiracial families have diversified the American population contributing to how social and intrapersonal factors of racial identities affects relationships in families of color (Bratter & King, 2008). Through the lens of critical race and colorism perspective Burton and colleagues summarized that power and privilege designated through a racialized system contributes to inequality and a lack of social mobility for families of color (2010). These inequalities included how segregation, a discriminatory housing practice based on race, contributed to limitations for

family income and educational attainment (Burton et al., 2010; Caughy & O'Campo, 2006; Ogbu, 2003). As well as how light skin African American and Latinos are afforded more opportunities than those with darker skin creating racial disparities for individuals within and across racial groups (Burton et al., 2010; Goldsmith et al., 2006). The conclusion of this empirical study was to provide a basis for future researchers to understand and account for how racialized systems affect family dynamics (Burton et al., 2010).

Similarly, Ray and colleagues (2017) took a sociological approach to understand how race and ethnicity contributed to narratives of racial progress. CRT and afro-pessimism were used to evaluate how racial progress, specifically how anti-blackness contributes to economic immobility for Black people (Ray et al., 2017). Afro-pessimism is a concept that distinguished anti-blackness as a distinct form of racism (Ray et al., 2017). Ray and colleagues (2017) utilized CRT because the theoretical framework is inherently based on the pursuit of racial progress. Their study sought to challenge how racial progression is described -- posing that progress doesn't occur linearly. Ray and colleagues (2017) concluded that Black people face unique challenges in the labor market such as economic exclusion, racialized policing, and disproportionate poverty. Similar to Burton and colleagues (2010) Ray and colleagues (2017) finds that housing and employment discrimination contributed to wealth inequality by limiting opportunities for social mobility. Furthermore, Ray and colleagues (2017) assert that standardized racial categories offer little variation to account for how multi-racial individuals may benefit in the labor market because of their skin color or familial ties. For instance, "multiracial individuals who identify as black with a black parent and white parent may have access to some of their white parents' social networks and may be advantages in the labor market relative to those who identify as black" (Ray et al., 2017, p. 154). This supports Cancio and

colleagues (1996) research on racial differences in wages which accounted for parental education and work experience, which found that white men (with White parents) earned 15% more than Black men (with Black parents).

Taken together the studies by Brown (2003), Burton et. al (2010), and Ray et. al (2017) extend CRT in sociological disciplines and describe how racial stratification impacts the lives of racial minorities in multiple aspects of life such as family dynamics, marriageability, mental health, and the labor market. In these studies, CRT was used to guide the studies' exploration into nuanced topics within each discipline wherein which the theory helped support the argument that race contributed to a multitude of social organizations and systems.

Critical Skin Theory

Critical Skin Theory (CST) is a theoretical framework that centers skin color as a hierarchy that contributes to inequality and discrimination in U.S. institutions that function as power structures. Hall (2018) created CST to unify past scholarship on Critical Race Theory (CRT) with a theoretical framework focused on skin color hierarchies as a system of oppression. Although synonymously defined in American culture, race and skin color operate separately and have different implications regarding how power structures and institutions affect individuals (Hall, 2018). Hall argued that there was not a unified understanding of colorism hence Critical Skin Theory (CST) was developed to bring together past scholarship under a unified theoretical framework (2018). Additionally, Hall (2018) sought to broaden the concept of colorism beyond what past researchers' attributed to preference and prejudice. Through historical analysis Hall (2018) explored how the institution of marriageability and how the power structure of the economy gave advantages to light skin Black Americans. The historical analysis of the Census in Hall's (2018) research pointed to how the racial hierarchy was reorganized after slavery to

encompass lighter skin black Americans per the 'color line' (Hall, 2018). This 'color line' established that white Americans held privilege and power, wherein one drop of Black blood led to the absence of both. However, before the 'color line' was rigidly defined those of lighter skin were able to attain certain privileges. Within the racial group, light skin signaled ‘superior’ status, which allowed social, economic, and political advantages such as achieving higher education attainment, social mobility, income, beauty ideals, and marital outcomes (Hunter, 1998; Gullickson, 2005; Mathews & Johnson, 2015). Thus, Black individuals with light skin can navigate these social structures more easily because of their proximity to whiteness (Hall, 2018).

Hunter’s (1998) analyzed how skin color stratification affects the lives of Black women. Specifically, her study examined how skin color hierarchies functioned as a system that operates in conjunction with racialized systems of oppression. Hunter’s (1998) research is important because it allowed researchers to understand how Black women face a multitude of intersecting oppressions such as race, sex, and class that they must navigate through a racialized white majority worldview, which refers to the categorical domination of one perspective over others (Collin, 1986; Robinson-Moore, 2008; Griffin, 2003). Hunter (1998) hypothesis was accurate, which posed that lighter-skin African American women would have higher levels of educational attainment, earn a higher average income level, and marry highly educated men more than dark skin women. Hunter’s research contended that the skin color hierarchy has been internalized by society thus leading to continued advantages through selectivity of person’s with lighter skin or conversely discrimination of person’s with darker skin.

Additional research on colorism focused on preference as a determinant for privilege. Goldsmith and colleagues’ (2007) hypothesized the “preference for whiteness” was a predictor for the wage gap. Their study predicted that having a lighter skin shade gave both in-group and

out-group advantages of privilege because of the greater proximity to whiteness (Goldsmith et al., 2007). They examined Black Americans and used two separate national surveys that categorized participants by skin color, income, education, and demographics to determine if skin shade affected wages. Goldsmith and colleagues found that mean hourly rate increased as skin color lightened, where $11.72 was the average earnings for black persons with dark skin in comparison to $13.23 black persons with medium skin (2007). Using statistical analysis, the researcher's created a wage equation in which they concluded lightness for Black Americans is rewarded in the labor market because of the proximity to whiteness (Goldsmith et al., 2007). Overall, the study found that phenotypic characteristics such as skin color affect socioeconomic placement in society (Goldsmith et al., 2007).

Further research using the "preference for whiteness" hypothesis expounded on the globalization of colorism, where researchers found that skin color bias goes beyond race. Painter and colleagues (2016) found that immigrants faced skin color bias similar to Black Americans, where darker-skin immigrants faced more disadvantages than their lighter-skin counterparts, such as wealth inequality. This wealth inequality is mainly due to immigrants not having a financial basis for building wealth in a new country but as it relates to skin tone stereotypes about darker skin minorities that already exist can impact earning potential. Using a new immigrant survey skin color as well as other variables, Painter and colleagues (2016) statistically analyzed financial earnings which showed that skin tone is a significant indicator of earning potential "each shade darker is associated with 11 percent or $134 less wealth" (p. 1166). Overall, the findings of the study determined that the racial/ethnic inequalities of immigrants coupled with darker skin complexions resulted in a double disadvantage because of the racial

minority status and skin tone of Asian and Black immigrants, compared to lighter-skin or white counterparts in the U.S (Painter et al., 2016).

Similarly, in Reece (2019) studied the historical marriage selections of light-skin Black Americans to assess their economic status and the deeper structural implications of social mobility. Reece's (2019) research acknowledged that there have been attempts at creating a colorism model that was centered around the "preference of whiteness" (Reece, 2019, p. 6). The argument used for the colorism model was that "white people simply prefer people who look similar to them" thus influencing larger color-based discrimination (Reece, 2019, p. 6; Goldsmith et al., 2007; Painter et al., 2016). Preference factors into color stratification in such matters as social mobility where even as the racial structure changed, lighter skin Black Americans were still able to preserve economic advantages (Reece, 2019). Reece (2019) posed that before the color-line was defined, lighter skin Black Americans were able attain higher education and affluence through marriage. In all, the research supports that there is a preference or prejudice-based framework for colorism as well as combinations of prejudicial and structural based factors (Reece, 2019).

Thus, CST findings have shown that colorism is a concept supported by past research that establishes that prejudice based on skin color functions as preference that affects structural based factors (Hunter, 1998; Painter et al., 2016; Reece, 2019). This is important to this study because CST is used to centralize skin color to extend the media as a power structure that comprises of writers, producers, and television networks.

Historical Background of Colorism

Colorism began when slaves with lighter skin were given preferential treatment because of the slave owners, "… affinity, and/or obligation toward their offspring" (Dhillon-Jamerson &

Hall, 2018, p. 2090; Gullickson, 2005). To understand the skin color hierarchy that persists within the Black community, one must acknowledge the historical basis of colorism. The beginning of color stratification was the raping of slaves by white slave owners resulting in lighter skin slaves (Hunter, 1998; Dhillon-Jamerson & Hall, 2018; Gullickson, 2005). The result of this sexual violence was mixed-race offspring who were still considered slaves and were placed under the oppression inherited by their mothers due to the notion of hypodescent (Hunter,1998). Hypodescent was the rule that made slavery a legal attribute passed on by the mother (Hunter, 1998). It was also used to define what constituted Blackness where one drop of Black blood determined your racial category (Hunter, 1998). When the one-drop rule reorganized the racial order, the separation of light skin and dark skin remained in the Black American consciousness, leaving residual intraracial hierarchies that persist in American mass media.

Thus, race became the primary way to separate white from other races (e.g., Black, Asian, Hispanic, etc.) while colorism was an extension of race that claimed proximity to whiteness as “better” than proximity to a darker (i.e., less white or European) color (Hunter,1998). Although proximity to white-ness did not equal white, any light-skin slaves dubbed "Mulattos" were able to attain privileges of white Europeans by "passing" as white at the expense of hiding their African-American roots (Harris, 2018, p. 2076). Harris (2018) defined passing as having phenotypical characteristics closely related to those of European descent. This allowed light-skin African Americans, "to bypass such structural barriers by acknowledging their White heritage as their most dominant ancestry" (Harris, 2018, p. 2074). "Passing" was a way for lighter skin individuals to attain privilege in a hierarchical system of race ranked or stratified in skin color. Having darker skin was seen as un-pure and better suited for hard labor while lighter

skin was considered more acceptable for indoor housework (Harris, 2018). Thus, the historical impactions of colorism suggest that being perceived as more "white" or "European" leads to a better chance of social mobility for those with light skin (Hunter, 1998; Gullickson, 2005; Mathews & Johnson, 2015).

