

8-2019

"I Like . . . Red Bone:" Colorism, Rappers, and Black College Sorority Women at a Predominantly White Institution

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“I Like . . . Red Bone:” Colorism, Rappers, and Black College Sorority Women at a
Predominantly White Institution

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Sociology

by

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Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, 2016

August 2019

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine black college sorority women's views about skin tone bias in hip-hop culture. I conduct interviews with 12 black undergraduate women in Black Greek Letter Sororities at a predominantly white institution. Prior research finds that rap music sends skin color messages to adolescent women through lyrical content and music videos. I build on this work by exploring how the experiences of being in college shape black college sorority women's views on skin tone bias and hip-hop. I find that time in college has been an important life stage in which black sorority women gained an increased sense of awareness and confidence about their own and others' identities, showed concern about how others interpreted messages in hip-hop, and wanted to see more inclusive women representation in hip-hop.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my amazing thesis committee, Dr. Brandon Jackson, Dr. Anna Zajicek, and Dr. Brittany Hearne. Thank you Dr. Jackson for agreeing to be my thesis chair. Your guidance and feedback during this research project has helped me to grow as a scholar and is much appreciated. Thank you Dr. Zajicek for always being an invaluable resource for me since my time here as an undergraduate student. Finally, thank you Dr. Hearne for being an incredible and supportive mentor. I cannot thank you enough for your support and always being open to listen to me.

I also want to thank my family. I am forever grateful for the unwavering support of my mom, dad, and sister. I would not be the student I am today without them.

Thank you God. I recognize that none of this would be possible with him.

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Introduction

One of the first things I do when I wake up in the morning is turn on my music playlist and prepare for the day listening to the rhythmic sounds of hip-hop and rhythm and blues (R&B). Exposed to these catchy genres since I was a young girl, I am definitely an R&B and hip-hop enthusiast. However, I, like several other young black women, have a complicated relationship with hip-hop. Joan Morgan, a self-proclaimed hip-hop feminist, addressed this complexity in her classic text *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*: “In between the beats, booty shaking, . . . , I have to wonder if there isn’t anything inherently unfeminist in supporting a music that repeatedly reduces me to tits and ass” (Morgan 1999:66). Like breasts and buttocks, skin color is another standard of beauty that has been emphasized in hip-hop culture.

Colorism is a real and tangible issue in the black community. For example, light skin can work as social capital for women of color. Lighter-skinned black women are more privileged in areas of education, income, and spousal status than their darker-skinned counterparts (Wilder and Cain 2011:581). Sociological research has also found that generally lighter-skinned African Americans earn more money, complete more years of education, live in better neighborhoods, and marry higher-status people of the same race/ethnicity (Hunter 2007: 237). In all, colorism can have major implications for a variety of outcomes.

Colorism is the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts (Hunter 2007:237). In the African American community, colorism often fosters an environment in which general European physical attributes (i.e. lighter skin or narrower noses) are preferred to general African physical attributes (i.e. darker skin or wider noses) (Maxwell, Abrams, and Belgrave 2016:1489). In the United States, where much emphasis is placed on race, even subtle variation in one’s phenotype, such as skin color, can

have major consequences for individual opportunity (Hill 2002:1444). African Americans live in a society where they constantly experience discrimination because of the color of their skin. But the intensity, the frequency, and the outcome of the discrimination will differ largely by skin tone (Hunter 2007). In regard to gender, the social and psychological effects of colorism can be severe and magnified among African American women (Maxwell, Abrams, and Belgrave 2016:1489).

Hip-hop is one medium through which meanings about standards of beauty and colorism are circulated. Although increasing studies have focused on the influence of stereotypical images within hip-hop and black youth (Stephens and Few 2007, Stokes 2007; Maxwell, Abrams, and Belgrave 2016), less attention has been given to black college women. Henry (2010) argues “Today’s young Black college women, when exploring and solidifying their identities, must detangle a barrage of conflicting positive and negative messages within the musical genre” (140). In listening and hearing these contradictory messages, Henry maintains that young black college women are faced with a complex issue with the context of a patriarchal hip-hop culture (Henry 2010:140).

In this study, I examine black college sorority women’s views about skin tone bias in hip-hop culture. Hip-hop is one of the most globally consumed byproducts of larger or general African American culture (Maxwell, Abrams, and Belgrave 2016:1488). However, simply listening to hip-hop is not the only way that skin tone messages are consumed. People watch rap videos, listen to hip-hop interviews, follow their favorite artists on social media, and also notice who hip-hop artists date. Prior research has established that rap music sends skin color messages to black adolescent women through lyrical content and music videos (Maxwell, Abrams, and Belgrave 2016). However, I build on this work by exploring how the experiences of being at a

predominantly white university shape black college sorority women's views on colorism in hip-hop. In contrast to their views as children and adolescents, the women I interviewed experienced a progressive change in their thinking about the relationship between skin tone and hip-hop once they became older and, more specifically, during their time in college. By joining a sorority, the women also expressed a desire to surround themselves around a positive group of women. The young women both appreciated and admired the service that black sorority members took part in.