Colorism research has established that colorism exists as a preference or prejudice of for lighter skin over darker skin within one's own race (Norwood, 2015; Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Russell et. al 1993). Colorism assigned value based solely on the color of one's skin and was stratified by the lightness or darkness of one's complexion (Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Russell et al., 1993). Simply put, colorism is the practice of preference or discriminating against a person based on their distance from "whiteness" (Maddox, 2004). Furthermore, colorism research on color stratification showed that being perceived as more "white" or "European" leads to a better chance at achieving higher education, social mobility, hire ability, beauty ideals, and marital outcomes compared to their darker-skin counterparts (Hunter, 1998; Gullickson, 2005; Mathews & Johnson, 2015). Thus, this research has provided a rich sociological understanding of how colorism affects one's ability to move through society. Whereas racism historically has been the overt form of discrimination, today colorism operates covertly to discriminate (Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Russell et al., 1993) making it important to bring the conversation into the light and increase awareness about the concept and how it is discussed currently.

Colorism in Advertising

Much of the media research on race and colorism has focused on advertising depictions with the majority focused on women and how likely consumers would be to buy products based on how models look (Kahle & Homer, 1985). Specifically, these studies evaluated how colorism was perceived with Black models as the endorser and attractiveness related to skin color.

Keenan's study (1996) found that the majority of Black women depicted in Black magazines were of a lighter complexion than those in editorial photographs. Their study provided a basis for future research to look at salient topics of colorism in other aspects of advertising.

Mayo and colleagues (2006) studied how Black models were being portrayed based on skin color. They found darker-skin Black models were depicted in more sports-related magazines while lighter-skin models were found in more fashion magazines. This led them to suggest media outlets believed lighter-skin models were more fit to sell beauty products. Mayo and colleagues (2006) examined five years of advertisements from *Sports Illustrated* and *Vogue* magazines using the Pantone Matching System (PMS) to accurately code the skin color of models. While Mayo and colleagues (2006) found that there was more representation of Black models overall in both publications, there was a significant difference in skin color represented in a sports-oriented publication versus a beauty-oriented publication. In summation, 93% of dark-skin models were represented in *Sports Illustrated* compared to 48% in *Vogue* (Mayo et al., 2006).

Meyers (2008) specifically looked at skin color and the responses of Black consumers to evaluate what variation of skin color is more preferred. Meyers (2008) found that Black participants demonstrated a predilection for lighter-skin models in advertisements. In an experiment where skin tone served as the independent variable and attitude toward the ad, product, model, and purchase intention served as the dependent variables, participants were shown three advertisements two of which were fake ads with one stimulus ad (Meyers, 2008). The stimulus contained the same Black model with her skin color digitally altered between "light" and "dark" versions (Meyers, 2008, p. 45). Meyers (2008) concluded the use of a lighter skin tone model yielded the most positive responses by consumers, in regard to attitude and purchase intent (Cowart & Lehnert, 2018). However, Meyers (2008) explicitly stated that this

research did not serve to justify using lighter skin models in advertisements, but instead suggested companies should use models of all skin tones. "Companies would be both successful in advertising outcomes by utilizing Black models of varied skin color and also socially responsible in their attempt to showcase the array of Black skin tones" (Meyers, 2008, p. 85). Although Meyers (2008) found what consumers preferred, he pointed out that advertisers should not represent Black models with the preferred lighter skin tone because the depictions had real social implications.

Similarly, Frisby's (2006) research found that the depiction of light brown skin models was reviewed more favorably as attractive than dark or pale skin models by both white and Black participants. Frisby's (2006) study specifically examined perceptions of physical attractiveness based on skin tone. The theoretical framework used in this research was skin color to test the hypothesis that darker skin tone will be judged negatively or less attractive than the same woman with lighter skin tone (Frisby, 2006). Participants were shown photos of four people with three different levels of darkness of skin tone. In which the hypothesis of this study was proven correct with black and white audiences perceiving lighter skin as more attractive (Frisby, 2006).

Taken together the significance of Keenan (1996), Mayo and colleagues (2006), Meyers (2008), and Frisby's (2006) research finds Black models with Eurocentric features, namely lighter skin, satisfy mainstream ideals of beauty. Additionally, the positive characteristics of attractiveness and likeability being attributed to lighter skin models in advertising has broader impacts on how other mediums, such as television evaluate representation. Centralized the images of light skin, in the media, as ideal contributes to audiences understanding of how value is placed on people of color based on skin color (Gerbner et al., 2002).

Colorism in Television

As a part of American culture, television provides insight into the culture, people, and environments that are not always accessible (Harrison et al., 2008). Much like advertising, skin color in television research has looked at how the content affects Black audiences, where the race was at the center of these studies (Pornsakulvanich, 2007; Sullivan & Platenburg, 2017; Tukachinsky et al., 2015; Erves, 2019). Images portrayed on television frame our understanding of others, especially when there is no prior knowledge (Gerbner et al., 2002). Limited understanding of other race and cultures by viewers gives power to images portrayed as truthful and normal when it's the only thing one has to compare knowledge to (Harrison et al., 2008). That is particularly important to consider due to the changing landscape of television, where there is a growing representation of minority portrayals on prime-time television, particularly Black Americans (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Television is important to evaluate because it plays an important role in informing viewers with images that define normalcy and what's acceptable (Sullivan & Platenburg, 2017; Harrison et al, 2008). As a part of American culture, television provides insight into the culture, people, and environments that are not always accessible (Harrison et al., 2008).

Pornsakulvanich (2007) reviewed and analyzed empirical research on how television portrayals of minorities influence perceptions on group vitality and identities in the U.S. The study found that "people usually select particular programs to satisfy their own need that reinforce their group identities and vitality" (Pornsakulvanich, 2007, p. 27; Harwood, 1997; Harwood,1999). Overall, Pornsakulvanich (2007) suggested that group members tended to watch shows that depict their group's identity positively and avoided negative portrayals.

In a study by Tukachinsky and colleagues (2015) attitudes of viewers in response to the depictions of other racial groups were evaluated over time. The race/ethnicity portrayals in primetime television were evaluated over 20 years and found that ethnic minorities are underrepresented and portrayals often depict stereotypes (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Over time the prevalence of Black characters has fluctuated overtime while other minority groups remained almost absent from being portrayed on television. The rise of the representation of Black characters is attributed to sit-coms that have been found to influence "viewer's perceptions of Blacks' educations attainment and income level" (Tukachinsky et al., 2015; Busselle & Crandall, 2002).

Additionally, depictions of Black characters in real crime shows have been found to influence viewer's perceptions of Black criminality (Tukachinsky et al., 2015; Oliver & Armstrong, 1998). The hypothesis guiding this research was that the quantity and quality of ethnic and racial representation on TV influenced the attitudes of white American's toward these racial groups (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). The methods used to understand this data were a survey to evaluate the attitudes of white Americans toward ethnic minorities in the U.S. as well as content analysis to examine the representation of minorities on the most viewed prime-time television shows between the years of 1987-2008. Multiple surveys were sent out over the course of this study, purposefully overlapping with at least one television season. This added to the validity of the research looking to understand the relationship between representation and public opinion over time (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). The findings of the research were that both the prevalence and social status of Black and Latino characters significantly impacted attitudes toward Black and Latino people. Blacks and Latinos were among the only ethnicities that could be studied due to the lack of representation of Asian Americans and Native Americans in prime-

time television shows. All together the results of the study revealed that the television representation of Blacks and Latinos as hyper-sexual or unprofessional can reinforce racial stereotypes. For which, Tukachinsky and colleagues (2015) highlighted the importance of how Black and Latino characters are represented as characters on television, because it can cultivate or reinforce stereotypes. The significance of these stereotypes influenced by representation, is that Black Americans are disproportionately represented in sit-coms and crime dramas reinforcing these depictions as normal (Tukachinsky et al., 2015).

Erves (2019) researched the representation of beauty among women of color, specifically looking at colorism through a content analysis of the television shows *Black-ish, Dear White People, Empire, Grown-ish,* and *The Carmichael Show.* The purpose of the study was to examine the representation of women and how colorism affects beauty and self-esteem as well as to evaluate if colorism still exists in 21st-century television. The findings of this study were that colorism still exists and often upholds stereotypical portrayals of Black women, such as darker skin women are angry and hyper-sexual (Erves, 2019). The study found that within these shows, lighter-skin women had more "authoritative roles" versus darker-skin have more negative portrayals. Erves (2019) argued that it, "is clear that there is an authoritative hierarchy that exists based on skin color and a negative stereotype is projected that dark complexion African American women are angry Black women" (p. 65). Erves (2019) concluded that beauty was correlated to skin color suggesting what was portrayed on television has an impact on perceptions and self-esteem if these stereotypes are internalized as truthful. The "authoritative hierarchy" reported in Erves's (2019) research is consistent with how colorism has operated historically, providing insight into how it has been perpetuated in the media.

Overall, television depictions often help construct a worldview that can be internalized; thus, it is important to understand how representation can impact the way groups are viewed and treated by society (Pornsakulvanich, 2007; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Sullivan & Platenburg (2017) researched the impact of the media on racial identity, where they concluded that there was a correlation between the consumption of Black information and a greater sense of Black identity. Furthermore, Tukachinsky and colleagues (2015) found that the representation of racial groups also impacts how other racial groups perceive them by cultivating or reinforcing stereotypes.