Black college sorority women occupy a unique standpoint in the conversation regarding colorism in hip-hop. One, as they are in college, their education level warrants inclusion within this discussion. Two, scholars have acknowledged the relationship between black sororities and stereotypes, based on colorism and classism (Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughley 2011; Giddings 2007; Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992). However, academic literature lacks empirical research on black college sorority women (Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughley 2011). I argue that their standpoint can offer contemporary insights about colorism in hip-hop. More specifically, this study contributes to academic literature by providing new insights about black sorority members and their views about skin-tone bias in hip-hop. In addition, this research introduces a dynamic view of how we examine intersectionality, as black college women described feelings as young adults that differed from feelings in their adolescent years.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality and Black Feminist Epistemology

In this study, race, gender, and educational attainment all come together, or intersect, to shape the lives of the interviewees and their perspectives about colorism in hip-hop. In *Incorporating Intersectionality*, Murphy and her colleagues (2009) examined the conceptual framework of intersectionality. As a theoretical perspective, intersectionality advances our

understanding of how various hierarchies of power and oppression based on race, class, gender, and sexuality, for example, intersect to create unique life experiences and reproduce inequalities. These socially constructed identity categories are inseparable and influence societal relationships, construct meanings, and shape people's everyday experiences (Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, and Hamilton 2009:7). In discussing intersectionality, Crenshaw (1991) has cited examples in which black women are marginalized by being negatively represented through rap lyrics and other forms of media. However, the way young black women interact with these messages may differ as they become older and during their time in college. As black women in college, black sorority women have a unique position within the intersectionality framework: their race, gender, and educational status impacts their daily lives.

Essed (1991) also recognized the intersecting categories of race and gender. In 1991, she developed the term *gendered racism* to describe how racism and sexism “intertwine and combine under certain conditions into one hybrid phenomenon” (Essed 1991:31). More specifically, Essed argued that the racial oppression black women experience was structured by racist perceptions of gender roles (Essed 1991). Several scholars have continued to build on this concept, even in regard to black college women (Burton 2017; Szymanski and Lewis 2016; Cottonham 2018). Thomas, Speight, and Witherspoon argued that gendered racism “suggest that African American women are subject to unique forms of oppression due to their simultaneous ‘blackness’ and ‘femaleness’” (Thomas, Speight, and Witherspoon 2008:307). Similar to intersectionality, gendered racism posits that the categories of race and gender are inseparable for black women.

Additionally, black feminist epistemology is a valuable framework to examine the standpoint of black sorority women. Black feminist epistemology is a way of “‘knowing’ that

reflects the unique standpoint of Black women” (Murphy et al. 2009:7). The framework has also been closely connected to intersectionality, serving as an epistemological foundation for many black feminist intellectuals who advocate for intersectionality. Patricia Hill Collins conceptualized black feminist thought as specialized knowledge created by black women that clarifies the standpoint of and for black women (Murphy et al. 2009:9). She argued that, specifically for black women, the knowledge gained by examining the viewpoint of those who occupy marginalized positions “provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of Black women’s critical social theory” (Collins 2009:11). This idea was reiterated by bell hooks (1989), who maintained that members of socially oppressed groups must begin defining their reality, naming their history, and telling their story. In sum, this current study emphasizes how race, gender, and educational status shape the lives of black women. My project builds upon these perspectives and frameworks by highlighting how black women, who are both a large portion of the consumers of hip-hop and are often subjects of lyrics related to skin tone, come to view colorism in hip-hop during their time in college.

Historical Context of Colorism

Skin tone bias against women of African descent has existed since slavery. Sexual violence, such as rape, was part of the beginning of the skin color stratification processes. This violence was a form of social control that white slave owners used to subdue, terrorize, and control black women (Hunter 2005:17). Along with the physical and emotional stress black women faced, this violent form of social control led to the creation of a color hierarchy through systematic privileging of light-skinned black people over darker-skinned black people (Hunter 2005). The systematic rape of black women by white men created both a population of blacks with varied skin tones and a large number of light-skinned biracial children. Overseers often

gave racially mixed children special status because they were the offspring of a slave owner. Although the children were defined as black, and thus legally enslaved, their proximity to whiteness granted them opportunities such as manumission, access to education, and less stressful work tasks (Hunter 2005). Lighter-skinned black people, although still in bondage, were aware that a lighter skin tone resulted in elevated positions in the social setting. This led to black people with lighter skin tones purposely reproducing among themselves to create offspring that would be considered “beautiful” and more socially advantaged (Brown, Parks, and Phillips 2003; Matthews and Johnson 2015). Because of this, women slaves with lighter skin were considered to be more attractive, smarter, and more delicate (Kerr 2006; Matthews and Johnson 2015).

Alice Walker coined the term *colorism* in 1983 to describe the “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their skin tone” (Walker 1983). The birth of a “golden” child or the desire to marry a “high-yellow” in order to “lighten up the race” were examples, according to Walker, of the manifestations of colorism (Walker 1983). These manifestations have carried over to the 21st century, and colorist ideology can often refer to not only skin pigmentation, but also hair texture, eye color, and facial features (Matthews and Johnson 2015). In recent years, more scholars have begun to examine the impact of skin tone for African American women (Hill 2002; Thompson and Keith 2001; Matthews and Johnson 2015). For example, Thompson and Keith (2001) found that skin color was an important predictor of self-esteem for adult black women. Black women, however, are not a monolithic group, and it is important scholars continue to examine how skin tone impacts black women in varied environments.

Black Female Sororities and the Significance of Skin Tone

During the early 1900s, few black people were allowed to attend predominantly white higher education institutions (Ray 2013:323). For black people who were able to attend these institutions, discrimination was widespread. African Americans could not join the clubs, societies, and fraternities and sororities at their schools. The social lives of black students were perceived as unimportant. Despite this discrimination, black students found ways to socialize with one another (Brown, Parks, and Phillips. 2005:60). Black Greek Letter Organizations emerged as a “response to the discrimination and alienation black students experienced on campus and in their daily lives” (Ray 2013:323).