Rhaman (2020) pointed to how the 21st Century Western film industry contributed to stereotypes by preventing darker-skin actors and actresses from getting roles. Instead, the Western entertainment industry prioritized lighter-skin or mixed-race actors or actresses to downplay distinct racial categories (Lo, 2017). Thus, the use of light-skin actors and actresses promoted racial ambiguity that exempted those in Hollywood from acknowledging the ethnic, cultural backgrounds, and histories of people of color (Lo, 2017). This allowed for race to be minimized and for the story being portrayed to take precedent for viewers. While some forms of casting seek to disregard race as a central part of a character, other forms contribute to negative stereotypes. For instance, when the casting call for *Straight Outta of Compton* went viral on the internet, it cemented what some in Hollywood already knew about light skin as the preferred skin color for main roles. The casting call was for extras in the movies ranking girls from ‘A’ to ‘D’. The ‘A’ girls were described as being any race with real hair and a nice body, ‘B’ girls were explicitly described as having light-skin and Beyoncé should be the prototype, ‘C’ girls were described as medium to light skin with weave, and ‘D’ girls were described as African American with medium to dark skin in poor physical shape (Webb, 2014). The A-B-C-D

grouping is not new to Hollywood casting but the blatantly racist stereotypes in casting exemplified the inequities for actors with darker skin. Central to television colorism in casting still persists as dark skin actors are hardly cast in main roles. This is exemplified in popular Netflix shows *(Ginny and Georgia, Never Have I Ever, Outer Banks)* in which the main character in these shows is of lighter complexion with little or no representation of darker skin character (Newman-Bremang, 2021). In this way, true representation is hampered because stereotypes diminish the complexities of colorism.

Thus, colorism findings in both advertising and television have shown that underlying issues of representation in the media also encompasses skin color. At the surface research has found that the typecasting of racial groups to specific television genres can develop or reinforce existing stereotypes (Tukachinsky et al., 2015; Webb, 2014). Subsequently, these stereotypes often include remnants of colorism that pit negative attributes of darker skin against positive attributes of lighter skin. Understanding, how television shapes perceptions through images and portrayals is important to this study because reinforcing one skin color (light skin) as acceptable over another (dark skin) is both detrimental interpersonally (with other racial groups) and intrapersonally (with one's own-self perceptions and self-esteem). While scholarship has provided how tropes of colorism on television affect viewers, it is also important to understand how the media influences perceptions and become a part of viewers' realities, thus normalizing or mainstreaming media content.

Media as a Power Structure

The media are a powerful tool that can not only change social narratives but enforce harmful one's and legitimize perpetuated stereotypes (Happer & Philo, 2013). Early research by Adoni and Mane (1984) integrated theories of mass communication to offer a well-rounded view

of the role mass media plays in the social construction of reality, which establishes a relationship between culture and society. Social construction of reality is defined as the process individuals use to both create and produce components of their social world by internalized meaning, experiences, and actions (Adoni & Mane, 1984). Adoni and Mane (1984) used the media dependency hypothesis in their study, which poses the media's impact on an individual's reality depends on their own experiences and amount of exposure to the media in line with Happer and Philo's (2013) study. Their early integration of media theories drew on the role mass media has on constructing worldviews dependent on the viewer's level of interaction with the media (Adoni & Mane, 1984).

For instance, in Happer and Philo's (2013) research of the role of the media in the construction of public belief and social change they identified common topics discussed in the news. Their findings suggest that public topics of discourse are shaped by powerful groups in society but also account for how popular (more common) opinions may dominate understanding of the subject matter (Happer & Philo, 2013). Their research went on to explain that the audiences' understanding of subject matter occurs at various levels based on direct experience or knowledge of an issue (Happer & Philo, 2013). Utilizing the news reporting of climate change as the media content Happer and Philo (2013) found that participants with the least amount of exposure to the topic adjusted their views. While participants with more exposure to the content were least likely to adjust their opinion (Happer & Philo, 2013). Although focused on subjects occurring in the news, Happer and Philo's (2013) research can apply to a larger discussion of the media's role in perceptions about colorism. Where depending on the audience's awareness or interaction with the concept determines their ability to come up with their understanding of an issue hence the use of personal anecdotes to describe their experiences.

Mainly focused on how exposure to television cultivates viewers' worldview, understanding of reality, Gerbner and colleagues (2002) looked at the processes of engaging with messages, audiences, and contexts of television. Their research centered on viewer construction of realities because "television's central role in our society makes it the primary channel of the mainstream of our culture" (Gerbner et al., 2002, p. 51). Central to this research is mainstreaming, which poses that heavily viewing the same content diminishes the viewer's ability to come up with their own understanding. Gerbner and colleagues (2002) argued that television as a source of broadly shared images and content that have the ability to centralize opinions through mainstreaming. For example, Gerbner and colleagues (1980) found that in correlation with television drama's underrepresenting older people, heavy viewers found that the population of people 65 and older was declining even though this was not factual (Gerbner et al., 2002).

Television, as a tool that shapes narratives and informs culture operates as a power structure made up of networks, writers, producers, and showrunners (Happer & Philo, 2013). Those creating television content do so from their own social construction of reality that then influences culture and impacts perceptions (Adoni & Mane, 1984). The commonalities between past scholarly studies are that perceptions are dependent on a multitude of factors including the viewers' understanding, awareness, and interaction with the media (Happer & Philo, 2013; Adoni & Mane, 1984; Gerbner et al., 2002).

Thus, media are a power structure that are important to understand because of the influential effect television has on normalizing and popularizing media content in which meaning, experiences, and actions can be internalized (Gerbner et al., 2002; Adoni & Mane, 1984). This is important to this study as CRT and CST attribute the discrimination by race and

skin color to power structures made up of social organizations, systems and institutions (Burton et al., 2010, p. 442; Delgado & Stefancic, p. xvii; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Brown, 2003; Hall, 2018). Wherein which the present study seeks to extend these power structures to the media, specifically television. As it occurs to colorism research mainstreaming has already been identified in advertising (Keenan,1996; Mayo et al., 2006, Meyers, 2008; Frisby, 2006) lending the concept to be studied in other forms of media. The present study looked at the Black-oriented shows of *Black-ish* and *BlackAF* to offer a more centralized look at colorism in television, specifically these two shows have identifiable themes of colorism to be textualized.

Role of Black-Oriented Media Content on Perceptions

Black-oriented media such as shows produced by Barris can offer insight into the topic of colorism because the concept is acknowledged in these shows unlike other forms of media (Vickers, 2018). Unlike other forms of media, Barris sought to, "challenge stereotypes, and give White America a look inside the lives of an affluent Black family" in his show *Black-ish* (Vickers, 2018). Similarly, what Barris portrays on television contributes to mainstream culture and informs viewers with images (Sullivan & Platenburg, 2017; Erves, 2019; Pornsakulvanich, 2007; Tukachinsky et al., 2015; Gerbner et al., 2002).

Banjo (2013) explored the perception of Black audiences and their attitudes when viewing Black-oriented media with an all-Black audience versus a racially mixed audience. Attitudes were measured on a 7-point Likert scale which measured enjoyment and an 11-point Likert scale was adapted to measure hostile media perceptions. The findings of the experiment were that Black audience members were more critical when viewing with an all-Black audience. Conversely, Black audience members were neutral to the Black-oriented media when viewing with a mixed audience (Banjo, 2013). The theories guiding this research include hostile media

and third-person perception which together both describe how viewers will negatively attribute the impact of what is being viewed to out-groups (Banjo, 2013). These findings disproved the hypothesis in which the research thought Black audiences would be more critical of the Black-oriented content when watching with a mixed-race audience (Banjo, 2013). However, these findings were consistent with past research that found that Black audience members would enjoy Black-oriented media, "regardless of the race of their co-viewer" (Banjo, 2013, p. 317; Appiah, 2002; Brigham & Giesbrecht, 1976). Overall, Banjo's study revealed that the Black audience's enjoyment of Black-oriented media was not hindered by mixed-race audience members (2013). However, there was still concern about the perception of other races, specifically white persons who could be influenced by the content of the media (Banjo, 2013). When viewing culturally significant and representative, Black-oriented media there is concern with how other races view the content. "Although they are able to form their independent judgments about the content, black audiences have little trust in white individuals to share in their enjoyment of black cultural media" (Banjo, 2013, p. 317). Thus, Black audiences understand that ethnic media is consumed by out-groups and are concerned about how their race is being portrayed.

Banjo (2013) presents that the third-person effect is central to evaluating how perceptions of ethnic media influence beliefs or opinions. The third-person effect essentially characterizes how "individuals are more likely to believe that other people are more affected by media messages than themselves" (Banjo, 2013, p. 310; Davison, 1983). For instance, a Black person who had experienced colorism watched a show dealing directly with colorism will believe the content will have greater influence on a non-Black persons perception than their own.

Taken together, prior research found the Black audience members had an over-awareness of how the perceptions of non-Black audiences could be skewed when exposed to Black-oriented

media. This awareness could be part of why Barris was critiqued for his casting of lighter skin cast members, because there are implications that white audiences are being informed by what is being portrayed on the show. The concern for white audience is that they will internalize the content as ideal thus perpetuating a preference for light skin (Banjo, 2013; Hall, 2018). Specifically *Black-ish,* exemplified how diverse viewership of Black-oriented media could potentially signify the third-person effect among Black audiences. Andrew McCaskill, senior vice president of Communications and Multicultural Marketing at Nielsen said, "storylines with a strong black character or identity are crossing cultural boundaries to grab diverse audiences and start conversations" (Nielsen, 2017, p. 1). Therefore, the selection of shows created by Barris is significant because of their intent to express or explain the Black experience/Blackness to an overwhelmingly white audience (Banjo, 2013).