During this same time period, African Americans also faced a national climate that upheld racial injustice and inequality (Bonner 2006). BGLOs offered a support system to help black students survive at institutions where they were the minority and provided a common ground to engage in meaningful relationships with their black peers (Brown, Parks, and Phillips 2005; Bonner 2006). The first black sorority began in 1908 at Howard University with Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011). Today, there are four total Black Greek Letter Sororities, including Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, and Sigma Gamma Rho (Brown, Parks, and Phillips 2005; Taylor 2008).

The aforementioned history of colorism within and around the larger African American community has had influences within Black Greek Letter organizations. The significance of skin tone in admitting members has been contested among members in Black Greek Letter Organizations (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992). Some scholars have claimed that skin tone bias did, and may still, occur (Hunter 2005; Taylor 2008; Little 2002). For example, although both black fraternities and sororities used color and class distinctions for membership during the early

to mid-1900s, black sororities often had stricter restrictions on who could join (Little 2002). Some students during this period have corroborated this notion of skin-tone bias. One student, who attended Howard University during the 1920s, shared that black or brown-skinned women had to “come from a well-to-do family, have a better than average scholastic record, be beautiful, and possess a ‘vivacious and pleasant’ personality” before joining a black sorority (Little 2002:49). Another study on sororities and colorism on Howard University’s campus during the 1900s noted that members who were selected for Zeta Phi Beta (Zeta) were usually darker than the members of Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta (Kerr 2006).

Historically, both Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) and Delta Sigma Theta (Delta) have been charged with complexion-based discrimination (Kerr 2006). The “Paper Bag Test” was alleged to be one method that black sororities used in selecting members (Hunter 2005; Kerr 2006). Students whose skin tone were darker than a paper bag could not join the organization (Kerr 2006). In *The Paper Bag Principle*, Kerr (2006) shared the story of a dark-skinned woman who faced the paper bag test, during the early 1900s, by both AKAs and Deltas and was denied from both organizations. Other members stated that although the paper bag test did not exist, women who were “too dark” were not considered for membership into the organization (Kerr 2006). In *Disciplining Women*, an AKA member stated that darker-skinned black women were more represented in black sororities today (Whaley 2010). This does not suggest that perceptions about black female sorority members and skin tone do not exist, but positive strides appear to have been made since the early to mid-1900s.

Colorism and Black Women’s Perspectives

The issue of colorism and black women’s perspectives has been increasingly documented in the literature (Hunter 2005; Wilder 2010; Wilder and Cain 2011 Maxwell, Abrams, and

Belgrave 2016; Hall 2017). Research suggests that colorism is as an aspect of the African American experience that can influence black women's feelings of attractiveness and self-worth (Awad et al. 2015). In general, African American women of all shades live in a society where the tone of their skin may impact how others perceive them, and consequently how they perceive themselves.

Dark-skinned black women. Gwendolyn Brooks, a dark-skinned African American poet, shared in her autobiography that growing up she saw how young girls needed to be “bright” [light-skinned] in order to be socially successful (Brooks 1972). Although published in 1972, Brooks's words carry meanings that still hold true today – specifically the belief that validation or invalidation by others is connected to one's skin tone. For example, in one study of college-aged African American women, skin color emerged as an important aspect of women's overall body image and beauty (Awad et al. 2015). One participant revealed that although there were pretty dark-skinned girls at her school, light-skinned girls always won homecoming queen. Another participant reflected on a childhood game where boys and girls would marry each other (Awad et al. 2015). In a separate study, a dark-skinned participant shared an inside joke on how light-skinned girls were chosen for dates during the first month of school (Hunter 2005). Feelings of invalidation are not limited to dating. For instance, in another project, a dark-skinned woman shared that she had always been exposed to this idea that light-skinned people were capable of attaining more education (Wilder 2010).

The societal meanings associated with dark skin still tend to be negative. In one study, focus groups with black women between the ages of 18 and 25, women with darker skin tones were typically described as loud, suspicious, unattractive, and unintelligent (Wilder 2010). In addition to these stereotypes, dark-skinned black women were also seen as militant and

intimidating. Wilder argues that although equating darkness with strength and attitude are arguably positive attributes, these negative beliefs about dark-skinned black women “more likely exemplify the controlling images of African American women” (Wilder 2010:196). Patricia Hill Collins defines controlling images as socially constructed images of black womanhood that maintain black women’s subordination (Collins 2009). Wilder asserts that the images of the matriarch and the welfare queen, along with the more recent “angry black woman” image, has been internalized within the African American community and is disproportionately associated with dark-skinned black women (Wilder 2010:196). However, there are also narratives of black women who seek to deconstruct the negativity associated with dark skin. In the same study, a participant expressed how she had to learn to realize that she loved being “sexy chocolate” (Wilder 2010:197). Some young dark-skinned black women have had to consciously tell themselves that they are beautiful in order to combat negative societal messages.

The emphasis placed on skin tone often seem to be introduced to African American women when they are children or adolescents. In interviews with African American and Mexican American women college students, we hear the experiences of a dark-skinned black woman who recalled being the target of “monkey jokes,” and shared that being “dark-skinned, tall, and skinny . . . was a bad combination” (Hunter 2005:72-73, 90). Although the participant in that particular study had well-meaning parents who emphasized black-pride, children often must battle strong cultural messages that criticize dark skin (Hunter 2005). Stories like these demonstrate how African Americans have internalized the racist beliefs of whites (monkey jokes related to skin color) and inflicted them upon each other (Hunter 2005:90). This does not suggest that all or most African Americans think in this manner – in another study on African American adolescents, young black women acknowledge that young men often viewed lighter

skin as more attractive, but they believed dark skin was just as beautiful (Stephens and Few 2007).