The studies of Black-oriented media programs have shown that there is sensitivity among viewer's when it comes to culturally significant representations. The way Barris depicts his fictional family may be non-Black viewer's only exposure to Black American culture (Vickers, 2018; Adoni & Mane, 1984). This is important to this study because Barris has the unique opportunity to dismantle stereotypes by contributing to mainstream media, which informs viewers (Gerbner et al., 2002). Although Barris has achieved wide acclaim and success for his approach to discussing race relations and Blackness he has faced criticism for his consistent casting of lighter skin actors. This criticism of colorism is documented in think piece articles about Barris, in which tweets by audience members supported that ongoing conversation about the concept was relevant (Essence, 2019; Wells, 2019).

The Second Screen Effect

The phenomenon of using another device while simultaneously watching television has become commonplace in recent years. Researchers have begun calling this phenomenon the "second screen effect" that has continued to stay on an upward trend as technology has become more widely available (Giglietto & Selva, 2014). Use of the second screen means that viewing television has become more interactive as audiences can use social media to communicate with each other as well as the characters and producers of the show (Giglietto & Selva, 2014). An early Nielson (2009) report proposed that 57% of Americans watched television and browsed the internet at the same time at least once per month (Nielsen, 2009). As of 2013, Nielsen reported that 46% of smartphone owners and 43% of tablet owners used their devices while watching television (2013a). The report found that second screens were used for viewers to browse and search the web, but also to participate in activities related to the content being viewed (Nielsen, 2013a). Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook encouraged viewer to viewer conversations. In 2013 Nielsen created a Twitter TV rating system that recorded that 19 million people composed 263 million tweets about live television in the U.S. in quarter two of one year alone (Nielsen, 2013b).

Giglietto and Selva (2014) conducted a study that evaluated second screen participation on Twitter in response to a political talk show on Italian television. A content analysis was used for tweets posted over an entire television season to determine the relationship between the types of scenes broadcasted, style of comments, and the way the audience participated with the content (Giglietto & Selva, 2014). The findings of the study were that Twitter viewers' expressed their personal opinions in general or address key members of the show (Marwick & Boyd, 2011;

Giglietto & Selva, 2014). The study by Giglietto and Selva (2014) concluded that the level of engagement depends on the television content.

Racial Discourse on Twitter

Twitter provides qualitative data on thoughts, opinions, experiences, and beliefs communicated through posts and replies (Brock, 2018). As a critical race scholar, Brock (2018) developed a tool to derive how cultural exchanges occurred through technology and could be analyzed. Brock's initial research on Black Twitter, and how race is communicated online, served as the baseline for establishing social networking sites as a source for understanding how beliefs and meaning are communicated through technology (Brock, 2018). Wherein the research on Black Twitter found that discourse served as a reference point for online exchanges and encouraged conversations (Brock, 2018).

Maragh's (2018) research analyzed racial authenticity using a social identity approach to look at how race is displayed on Twitter. Maragh (2018) explored the cultural phenomenon of "Acting White" as rhetoric among Black Americans, where Twitter was used to evaluate how criticism of racial authenticity affected belonging within an ingroup. Maragh's (2018) research analyzed textual data contained in tweets compared to interviews that allowed the researcher to see how race is displayed online versus in person. Maragh (2018) employed 14 Black Americans from various on-campus Black-identifying organizations at an unspecified Midwest University. The in-depth interviews allowed participants to define "Acting White" based on their experience coupled with an analysis of participants tweets to track themes and patterns through "critical race, communications-based analysis" (Maragh, 2018, p.598). The findings of this study were that Twitter acted as a way for audience member's to determine how race is portrayed and authentically displayed online (Maragh, 2018). Additionally, Maragh's (2018) study contributed

a fuller understanding of the construction of race and how it is communicated through interactions online by examining implicit forms of user interactions that could only be identified through with in-group knowledge.

In line with the present study, Webb and Robinson's (2017) research on how people used Twitter to communicate individual experiences about colorism to reveal personal constructions of reality. Using critical discourse analysis, the researcher analyzed threads of tweets that contained the term colorism to analyze how the topic was being discussed. Grounded in critical discourse analysis, Webb and Robinson (2017) used content analysis in which they concluded that the diverse amount of audience members uses "Twitter to argue, agree, share, and probe about the issues of colorism" (p. 32). Webb and Robinson (2017) reported that discourse on Twitter allowed audience members to reinforce, broaden, or learn their identities. Webb and Robinson's (2017) research are inherently important because it guides the current study and allowed parallels to be drawn such as audience members using the social media site to communicate their thoughts, opinions, beliefs and explanation of the world. While Webb and Robinson (2017) looked at colorism discourse on Twitter on a broader scale, this study offers a more focused look at colorism discourse in response to television media.

Overall, the second screen effect and racial discourse on Twitter show evidence that colorism discourse occurs. This intersection of media uniquely allows researchers to view attitudes about colorism and how their formed in relation to specific stimuli (Webb & Robinson, 2017). This study seeks to examine the unprompted discourse related to colorism when it is the explicit topic of viewer content utilizing television and Twitter. The following research questions address themes and subthemes that emerged from the data and are organized around the two research questions that guide the study.

Research Questions

This study seeks to examine audience conversations about colorism prompted by viewing Black-ish and the casting of BlackAF. The colorism conversations are important because they offer insight into how the concept of colorism is constructed through shared experiences, beliefs, and opinions (Webb & Robinson, 2017). The concepts included in this study are colorism, power structures in the media (television) and Twitter discourse. Wherein these concepts intersect due to the second screen effect (Giglietto & Selva, 2014) and provide an identifiable stimulus for colorism discourse to occur. Television as a contributor to media as a power structure has the power to shape perceptions (Sullivan & Platenburg, 2017, Happer & Philo, 2013; Adoni & Mane, 1984; Gerbner et al., 2002). These perceptions can be observed in social spaces where scholarship supports that audience members are often compelled to share their worldview on Twitter among other platforms (Webb & Robinson, 2017). These concepts are important to the study because they help illustrate how colorism in the media can be perpetuated by powerful entities but also showcase a collective level of change wanted by audience members for true diversity, which included a diversity of skin tones (Happer & Philo, 2013). The powerful entities are alluded to Barris' Twitter response to colorism accusation in which he said, "Colorism is a divisive tool used by the powerful to separate the truly powerful" (Meara, 2019). Colorism as a divisive tool used to separate people based on power aligns with the basis of CST, which also lends that colorism is a means of discrimination that delineates power and privilege. Taken together, these concepts helped shape the present studies research questions:

The following research questions provided insight into how discussions involving colorism are taking place on Twitter within the confines of black-oriented television shows

produced by Barris. These questions yielded insight into American viewers' perceptions about colorism through themes that emerged in Twitter discourse.

RQ1: What colorism themes emerge within the discourse on Twitter centered around Kenya Barris and shows produced by him, specifically Black-ish and BlackAF?

Colorism themes centered around these specific shows are important to examine because they offer insight into salient issues that occur within racial groups but have broader implications. Television is a medium that shapes audience members perceptions and has the power to normalize media information; while Twitter is a social media platform that allows audience members to communicate and affirm worldviews through shared experiences. Thus, making them both ways that contribute to audience member social construction of reality, which entails the way media is understood from an individual's own beliefs, experiences, and perceptions (Adoni & Mane, 1984). Previous CST findings show that colorism is the preferential treatment of lighter skin individuals over darker skin individuals, resulting in the adverse mistreatment of those with darker skin (Hall, 2018). Thus, a pattern of themes showing evidence of a preference for lighter skin would support CST. The research question posed was important to explore because of the way television shapes perceptions, especially when it comes to how black-oriented media affects how other racial groups view black people (Sullivan & Platenburg, 2017; Vickers, 2018; Banjo, 2013).

RQ2: What colorism themes emerge within the discourse on Twitter centered around power structures namely Barris himself as the creator of these shows and the networks that air his shows?

Colorism themes centered around these power structures are important to examine because these institutions are in control of what become mainstream contributing to how

television normalizes U.S. culture (Gerbner et al., 2002). Barris, the network, writers portrayal of the Black experience/Blackness have the opportunity to inform a majority white audience (Banjo, 2013; Porter, 2021; Stoll, 2021). This presents showrunners the opportunity to either perpetuate or dismantle harmful stereotypes about Black Americans stereotypes (Tukachinsky et al., 2015; Erves, 2019). Acknowledgment, of the influence of these stereotypes in the media is important because they have implications on how other races view Black Americans (Banj0, 2013). Thus, there is concern that these oversimplified depictions of a racial are internalized into non-Black audience members perceptions (Vickers, 2018; Banjo, 2013;Happer & Philo, 2013; Adoni & Mane, 1984). Previous CST findings show that colorism contributes to skin color by discriminating against darker skin individuals, limiting their ability for education, job attainment, marriageability, beauty ideals (Hall, 2018; Hunter, 1998; Gullickson, 2005; Mathews & Johnson, 2015). Thus, a pattern of themes of the over-representation of lighter skin actors in shows points to discrimination of darker skin actors as it relates to casting shows evidence that would support CST (Rhaman, 2020; Leary, 2018). Taken from the principles of CRT social organization, systems, and institutions create power structures that impact racial groups wherein CST centralizes skin color and is used to extend the media as a power structure.

Chapter IV: Methodology

This study used a qualitative content analysis to explore themes related to colorism in the discourse on Twitter within the context of Black-oriented shows produced by Kenya Barris. This method was used because, “it requires the researcher to focus on selected aspects of meaning, namely those aspects that relate to the overall research questions” (Schreirer, 2014, p. 170). In this way the qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to be flexible in that the categories developed from the coding process are guided by the data (Schreirer, 2014). This process

allowed initial coding and analysis of data to occur and helped the researcher evaluate the data without assumptions or expectations (Schreirer, 2014).

Why Twitter?

Twitter was chosen because it is a platform on social media that offers a large sample of audience members as well access to a forum where individuals communicate their worldview (Webb & Robinson, 2017; Carney, 2016; Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014). Twitter's advanced search was used to input the search terms and find original posts and replies containing *Black-ish* or *BlackAF* and colorism. Results from the search terms about *Black-ish* were collected from the timeframe of January 15, 2019, to January 15, 2020, because January 15, 2019, marked the premiere of the "Black Like Us" episode on colorism. Results from the search terms about *BlackAF* were collected from the timeframe of April 17, 2020, to April 17, 2021, because April 17, 2020, marked the premiere of *BlackAF* on Netflix.

Only original posts and replies that talked about colorism in response to *Black-ish* and *BlackAF* were analyzed. There were 245 original posts and replies collected and coded for the present study. In total, 178 posts and replies were examined for *Black-ish*, and 67 posts and replies were examined for *BlackAF*.

Along with original posts and replies, threads where multiple audience members take part in the discussion were also noted in which a stream of replies are connected to one initial post. Original posts refer to a tweet and replies refer to comments under original posts. Specifically, original posts and replies were collected under the following search terms: Blackish, colorism, Black like us and colorism, Black-ish and Black AF, Kenya Barris, colorism, and colorism, #blackAF. These search terms provided the best results for posts and replies containing discourse on colorism and these shows. The initial name of the show *BlackAF* (*BlackExcellence*) yielded

mostly articles linked to Twitter, which was not pertinent to the data collection. Other search terms such as #blackish or #KenyaBarris alone produced promotional content for the show and articles about Barris or the show. Thus, these posts and replies were excluded from the study as they did not address colorism or power structure concepts necessary for this study. The only hashtag used in this study was #blackAF because of the metadata tag's use in the name of the show title. Subsequently, pictures, memes, and gifs contained in tweets were also excluded from the study and only the text of the tweets was used. Additionally, as a source for observing data Twitter allowed uninhibited by researcher bias for audience members. Participants can alter their words or behavior when being observed and evaluated for a known reason also described as the Hawthorne or observer effect (Webb & Robinson, 2017; Stacy, 2013).

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis used for this study was Twitter posts and replies containing discourse about colorism. Colorism discourse was defined as conversations about skin color (i.e., light skin or dark skin) from audience members who viewed the television shows *Black-ish* and *BlackAF*. This means the audience members shared their perceptions, thoughts, opinions, and beliefs of the shows as they related to their familiarity with the concept of colorism. For example, an audience member that agreed with Barris' framing of colorism posted,

> "First break on Blackish's colorism episode… Immediately, (I) like that they highlighted colorism as a global issue for people of color and that for Black people in the US, it has roots in our ancestor's enslavement. Hoping they tie the pervasive nature to white supremacy soon."

Another audience member that disagreed with Barris' framing of colorism posted,

> "Well, let's hope this is readdressed in future episodes. By no means was the topic of #colorism really resolved of fully understood from Ruby and Diane's perspective. Colorism is deep and still effects people socially, economically and psychologically to this day. #blackishABC."

Original posts and replies were then coded for audience member's mention of their own life experience, mention of Barris, and mention of a network.

An Excel sheet was formatted for coding in the following way: the search terms used for each post and reply, the date of the tweets, whether the posts were in favor of the shows' framing of colorism by Barris or not in favor of the shows' framing of colorism by Barris, if the person mentioned of their own life experience, mention of Barris and mention of a network. Additionally, a screengrab of each tweet was also linked in the Excel document, and the number of likes, retweets, and replies were recorded for each tweet.

The initial categories coded in the qualitative content analysis were selected to answer the study's research questions. **RQ1** dealt with how discourse on Twitter was being framed by audience members based on their interaction with content created by Kenya Barris. **RQ2** examined power structures, which included large media corporations that are in charge of producing popular content to mass audiences. Other power structures included the producers, writers, and Barris himself as the creator, writer, and producer of his shows. To explore **RQ2** original posts and replies that mentioned Netflix/ABC or writers/producers were noted.

Measurement Categories/Initial Analysis

In the 'Black Like Us' episode of *Black-ish*, every member of Barris' family is presented as dealing with colorism regardless of skin tone. Although *BlackAF* did not deal with colorism directly, the show represents Barris' real-life family who have different skin tones. Thus, original

posts and replies were subject to initial analysis to substantiate the relationship between Barris' shows and discourse on colorism.

Agreement or Disagreement. To address **RQ1** tweets were coded for agreement or disagreement with Barris' framing of colorism in his shows. Agreement with Barris' framing of colorism was determined by positive reactions wherein audience members praised the show for addressing colorism, encouraged others to watch the show to learn more about the issue, or defended Barris' casting of the show as it related to *BlackAF*. Disagreement with Barris' framing of colorism was determined by negative reactions wherein audience members criticized the shows and/or Barris directly or suggested that Barris did not address the issue of colorism accurately.

If Agreed/If Disagreed. The category that was observed when audience members agreed with Barris' framing was, 'if agreed with Barris' then a larger conversation is needed' where the audience members positively responded to the show, but felt that there was a need for a larger conversation that should happen outside of the show and in the real world. When an audience member disagreed with Barris' framing the category observed was, 'if disagreed with Barris the issue should be taken more seriously' where the audience members negatively responded to the show and felt that the issue of colorism should not be addressed in a sit-com format when the issue has societal and political impacts.

Personal Experience. In line with **RQ1,** a consistent theme that emerged was audience members communicated their personal experience. Audience members described their personal experience with colorism by either specifying their own skin color and how they were treated or detailing the skin color of various family members and how they saw colorism take place.

Mention of Barris/Network. To address **RQ2** the present study refers to the tenant of CRT which pose that power structures are made up of social systems, social organizations, and institutions. Specifically, CST is used to centralize skin color to extend the media as a power structure that comprises of writers, producers, and television networks. While both of these categories function as a power structure they were separated to capture direct mention of Barris versus broader mentions of the network in the posts and replies. As the showrunner, Barris' name is prominently known therefore attributed to the show while mention of a network was defined for this study as meta-tagging the show through hashtags, with an @ sign or sometimes inferred by the use of "they," "the writers," and "the producers" in reference to those who control the content in the show. The initial categories were looked at to determine whether power structures in the media were discussed by audience members.

Grounded Theory Approach

Because of the nuanced topic of colorism, this research utilized grounded theory, which allows for meaning to emerge from the data (Martin & Turner, 1986). Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) grounded theory allowed the researcher to approach the topic with an open mind and let the theoretical framework emerge from the data (Martin & Turner, 1986). Martin and Turner (1986) defined grounded theory as, "an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data" (p.141; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Table 1 contains an example of the focused coding.

Table 1. Grounded Theory Data Coding

Element	Description	Colorism Study Example
Phenomenon	The concept of interest that ties everything together	Using Twitter to engage in discourse about colorism. Ex: "Colorism has seriously caused trauma and mental health issues in our community. Ever since slavery separated us from color in the house and fields, it's been an unnecessary divide between us. The more we talk about the shame of colorism the more we can heal from it. #blackish"
Causal Conditions	The conditions that influenced the phenomenon to occur	Need to express thoughts, views, and opinions of colorism as a result of being exposed to content with themes of colorism. Ex: "One thing #blackAF is doing, it(s) exposing (on Twitter at least) centuries-old pain Black Folks still carry with colorism. I mean, folks are really showing their true colors. No pun intended."
Action Strategies	The activity performed in response to the phenomenon	Communicating how viewing the media with colorism themes impacts audience perceptions. Ex: "The colorism episode of Black-ish is something i genuinely didn't understand before watching but now have a better understanding of"
Consequences	The result of the action strategies	Concerned with how portrayals of colorism influence audience members. Ex: "For the record, I've seen several white women reference #BlackAF as 'race education.' They really think that Kenya Barris' colorism and flattened interpretations of Black culture not only represent American Blackness but serve as an AfAm history/sociology lesson."