Light-skinned black women. Scholars claim that light-skinned black women are also exposed to assumptions and differential treatment based on their skin tone. Literature has noted how light-skin is often equated to beauty (Hunter 2005; Wilder 2010; Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992). In a study of African American women, the most frequent and common characterization mentioned was that of the “light-skinned, stuck-up, snobby, pretty, black girl” (Hunter 2005:72). Many of the light-skinned black women in the study revealed that this was a stereotype they frequently encountered. One interviewee (a mixed-race woman identifying as African American) disclosed that in high school a few girls teased her for thinking she was “too cute” and “too good.” She admitted still feeling uncomfortable walking into a room of black women. The participant’s narrative revealed issues around both skin color and racial identity (Hunter 2005).

Ethnic authenticity has also emerged as a challenge light-skinned black women experience. Many African Americans consider light-skinned black people as less identified with other African Americans (Hunter 2005:104). Light-skinned and biracial people often report feeling left out or pushed out of co-ethnic groups (Hunter 2007:244). Hunter (2005) captures these feelings of inauthenticity in interviews with African American women. One participant, a light-skinned woman, reveals that she went to a private high school where she was part of a small group of black students. The students would jokingly call her “white girl” and teasingly ask if she needed clarification on topics regarding black culture (Hunter 2005:105). Hunter argues that many African Americans consider lighter-skinned individuals as less knowledgeable about black culture. In one interview with a dark-skinned African American woman, a young

college student was surprised that the leaders of an African American student organization were light-skinned. Her belief further supported the idea that darker-skinned people are more politically active in racial issues than lighter-skinned individuals (Hunter 2005).

In another study, black women were asked to describe the attributes related to light skin. In response, many participants used words such as trustworthy, nonthreatening, and comfortable. One participant, a light brown-skinned woman, opened up about her frustration with constantly being labeled as a snob, “I don’t think I’m stuck up, but people say that I am, and I just think it’s because of my complexion” (Wilder 2010:193). Here, the author states that the participant’s response mirrors other light-skinned women in the study – before having the opportunity to prove otherwise, many light-skinned women are judged in their everyday lives solely based on their skin tone (Wilder 2010:193). The participant also shared that people thought she would be a great fit for Alpha Kappa Alpha, as this sorority has historically been believed to select mainly light-skinned members (Wilder 2010). The beliefs associated with light-skinned women illustrates how much meaning is still placed on skin color in the African American community and in the United States, broadly.

Medium-toned women. Few studies discuss what it means to fall in the middle of the color spectrum (Wilder 2010). Wilder’s (2010) study serves as the exception to the trend of overlooking the experiences of medium-toned women. In Wilder’s study, one of the first themes emerging about medium skin tone was that colorism was not an issue for those considered brown (Wilder 2010:198). However, some medium-toned women believed they occupied a unique “buffer position” in which they were viewed as neither light or dark-skinned. As a result, being medium-toned offered more advantages than a dark-skinned black woman, but less advantages than a light-skinned black woman. Although the women reported that colorism was not as

significant in their lives, medium-toned women were attentive to the different value placed on brown skin, in contrast to light or dark skin. One participant, who identified as medium-toned, recalled how in elementary school many of the young boys were attracted to the “light” and “Spanish-looking” girls (Wilder 2010:200). She then internalized the negativity placed on being a brown woman. Wilder finds that medium-toned girls also distanced themselves from the term “dark,” instead preferring to be seen as brown-skinned (Wilder 2010:200). Some participants feared the condemnation inherent in having dark skin. One participant stated that her mother would correct her when she called herself black, telling her that she was not black but brown. (Wilder 2010). This study is a useful example of how colorism among black women is a far more complex issue than whether one is light or dark-skinned.

Rap Music and How Women’s Skin Tone is Treated

Historically, rap music has talked about skin tone in a way that elevated European standards of beauty, specifically lighter complexions. It was not uncommon for black male rappers in the 1980s and ‘90s to perpetuate skin tone bias in their music. Big Daddy Kane once rapped, “Light-skin honeys of the red-bone breed. You got, you got, you got what I need” (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:159). Similarly, rap videos typically propped women in front of the camera who were lighter-skinned, advancing this infatuation of the light-skinned black woman (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992). As noted by Harvard psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, the preference for light skin was most salient in music videos where dark-skinned black men chose light-skinned black women as their love interests (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:159).

Of course, not all black male rappers of this era had colorist messages in their songs and videos. In 1994, rapper Common released the video to his song “I Used to Love H.E.R.” In this video, the audience saw a young, attractive dark-skinned black woman. The woman was the

female embodiment of hip-hop and Common's first love (Pough 2004). During the 1980s, in his "I Need Love" video, LL Cool J rapped and sung about the difficulties of being a celebrity, while at the same time trying to find a romantic partner. The leading lady was a dark-skinned black woman with short, natural hair, meaning hair that has not been processed (chemically) in any way (Pough 2004; Randle 2015:2). In the early 1990s, rapper Tupac Shakur released his song "Keep Ya Head Up." Opening with the lyrics, "Some say the darker the berry, the sweeter the juice/I say the darker the flesh, the deeper the roots," Shakur embraced a common African American folk expression that projected "a positive view of dark skin" and identifying with one's African roots (Ford 2011:1). Some have argued that slogans like "Black is Beautiful" that emerged during black pride campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s helped to influence 1980's hip-hop culture (Sharpley-Whiting 2007). In addition, the mass commodification of rap music has been cited as shaping what individuals hear and see from mainstream rap music (Laybourn 2015; Pough 2004). As a result, it comes as no surprise that images of women in rap music today, especially in regard to skin tone, look and sound much different than they did twenty or thirty years ago.

In recent years, more scholars have continued to study the relationship between colorism and hip-hop. In a project that examined the lyrics of 20 rap songs, recorded between 2005 and 2010, to investigate the purpose of skin color references, we find that words such as "light-skinned" and "red" were most associated with light complexions, the word "caramel" for brown or medium complexions, and the word "dark-skinned" for dark complexions. Out of the 16 songs that referenced skin color, over half of the songs implied a preference for light-skin complexions only (Ford 2011).

Ford's (2011) analysis is consistent with a recent article that examine how black adolescent women understand colorism in rap music (Maxwell, Abrams, and Belgrave 2016). Participants felt that terms such as "redbones" and "yellowbones" were often used in rap music. When discussing the portrayal of dark-skinned women, several of the young black women believed that they were hardly mentioned in rap music. If dark-skinned black women were discussed, they were negatively depicted. One primary theme that emerged was participants' beliefs that among rappers and rap music, there was an expressed preference for light-skinned women over dark-skinned women (Maxwell, Abrams, and Belgrave 2016).

Members of the hip-hop community have also acknowledged colorism. During a 2013 interview with rapper Azealia Banks, Snoop Dogg praises Banks for being a "chocolate diva" in an industry where ideals of dark-skinned black beauty has often been overlooked or ignored: "See my daughter's chocolate, right? And what I want to say is they're always pushing the chocolate, the black, to the back . . . But y'all ass step up front, let'em know that chocolate's flavor here" (McNally 2016:69). Though Snoop Dogg only briefly mentions his daughter, in drawing parallels between her skin color and Banks, the importance of skin color in hip-hop is emphasized further.

Although there is a relationship between hip-hop and the representation of black women's skin tones, there are few empirical studies on black women's views about hip-hop and colorism. When considering black college sorority women, the research is even more limited. Considering their educational experiences and sorority membership, black sorority members offer unique perspectives about colorism and hip-hop. Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo (2018) argue that black sororities have played an essential role in the foundational parts of the narrative

on black college women (16). In this project, I focus specifically on how black undergraduate women in black sororities at a predominantly white university view colorism in hip-hop.

Methods

Participants and Recruitment

In the fall of 2018, I conducted twelve in-person, semi-structured interviews with black undergraduate women in Black Greek Letter Sororities at a predominantly white institution (PWI). All women were between the ages of 20 and 24 and were either juniors or seniors in college. Participants attended Southern Truman University, a large public university in the Southern United States. A pseudonym was given to the university in order to protect the participants' identity. According to the University's enrollment reports, 4.4% of enrolled college students were African American during the time of interviews (School Website 2018).

Once IRB was approved, I began recruiting participants by sending an introductory email to each president of a black sorority at the university. These sororities included Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, and Zeta Phi Beta. In the email, I shared the purpose of the study and asked permission to attend the next chapter meeting to recruit participants. I was then invited, through a gatekeeper, to attend one black sorority meeting and one National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) general body meeting (the umbrella organization for historically black fraternities and sororities). The NPHC meeting included a larger number of black sorority members. At both meetings, I explained the purpose of the study, emphasized confidentiality, and invited members to participate. In order to gain a larger sample size, I also reached out to participants on social media websites.

Procedures

After participants agreed to be in the research study, interviews were held on-campus. These interviews occurred either at the on-campus library or at another building on-campus. When meeting at the library, I interviewed participants in a group study room to ensure privacy. Before each interview began, I explained informed consent to the participant, noting that she could refuse to participate at any time during the study and stressed confidentiality. I also reiterated the purpose of the study to all participants. Once participants signed the informed consent form, I began the interview. Each interview was audio-recorded, and, on occasion, I jotted notes from the interview. All participants were given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

In this research, I examine how the experiences of being in college shape black college sorority women's views on colorism in hip-hop. Examples of questions from the interview schedule include: "Do you hear or see messages about skin tone in hip-hop?" and "How has colorism in hip-hop affected your ideas about skin tone?" Prompts were used throughout the interview to gain a deeper understanding of participants' responses. A few questions from Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey's 2011 study on stereotypes among alumnae members of Black Greek Letter Sororities were adapted to the interview guide (Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011).

Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed them by hand and used an outside transcription service. To analyze the interviews, I coded the data by identifying key themes from the interview text and made use of post-interview memos (Charmaz 2006). Themes are common patterns or topics identified in the data (Bailey 2018:245), and memos are informal analytic notes

(Charmaz 2006). This process allowed me to present patterns in the data with rich detail (Braun and Clarke 2006). Next, I used grounded theory techniques to move from initial codes to theoretical codes that were more conceptual, constructing theory from the data (Charmaz 2006) while also allowing the process to be guided by concepts of intersectionality, gendered racism, and black feminist epistemology. This process resulted in three primary concepts: (1) gaining awareness and confidence (2) expressing concern about others' interpretations (3) wanting more inclusive representation.