In line with grounded theory, open coding was utilized for initial analysis in which the text of every original post and reply was examined line by line which allowed a deeper understanding of the data. Patterns and constant comparison of responses were used to identify

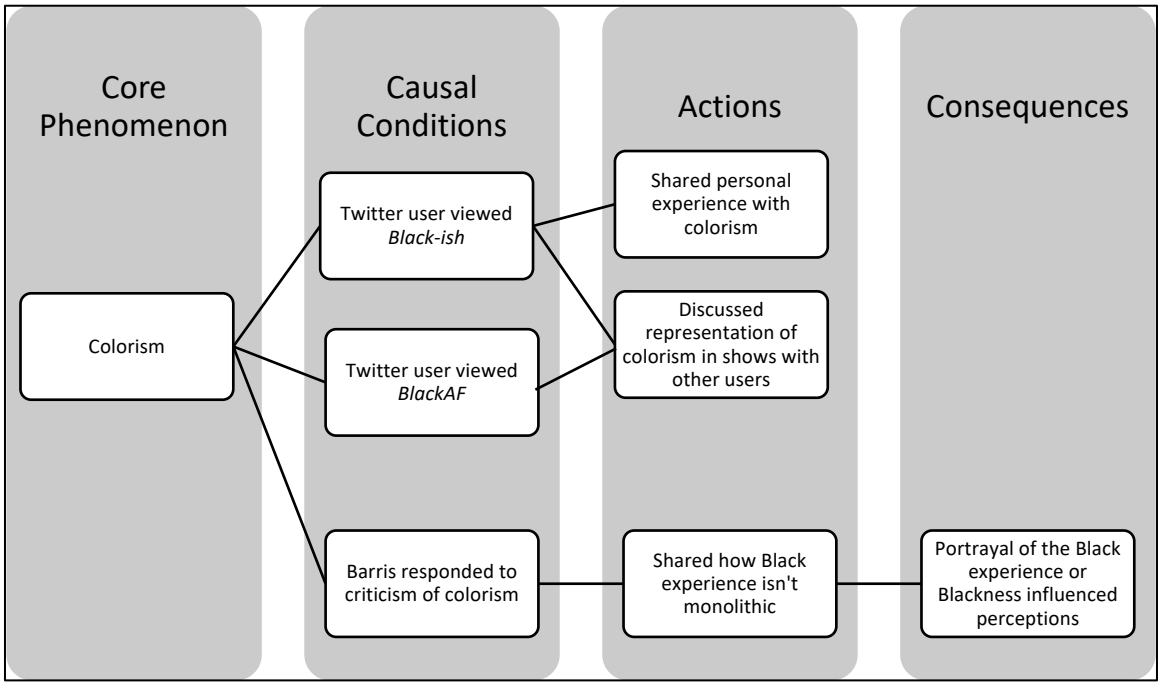
themes (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). These initial codes were determined as, 'agreed with Barris' framing of colorism', 'disagreed with Barris' framing of colorism', 'if agreed with Barris' then a larger conversation is needed', 'if disagreed with Barris the issue should be taken more seriously', 'mention of personal experience', 'mention of Barris' and 'mention of network' were coded to address **RQ1** and **RQ2**. After these initial codes were created, focused coding took place in which the researcher selected the most frequent codes that best captured the data and raise these codes to conceptual categories (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). This approach is consistent with grounded theory which allows for themes or categories to emerge from the data as it is being analyzed.

From this focused coding approach, actions were analyzed in which the researcher asked, "what caused these actions?" and "what were the consequences for these actions?" This allowed for conditions to be examined (i.e., phenomena, causal conditions, actions, and consequences) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Moore et al., 2019). The final stage of the process was theoretical coding in which the researcher integrated focused codes with literature and memos in a related conceptual framework. Because the theory guiding this research already existed the "theoretical codes refer to underlying logics that could be found in pre-existing theories" (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014, p. 159). During theoretical coding, the researcher used CST to guide the structural process occurring with the data.

The causal conditions to the concept of colorism were that the Twitter audience members viewed *Black-ish, BlackAF*, or responded to Barris' response to criticism of colorism. Thus, the actions taken in response to the causal conditions emerged in themes that were categorized as follows: 'agreed with Barris' framing of colorism', 'disagreed with Barris' framing of colorism', 'if agreed with Barris' then a larger conversation is needed', 'if disagreed with Barris the issue

should be taken more seriously', and 'mention of personal experience.' The significant theme that emerged from this data were 'shared personal experience with colorism,' 'discussed representation of colorism in shows with other users,' and 'shared how Black experience isn't monolithic.' In regard to the action of audience members sharing how the Black experience isn't monolithic the only consequence was audience members communicated how the portrayal of the Black experience or Blackness influenced perceptions. Figure 1 contains an example of the colorism discourse model.

Figure 1. Colorism Discourse Model



Chapter V: Findings

Original posts and replies from Twitter were collected as they related to colorism in response to Kenya Barris and his shows *Blackish* and *BlackAF*. The objectives and goals of this study were to 1) to determine how the discourse about colorism is being framed by Twitter users

based on their interaction with content created by Kenya Barris and 2) to investigate how users identified power structures as it related to the media.

What colorism themes emerge within the discourse on Twitter centered around Kenya Barris and shows produced by him, specifically *Black-ish* and *BlackAF*?

To address **RQ1** initial themes were identified as **'agreed with Barris' framing of colorism'** and **'disagreed with Barris' framing of colorism.'** These themes described audience members positive and negative reactions to the shows in the study. The themes allowed for the identification of discussions of colorism as it related to the shows to be established. Subsequently, this articulation of agreement or disagreement also included strong opinions about how the conversation of colorism should be approached. This subcategory of themes was identified as **'if agreed with Barris' then a larger conversation is needed'** and **'if disagreed with Barris the issue should be taken more seriously.'** Audience members that agreed with Barris' framing wanted the topic of colorism to be discussed more in real life. For example, and audience member posted,

> "this episode of #blackish is great black people need to talk about colorism."

While, those that disagreed with Barris' framing thought the conversation of colorism should not take place in a sit-com. One audience member stated,

> "Not totally satisfied with the analysis of colorism in on #blackish, but it is a half hour show & I think it was a net positive. As a light skin those jokes aren't the same as the oppression darker skin folks face & I've never met someone who TRULY though[t] I wasn't 'Black enough'."

To which these initial categories did not extend past initial observation. Significant to this research was audience members disclosing their personal experiences with colorism aligning

with how CST poses that there is preferential treatment of lighter skin individuals and adverse treatment of darker skin individuals (Hall, 2018; Goldsmith et al., 2007; Painter et al., 2016; Reece, 2019).

Shared Personal Experiences with Colorism. There were 31 posts and replies that were coded for audience members who posted their own life experiences with colorism after viewing the shows *Black-ish* and *BlackAF*. The theme that emerged was, 'mention of own life experience' where the audience member's included their personal experience with colorism in response to seeing the show providing rich data and insight into an individual's experience. Aligning with CST audience members acknowledged that colorism is experienced differently by individuals, where those with darker skin face more systematic disadvantages and harsher treatment from society (Hall, 2018). For instance, one audience member posted,

> "Coming from a biracial family, tonight's episode of #Blackish about colorism hit close to home. My grandfather was hard on black people with a dark complexion, including family members. It's a conversation that needs to happen."

Similarly, another audience member posted,

> "#blackish colorism I can personally speak on this issue. Episode well done, and as I thought, brought up a lot of pain for me, as I was called 'eclipse' by the kids as I was the darkest kid on the block. The issue, like racism, won't be solved in my lifetime."

Additionally, audience members who identified themselves as having light skin spoke to the privilege and preference they experienced they perceived by having lighter skin. One audience member stated,

> "While I grew up identifying more with being fat than light, there is no pretending that us lightskints are preferred by whites, Blacks, & non-black POCs In, almost every sector of

> life. The jokes are a small 'price' to pay & are clear & obvious reaction to systematic oppression."

The same audience member continued on in a thread about their realization of colorism,

> "I didn't understand and when I told my about it I was upset with her for not telling me about colorism. But colorism & preference for lightskin is undeniable. I grew up hearing the rhymes & knowing about paper bag test for colleges & sororities."

Overall, there were a significant amount of audience members' expressing their personal experiences therefore opinions about colorism much like the past scholarship that explored Twitter discourse as it relates to colorism or stimulated by viewing television (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Giglietto & Selva, 2014; Webb & Robinson, 2017). Specifically, this study found that audience members communicated that colorism was a significant part of their experience with colorism where they recognized that preference for light skin is and mistreatment of those with dark skin.

What colorism themes emerge within the discourse on Twitter centered around power structures namely Barris himself as the creator of these shows and the networks that air his shows?

In line with **RQ2,** power structures at play were determined to be producer, writer Kenya Barris, the networks ABC and Netflix, the shows' producers, writers, and a general 'they' to represent a larger notion of those in charge. To identify these power structures there were 52 posts and replies coded for **'mention of Barris'** and 101 posts and replies coded for **'mention of network.'** While many of the power structures were alluded to mention of the power structures were determined by meta-tagging the show with a hashtag, or with an @ sign. For instance, one audience member uses the shows hashtag and tags the writers,

> "Diane teaches adults a lesson in skin tones. Blackish once again doesn't sugarcoat, proving over and over again why it is one of the most important programs in television history – and very funny. BRAVO to all involved! #blackish @blackishwriters."

Another audience member posted,

> "Never heard the 'pretty for a darkskinned girl' thing until senior year in college and had to educate the young brother as to why it was rude. Only when I asked him how did he like being told he was smart 'for a football player' did he get it. #blackish @blackishabc #colorism."

How audience members discussed each power structure varied but the most common theme that occurred was discussion of casting. Wherein which the casting of the shows exemplified colorism at play in the shows spawning continued discourse.

Representation in Casting. There were 96 posts and replies coded for the category of 'representation of colorism in the casting of the shows' in the shows. Both *Black-ish* and *BlackAF* audience members discussed the casting of characters contributing to the representation of colorism. Many audience members expressed that the shows should not have tackled colorism without the representation of darker-skin characters, where *Black-ish* and *BlackAF* are shows seen with an overrepresentation of light skin characters.

For instance, an audience member stated,

> "But they shouldn't talk about colorism when they did the same thing that everyone else does. They hypocritical to try to bring awareness to an issue that they contributed to."

Another audience member stated,

> "It took them several seasons before they even discussed colorism. And they gave it one episode. And still no cast members are darkskin. Tell me you'd be okay with this scenario if it was all white people talking about racism for one episode and I'd laugh."