Findings

In this research, I find that time in college has often been an important life stage in which young black sorority women developed a greater sense of regard for self and others. For many participants, time in college has allowed them to combat skin color messages in hip-hop first seen or heard as young children or adolescents. The first theme was that many women expressed having either a gained awareness or confidence about others' identities or their own. This awareness and confidence was significant in helping the women face negative skin color messages in hip-hop or more fully embrace and uplift others around them. Second, many of the young college sorority women showed concern about how others interpreted messages in hip-hop. Specifically, several women shared how kids, adolescents, and young black men may be vulnerable to internalizing skin color messages in hip-hop. The last theme centered on wanting to see more inclusive representation. Here, the young women believed there needed to be a greater range of skin color, hair, and body types among black women in hip-hop. In addition, some women also called for a more positive portrayal of women in hip-hop. Altogether, this work shows us how college matriculation can be a pivotal time where black college sorority

women form meaningful bonds, embrace self and others further, and ultimately are able to better confront skin color message in hip-hop.

Gaining Awareness and Confidence

One common theme that emerged from this study was that many of the young women shared stories highlighting a gained awareness and confidence about their identity, or others, that often occurred during their experiences in college. This gained confidence and awareness were tied to varied parts of their experiences as both college students and sorority members. When asked what made them want to join a sorority, many participants shared similar narratives. Most notably, sorority life was a conscious decision made by the young women to surround themselves with strong-minded black individuals similar to the role models they had growing up. In addition, sorority life provided a sisterhood and safe space in which the women felt they could be themselves. This sense of security was especially relevant as participants' acknowledged their marginalized positions at a predominantly white university. Having greater confidence and awareness was particularly beneficial in how the young women viewed skin color and hip-hop.

Many of the young college women in this study detailed stories about their childhood or adolescence where they experienced wanting to be lighter, hearing subtle jokes about skin color, encountering stereotypes/compliments or being overlooked for opportunities based on skin tone. While at times, some participants felt that hip-hop, and the genre of rhythm and blues (R&B), influenced how they felt about their skin tone, the women also cited other influences, such as television, social media, and family and peers. When asked "When was the first time you noticed colorism in hip-hop?" Lauren provided a clear narrative of watching a music video while in middle school:

I don't know why this one sticks out to me but it was *Customer* by Raheem DeVaughn. And I love the song, still play the song. But I remember when the video first dropped when I was watching videos on BET. The video dropped it was a light-skinned girl. She had on black leather pants. I remember everything. You know she was the perfect little model shape. I want to be like her, but I can't. Cause I'm not even her skin color. So it's just like, I noticed at a younger age, where I didn't know the word colorism, but I knew the issue.

It is important to note that the song *Customer* is a R&B song. However, this was the first moment that Lauren noticed that in the world of entertainment, there was a clear difference between her physical features and the women seen in music videos. Although Lauren noted feeling “not pretty” during her middle school years, like many other black sorority women in this study, college signaled a time of gained awareness and confidence about her own identity. She described how she had to find herself as a black woman entering college at a predominantly white institution. Although she admitted to sometimes experiencing moments of insecurity, Lauren spoke about herself with much confidence, “Now that I am older honey, you can't tell me nothing. But you know as a little girl, you gain this confidence over time.” When talking about her sorority sisters, Lauren said that they often encouraged one another, particularly as it related to confidence and self-identity. Sabrina, who identified as dark-skinned, shared a similar narrative:

I felt like being dark skinned, after watching the videos, kind of made me feel small and less worthy of things compared to lighter-skinned women or other women. Now that I began to learn my worth and love myself, that's definitely the biggest change. Like if you don't love yourself, of course you're going to let outside sources decide who you are as a person and how you feel about yourself.

Sabrina reflected on the importance of giving herself positive affirmations, a lesson that she learned as she got older. She also shared the importance of sisterhood among her sorority, it being one of the primary reasons that attracted her to joining. Morgan, also influenced by R&B and hip-hop videos at a young age, attributed her increased understanding to the knowledge she

gained in college. She described her skin tone as “in the middle” of light-skinned and dark-skinned:

I went from wanting to be mixed to wanting to be light-skinned and now I’m okay with my skin color. When I came to college, I think that’s when the change started to happen. Or really just coming to college, because you learn a lot of things when you come to college. The change of mindset is maybe what brought about my change and my thoughts about skin.

When speaking about her transformation, Morgan placed more emphasis on how the overall experience of being in college improved her confidence. She became inspired to join her sorority when seeing the large amount of service the women were involved in. For Lauren, the support of a professional, black woman was another factor that helped strengthen her confidence. During the interview, she spoke highly of her sorority advisor, who was a dark-skinned black woman. She shared how her advisor often promoted positive thinking focused on being a strong black woman:

She is pro-black woman. So even before I showed interest in an organization she might bring up a topic of “a woman this, as a black woman this.” I mean she’s in corporate America. So she’s around people who don’t look like her, but she’s one of the top and has people who work under her. So it’s just like a black woman is your boss.

Although Lauren’s sorority advisor did not work in higher education, her supportive and encouraging role emphasized the importance of mentorship among black undergraduate women.

Porter (2017) explains how interactions with mentors must provide space that consists of validation and support, which contributes to the survival of black college women (97).

Lauren, Sabrina, and Morgan recognized the change in their identity from adolescent women to young adult women. What was most noticeable was a general awareness or confidence in how they perceived themselves as young women. These characteristics sometimes lacked during adolescence. Yet, as college students, the women recognized their growth in self-

assurance and knowledge. This growth was important in how the women viewed images or messages in hip-hop.

Jessica, who was very candid about her experiences in college, believed that it was during this time that she began to more fully embrace positive qualities about herself. She described her skin tone as “kind of brown skin, border dark skin,” and admitted to not liking her skin tone in high school:

I started loving myself more when I got to college. I just started following more black girl pages on Instagram and then I started hanging out with a different group of friends who were just all for natural hair, all for just embracing you and all for mental health. And once I started surrounding myself with those type of people. Their support and their love kind of rubbed off on me.

This support system came at a significant time for Jessica. As a senior in high school, she recalled watching hip-hop videos and noticing rap artists privilege light-skinned women with long, straight hair. For Jessica, this led her to think that having bundles, or hair extensions, and wearing make-up would more likely attract guys’ attention. She explained that she thought she had to “change stuff about [herself], or try to be more like the girls in the videos.” Jessica’s experiences in college, specifically the support system she formed and the images she began to surround herself with, helped to improve her confidence.

For some participants in this study, a strong support system was an important part of building awareness and confidence. Although Jessica was in a different sorority than Lauren, they both discussed the importance of college friends or sorority sisters in regard to uplift and empowerment. This finding is in line with Porter’s suggestion that black undergraduate women have found “solace, affirmation of their identities, and sisterhood among black women on campus” (Porter 2017:94). Jessica also credited a class at the university for educating her more about colorism.

Jessica claim to have moved beyond negative feelings associated with colorism. Yet, there was still hints of internalized racism associated with listening to hip-hop music. When asked how often she listened to rap music, Jessica responded: “every day.” Jessica acknowledged hearing less skin-tone messages in hip-hop today. However, upon reflection, she noticed that within the music videos, rappers tend to privilege light-skinned women with curvier bodies. Although she admitted to sometimes slipping back to feeling not “enough,” Jessica shared that she had “a better sense” of who she was today.

For some participants, learning about others’ identity was more prevalent than increasing confidence. Alexis, identifying as light-skinned, also connected education as part of her growth about skin color. When asked how colorism and hip-hop affected her ideas about skin tone, she responded:

Definitely when I was younger, I definitely wanted to be lighter. I took pride in being light-skinned. I definitely had the assumptions of dark being uglier. But as I got more educated and grew up, I grew out of that. I definitely disregard all those comments and ideas because it’s not the case.

Alexis went on to draw parallels between how dark-skinned and light-skinned people were treated as children and portrayed in hip-hop. She explained “when I was growing up, you got made fun of if you were dark-skinned and light-skinned people were praised.” This statement is consistent with some of the narratives in Hunter’s 2005 research on African American women and skin tone (Hunter 2005). In both circumstances, young black children and adolescents were teased if their skin tone was a darker shade. Alexis believed that a similar process occurred in hip-hop. Throughout their music, hip-hop artists have indirectly and directly informed people of who was favorable and who was not. In addition, Alexis also noted the lack of autonomy hip-hop artists may have when selecting women to be in their music videos. Similar to Jessica, however, she occasionally fell back into her younger mindset, such as being overly conscious of

becoming darker when outside for long periods of time. She shared “And sometimes I still catch myself, when I’m outside for a long time I get really dark. And I’m like I don’t want to be this dark. I try to grow from it because I know that’s not how I should think.”

Jasmine was another participant who recognized the privilege associated with lighter skin at an early age. She recalled her teenage years as the times when she first noticed music artists privileging certain types of women. As a young girl, she was aware that her skin tone was favored among “rappers” and “famous people.” She paused for a short time to consider whether her knowledge of light-skinned preferences offered an ego boost, but eventually decided against the thought. Now, Jasmine looked to uplift black women of all skin tones:

So every day they [black women] listen to hip-hop music. So every day they listen to this rapper that they admire talk about how they don’t want a girl that looks like her. Black is beautiful, no matter what tone it is. Well at least today. I don’t know about 13-year-old Jasmine.

Although during the interview Jasmine did not directly connect her college experiences as part of her growth, her awareness from a teenager to a senior in college has helped to both empower and educate men and women to embrace more positive thinking about standards of beauty and skin tone.

Brittany, who described herself as dark-skinned, spoke about both awareness and confidence. She shared how as a young girl that she never wanted to be light-skinned. However, she did desire to be “brown-skinned, on the border of dark-skinned.” When asked “How has colorism in hip-hop affected your ideas about skin tone,” she responded:

I think it [colorism in hip-hop] was a hard thing to battle with being younger. Because I think that it sorts of affirms every joke and you know, side remark or even just this thing that you’ve come up with in your head all over again. Whether that be [the] lack of portrayal or how it’s portrayed. Today I think that we’re becoming more aware of what we want as women in general. And maybe not that we weren’t aware before, maybe I was too young to be aware.

For Brittany, this understanding was connected to her confidence. Earlier, in the interview she discussed being much prouder of her skin tone today – even noting that she has anticipated summer when noticing that she looked pale. She often credited her confidence to hearing positive affirmations from the individuals around her, such as her friends, sorority sisters, men, and even people she did not know. Another affirmation she discussed was seeing positive representations of dark-skinned black women in media outside of hip-hop. Actresses such as Viola Davis, Tika Sumpter, Gabrielle Union, and even the first animated black Disney princess have served as open declarations that her skin tone was beautiful. As African Americans establish more creative control over the images used in television, alternative images emerge that often differ with images that were advanced when creative teams were mostly white men (Cheers 2018:16). Although Brittany was more confident and aware of her identity today, when talking about skin tone and hip-hop, she felt that there had been progress within the genre, but also shared that more change needed to take place.