This representation of colorism surrounding casting aligns with viewer awareness of how those in Hollywood determine what is being shown (Rhaman, 2020). Lighter skin actors are portrayed as the main character most prevalently in American media, so these characters can be perceived a more racially ambiguous therefore the story being portrayed takes precedent for viewers (Lo, 2017). Overall, audience members recognize that colorism in the media prevents darker skin actors and actresses from receiving roles (Rhaman, 2020). One audience member stated,

> "I just feel lie there is sooo much biracial and mixed representation in all aspects of media but not enough black people (dark skinned) who get actual representation or credit, a lot of the times light skinned (mixed) people are choose over darker people."

While some felt as though Barris portrayed lighter skin characters too often in his shows, Barris, as the most prominent contributor to the shows, is mentioned directly by name in audience members posts and replies. As it regarded casting audience members discussed Barris' reasoning for casting light skin characters because they resembled his family. For example, an audience member stated,

> "The reason I'm not heavily critiquing #BlackAF and other Kenya Barris productions regarding the colorism issue is because he writes things based on his own family."

One audience member stated,

> "If I'm not mistaken I DO believe #blackAF is based on his life so the colorism arguments for casting don't apply."

Another audience member stated,

> "People are mad that the show Black AF is being renewed because they feel that Kenya Barris wife isn't "black"… like bro she's mixed, the series is based off his actual family. Everybody doesn't have to be dark skinned to be black af. Stop the colorism shit!"

Audience member's defense of Barris creating shows based on his family is in line with Adoni and Mane's (1984) research on how individual's produce and create their social construction of reality based on their internalized meaning, beliefs and actions. In Barris' case his social construction of reality is portrayed in his shows contributes to mass media's role in informing audiences (Adoni & Mane, 1984).

Shared How the Black Experience isn't Monolithic. There were 49 posts and replies that were coded for the category of 'shared how the Black experience isn't monolithic.' Where audience members questioned what defines Blackness and how that definition could potentially be defined by how Barris portrays characters in his shows *Black-ish* and *BlackAF*. Many of the discussions that surrounded the Black experience were in direct response to Barris posting his response to criticism of colorism on *BlackAF.* For instance, an audience member posted,

> "kenya [B]Harris is getting so much hate for #blackaf as if… that's not the life of the people you look up to live. the black experience is not universal at all, there are people who struggle more, have it easier, etc…ie: colorism??? which y'all talk about every other week."

Similarly, another audience member stated,

> "Y'all gonna hate me, but I don't see anything wrong with the idea. Bc biracial & mixed people have completely different experiences compared to other blacks. Having a nonblack parent/family members is a completely different experience than having all black family."

Barris responded to criticism of colorism of BlackAF by stating that the characters were a representation of his actual family (Essence, 2019). Users defended Barris' right to portray what constitutes his Black experience which involves his family.

An audience member posted, "And it's his life. It's not a documentary on the black experience. People gotta chill. I thought it was funny."

Pertinent to this idea that the Black experience not being monolithic is a viewer's social construction of reality, where viewers determine meaning from their experiences and actions (Adoni & Mane, 1984).

Discussions about how Barris portrayed the Black experience in his show *BlackAF* soon turned into threads where the conversation shifted to audience members discussing what defined Blackness. The over representation of lighter skin characters in *BlackAF* made some audience members question the way Blackness was demonstrated in the show. An audience member posted,

> "Y'all skip #blackAF. It's another one of those performative Black shows that centers light-skin, white passing, and culture vulture Black folks who treats Blackness as aesthetic to appeal to the masses, rather than a true experience for US. The plot is typical, wack."

Another audience member replied in another thread,

> "I was literally just thinking this! it's just sad like everybody's 'black experience' is not the same experience and clearly half of the people that are mad about this TV show don't live in Hollywood with mixed race kids so & bc they're mixed it doesn't make them any less black."

While the conversations centered around colorism, discussions of race were often intertwined signifying how racial identity portrayed in the media influences perceptions (Vickers, 2018; Banjo, 2013). The data suggests that audience members understood everyone has their own Black experience and what is portrayed on television is just one version of this experience determined by writers, producers and showrunners. Similarly, perceptions of what constitutes the Black experience and blackness are dependent on the viewers' worldview and understanding of the media images (Happer & Philo, 2013; Adoni & Mane, 1984; Gerbner et al., 2002).

A consequence of portraying shows that encompass the Black experience is that these portrayals of Blackness influence the perceptions of non-Black viewers. As it involves Black-oriented media audience members communicated concern with how Black characters portrayed affected audience perceptions. For example, an audience member stated,

> "Let's talk about the real reason people are upset here. They fear erasure of self and the influx of people that don't look like them being able to define blackness due to their privilege. Which brings us back to colorism and proximity to whiteness #blackaf #colorism #blackness."

Discourse on Twitter as it related to perceptions influenced by Black-oriented media referenced power structures in the media such as writers and producers sometimes specifically mentioning Barris and expressing concern of how other races perceive this type of media. For example, an audience member posted,

> "It's obvious that the people behind those shows never felt 'black enough',and base their idea of 'blackness' through the lenses of YT [white] people. Those shows are just

> televised huge micro-aggression regurgitating futile SJW [social justice warriors] twitter narratives. The show is dated & lame."

Another audience member stated,

> "I wonder if other *races have the same feelings when shows casting them get the green light… or is it just black people who have to define what is or isn't black enough to determine how 'for something' we will be. #supportblackactors."

Similarly, another audience member posted,

> "For the record, I've seen several white women reference #BlackAF as 'race education.' They really think that Kenya Barris' colorism and flattened interpretations of Black culture not only represent American Blackness but serve as a AfAm [African American] history/sociology lesson."

One audience member stated,

> "I got no dog in this fight imma just step out lol but I agree that #BlackAf is performative and cheap comedy dependent on bringing stereotypical Black family tropes to white people while presenting them with mainly mixed actors as a form of colorism. ODR is not my place."

In line with Banjo's (2013) research there was an overall concern with how other races view content, specifically white audience members. Although the race of each individual audience member could not be identified, there is significant concern about how Blackness or the Black experience is communicated to non-Black audiences. The third person effect helps explain the concern of audience members because individuals perceive other people are more affected by the media than they are (Banjo, 2013; Davison, 1983). Furthermore, past scholarly research gives validity to the concerns to those viewing Black-oriented media the non-Black audiences will

internalize what is being shown as factual (Harrison et al., 2008; Sullivan & Platenburg, 2017; Pornsakulvanich, 2007; Tukachinsky et al., 2015).

Chapter IV: Discussion and Conclusion

Critical race theory posits race as the center of to the everyday experience of people of color (Burton et al., 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, p. xvii; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Brown, 2003, Hall, 2018). Critical skin theory extends this further by positioning colorism as the center of persons of color's lived experience. Florini (2014) adds that Twitter users are influencer's of cultures and social change, often feel that their voices, experiences, culture and language are often omitted or misinterpreted within mainstream media. As these themes encompassed a broad category of findings, the following discussion will draw similarities and differences to key scholarly work in CST and colorism research. The discourse of the audience members that were sampled contributed to strategic communication scholarship by bringing the discourse provided to the forefront of the present study. The purpose of this research was to position the audience members as social agents to offer insight into understanding and examining the complex social phenomenon of colorism in their lives (Webb & Robinson, 2017). Guided by CST and colorism research, this study explored colorism themes that emerged.

What colorism themes emerge within the discourse on Twitter centered around Kenya Barris and shows produced by him, specifically Black-ish and BlackAF?

Discussion of Experiences of Colorism. The content about colorism in Barris' shows prompted several audience members to reflect on their experience with colorism. Audience member's detailed their experiences where there was privilege associated with lighter skin and adverse treatment of those with darker skin (Hall, 2018; Hunter, 1998; Gullickson, 2005; Mathews & Johnson, 2015). One of the primary themes that persisted was there remains a color

stratification process that still persists. In the discussion of the show and casting preferential treatment of those with lighter skin was a main topic (Goldsmith et al, 2007). The audience members confirmed their experiences of colorism and mentioned how colorism shaped how they saw themselves as well as how they interacted with others. While lighter skin audience member's understood that they had privilege or preference over others, in some instances they also felt their race was invalidated. This aligns with Webb (2014) article that found that light skin women have their race questioned constantly. Audience members confirmed with their tweets about feeling racially ambiguous and not fitting into any one racial category. This notion of undefined racial categories aligns with Hall's (2018) acquisition that society is moving away from racial categories into social categories based on skin color.

Discussion of Families Influence on Colorism/Internalized View. Burton and colleagues (2010) research established that colorism impacts the family dynamics by asserting that outside social and intrapersonal factors of racial identities affect relationships in families of color (Bratter & King, 2008). Audience members explicitly refer to their families skin color composition when describing their lived or observed experience of colorism. Similarly, Maddox (2004) conceptualized the idea of skin tone bias as people behaving differently towards other people based on the lightness or darkness of one's skin supporting audience member's experience of darker people being treated differently by lighter skin family members. This preferential treatment is attributed to the skin color stratification system of slavery, which gave preference to those with skin color closer white (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018; Gullickson, 2005; Hunter, 1998; Harris, 2018). Consequently, this skin color stratification system was internalized and perpetuated over time, most prominently in the Black community. This internalization of colorism through personal experiences and beliefs as well as their families affirming of skin

color bias can aid a person's constructed worldview (Adonis & Mane, 1984; Hunter, 2007). These findings converge with Webb and Robinson's (2017) study that found that discourse on Twitter offers insight into the construction of identity and how the "personal construct" of colorism is communicated (p. 32). Parallel to the current study, Webb & Robinson (2017) found a significant amount of personal experience as it regarded discourse on colorism, to establish their own authority or credibility of the concept. Furthermore, familial influences played an essential role as to how viewers understood their identities in relation to their skin color as well as how they understood skin color in general (Banjo, 2013; Collins, 1986; Hunter, 2007; Hunter, 1998).

The sub-theme of 'shared personal experience' emerged from the data revealing that there still remains a preference for lighter skin (Hall, 2018; Maddox, 2004). This finding is important because discrimination based on skin color functions in the same way racism, in which discrimination of those with darker skin have real life implications. Bringing the discussion of colorism out of the shadows and into a broader conversation highlights skin color bias as discrimination. This research supports those biases were confirmed in the textual analysis as being observed in the media, prompting audience members intrapersonally. Although, it should be noted that audience members did not go into the broader effects of colorism such as disadvantage affect marriageability, job attainment, social mobility, and educations attainment established by colorism scholars (Hunter, 1998; Gullickson, 2005; Mathews & Johnson, 2015).

What colorism themes emerge within the discourse on Twitter centered around power structures namely, Barris himself as the creator of these shows and the networks that air his shows?

Discussion of Colorism Representation in the Media. The notion of power structures was taken from the tenant of CRT to extend the media as a power structure that contributes to colorism (Burton et al., 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, p. xvii; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Brown, 2003, Hall, 2018). From initial analysis these power structures were determined as writers, producers, and television networks. Along with these broader notions of those in charge, Kenya Barris was identified as a contributor these power structures. These power structures were mentioned in broader terms and specifically, as it related to casting. understanding of colorism through dissecting the representation of colorism in the shows within the casting of the show. In the past, advertisers have observed a preference for lighter skin by consumers (Keenan, 1996; Mayo et al., 2006; Meyers, 2008; Frisby, 2006), however, the Twitter discourse, along with recent research surrounding colorism, suggests that the preferences are changing. The colorism discourse in this study indicated that audience members wanted a more representative cast of characters, specifically more dark-skin representation especially if the topic of the show is colorism. Similar research such as Leary's (2018) study also found that viewers wanted to see more representation of darker skin actors and actresses.

An additional theme that emerged from the data was about what affect media images had on perceptions. While some wanted a more representative cast of varying skin colors, others understood that Barris based the show on his family. Users often shared the notion that the Black experience is not a monolith and as a consequence audience members expressed hyper-awareness of how racial identity portrayed by the media influenced perceptions (Vickers, 2018; Banjo, 2013). Similar to Banjo's (2013) findings, Black audiences are apprehensive to the portrayals of Blackness to majority non-Black audiences, perhaps because there is a fear that what is portrayed as one person's experience becomes the standard for all experiences. Barris as a

prominent showrunner has the unique power to reinforce or dismantle stereotypes, as they relate to colorism (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Leary's (2018) study concluded that those in power that control the narratives should understand the casting of character based on skin tone is just as important as racial diversity because it can affect viewer perceptions (Happer & Philo, 2013).

Limitations of Research

The limitations to this can be found in the selected method. Grounded theory allows meaning to be derived from data however when analyzing textual data clarifications cannot be made. Specifically, as it involves Twitter posts and replies can be deleted from threads at any time limiting understanding of the discourse being analyzed. Furthermore, the current study only looks at two shows - *Black-ish* and *BlackAF* produced by Kenya Barris - when there are other Black-oriented shows by other producers (e.g., Scandal, How to Get Away With Murder, Bridgerton by Shonda Rhimes). An expansive study about multiple, Black-oriented shows across multiple seasons would allow for a longitudinal data about viewer perceptions of colorism. This study cannot be generalized as colorism is a global issue that affect many racial group/ethnicities in different ways. This specific study looks at colorism in American society stimulated by American media and culture.

Future Research

Future research should combine audience member discourse on Twitter with interviews or focus groups to have a well-rounded scope of audience member perceptions. Thus, future research should provide a narrative of how colorism is experienced, constructed, and communicated with exposure to television content. A survey is also recommended for future research to account for demographic, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of audience members as it is related to colorism. Considering the numerous posts and replies for continuation colorism

conversations, it would be useful for future researcher's to conduct a longitudinal study to evaluate larger amounts of original posts and replies. This would allow an entire season of a show or shows regarding colorism to be evaluated and compared. In addition, future research could expand beyond Twitter and look at Facebook for discourse about colorism. As Twitter is limited to 240 characters, Facebook may provide more in-depth textual data to be analyzed.

Conclusion

Overall, the present study has concluded that colorism is a complex system of inequality that has been internalized as a result of the racial skin hierarchy put in place by slavery in the America. Through Twitter audience members posts and replies were able to be collected as textual data. This data exemplified the complexities of colorism in American society which are reinforced by television content (Gerbner et al, 2002). The data collection tools in this research offered unique insight into the discourse on colorism and how images in the media reinforce or dismantle certain notions. Specifically, this research is representative of colorism scholarship and applied to the media with CST. Using the tenants of CRT, this research extends applies power structures to CST as factors that contribute to skin color inequality (Hall, 2018). These power structures were extended to the media and asserted that television is a powerful tool that influences perceptions, cultures and opinions (Happer & Philo, 2013). The findings of this study were that when exposed to Black-oriented media regarding colorism audience members shared their personal experience, discussed representation in casting with audience members, and shared how the black experience isn't a monolith.

The main goal of my research was to position the viewers as social agents to offer insight into understanding and exploring the complex social phenomenon's in their lives (Jenkins, 2009). By affirming audience members discourse as important contributions to the scholarship of

colorism, this research provides them with not only a voice but also representation in the scholarship of colorism, and by extension the Black experience. The implications of this research suggest that true representation includes the portrayal of complex characters of diverse races and skin tones (Leary, 2018). Most prominently, this calls for true representation speaks to television networks and calls writers and showrunners to cast more divers actors of varying skin tones. As it functions, colorism is an extension of racism that operates in multiple facet of society. Thus, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts in the media should encompass skin color as a contributor to discrimination and recognize the power media images have in reinforcing or dismantling hierarchical systems of privilege or preference.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Colorism Discourse Model

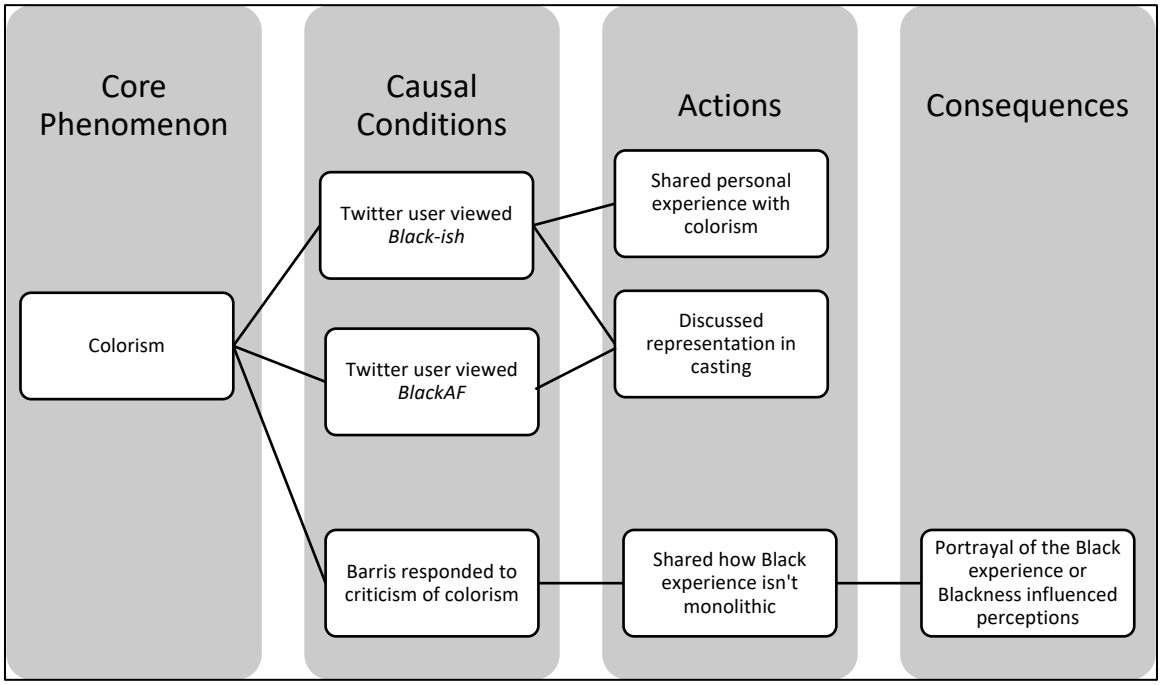

Table 1. Grounded Theory Data Coding

Element	Description	Colorism Study Example
Phenomenon	The concept of interest that ties everything together	Using Twitter to engage in discourse about colorism. Ex: "Colorism has seriously caused trauma and mental health issues in our community. Ever since slavery separated us from color in the house and fields, it's been an unnecessary divide between us. The more we talk about the shame of colorism the more we can heal from it. #blackish"
Causal Conditions	The conditions that influenced the phenomenon to occur	Need to express thoughts, views, and opinions of colorism as a result of being exposed to content with themes of colorism. Ex: "One thing #blackAF is doing, it(s) exposing (on Twitter at least) centuries-old pain Black Folks still carry with colorism. I mean, folks are really showing their true colors. No pun intended."
Action Strategies	The activity performed in response to the phenomenon	Communicating how viewing the media with colorism themes impacts audience perceptions. Ex: "The colorism episode of Black-ish is something i genuinely didn't understand before watching but now have a better understanding of"
Consequences	The result of the action strategies	Concerned with how portrayals of colorism influence audience members. Ex: "For the record, I've seen several white women reference #BlackAF as 'race education.' They really think that Kenya Barris' colorism and flattened interpretations of Black culture not only represent American Blackness but serve as an AfAm history/sociology lesson."