Many of the black college sorority women were forthcoming in how skin tone bias in hip-hop impacted them as young kids and today as young college women. Their time in college was important for a couple of different reasons. As part of a sorority, the women often shared a common reasoning for joining their organization. Many of them anticipated being around a group of strong-minded women similar to the black Greek members they had admired growing up. Other women spoke of college friends who provided uplift and words of encouragement. Each of these relationships were important in empowering the young women and building their confidence. Banks (2009) discuss the importance of black women undergraduates finding allies who understand their race and gendered lives and provide motivation and a strong sense of identity. For many of the young women, these allies were their sorority sisters, sorority advisors,

and college friends. Building confidence and awareness also occurred in the classroom and through other forms of media. Some women spoke on learning more about colorism and societal standards of beauty in the classroom. Other women shared their appreciation for the increasing presence of dark-skinned black women on social media, television, and movies. In addition, some women acknowledged maturing as a result of being in a college environment. All of these factors contributed to their increased awareness and confidence, which helped many women better confront skin color messages in hip-hop.

Expressing Concern about Others' Interpretations

During the interviews, several participants brought attention to how hip-hop and skin tone were interpreted by other individuals. Particularly, many young women felt that young African American men, adolescents, and children were most vulnerable to internalizing skin color messages in hip-hop. Some of these concerns have been documented in the research literature. Stephens and Few (2007) note how skin tone and hair texture were two phenotypic traits important to how young black adolescents described images of African American women in hip-hop. In my study, many of the young college sorority women expressed concern to how hip-hop was interpreted by those around them.

An overwhelming concern about other interpretations was centered on how children and adolescents were influenced by hip-hop. For example, some young women discussed the impact hip-hop music had on their younger siblings. Chelsea shared that she only recently began listening to hip-hop, but she had a younger brother who frequently listened to the genre:

I mean I have a little brother that's 18. He just turned 18. And that's all he listens to is rap music. And that's all he says is "Oooh you know I like light skin girls. I like Mexican girls." And we're like dude you know there's more out there than that. So I feel like yea, young people, especially young black men look up to them.

Chelsea went on to talk about her younger sister, who was around age 13. Similar to her brother, her younger sister frequently watched hip-hop music videos. Chelsea believed that kids were like “sponges,” absorbing aspects around them that they care about – one specifically being music.

Even if kids were unaware of the meaning behind a particular hip-hop song, Chelsea felt that they were vulnerable to internalizing the lyrics. She explained, “even if it’s something that they can’t comprehend, they’ll internalize it like I did.” This point was also reiterated by Alexis, a 21 years old respondent. Thinking back to her younger years, she stated that young people were more impressionable to skin color influences in hip-hop. To her, they were more likely to follow the lives of hip-hop artists than people her age. She later explained how the type of people hip-hop artists date can be problematic to young kids:

So the kind of girls that hip-hop artists go after tend to look the same. So when you show someone, like Jhene Aiko is very beautiful and so is Karrueche. But at the same time, when all these hip-hop artists go after these same females that look very similar, it’s kind of like you’re telling the younger generation and those who listen to you that is what they should go after too.

Here, Alexis made an interesting point. The influence of hip-hop and skin color messages is not limited only to lyrical content and videos. When hip-hop artists date people with similar phenotypic traits, such as light skin, this can send subtle messages to youth, both young men and women, about what is attractive.

Morgan recalled how during junior high school she noticed when Chris Brown dated Karrueche. She was also aware of the type of women Brown interacted with in his videos, noting that most of the women were not “visibly brown.”

Well back then I was like dang. I'm never gonna be with Chris Brown cause he likes girls like that. Not that I was going to be with Chris Brown anyway because he's like famous. But as a kid, you're like dang. Nobody even similar to Chris Brown is going to like me. No boy that I like is going to like me because I don't look like that.

Morgan was also aware that, like her, younger kids today may be negatively impacted by the type of women artists fawn over in music videos.

Similar to Morgan, Lauren also expressed concern about younger people's interpretations of hip-hop. She discussed the harmful impact that may occur when young black men imitate the behaviors of hip-hop artists:

Men see rappers, especially young boys that are gonna grow up and see what older men do and they try to mimic it. And so if we continue to show the colorism issue, it will be a cycle. And it will never stop because what little boys see is what they want to do when they grow up.

Lauren believed that hip-hop artists were influential. Specifically, issues concerning skin color and black women would continue to be a problem if rappers continue to glamorize one group of women while excluding others.

Some of the young women discussed everyday black men's interpretations of skin tone in hip-hop. Sabrina believed that hip-hop's exclusion of both dark-skinned women and black women might influence how black men interact with women in regards to dating:

Cause you will be like okay I find him attractive. But you might not want to even go over there cause you just feel he might not want to talk to you, because of something that is publicized as well as always talked about in the hip-hop community.

Sabrina admitted that these preconceived notions occasionally influenced how she communicated with black men. However, she also said that these interactions differ depending on the racial diversity of a city— noting that the college town she currently lived in was a lot less racially diverse than her hometown. Morgan shared a strikingly similar view. Earlier in the

interview, she described herself as “not-light-skinned, but not dark-skinned either.” Although she admitted to sometimes internalizing what she heard in hip-hop, for Morgan, more concern about hip-hop’s interpretations was geared towards young black men. She felt that young black men could be influenced by the preferences of hip-hop artists:

I mean with black men they look up to these rappers. So they see that they’re [rappers] saying “Oh this is what I want.” So this is what I like cause this is what he likes. You don’t look like the girl that was in my favorite rapper video. And I guess that kind of goes back to the parenting thing because a lot of stuff that we listened to we probably shouldn’t have been.

Morgan’s concern about black men’s interpretations of hip-hop was similar to Sabrina, Lauren, and Chelsea’s prior points. Young black men, consciously or even subconsciously, may want to imitate the behaviors of artists they admire. This can be especially problematic in regard to young black men and romantic relationships, limiting the dating pool of potential partners. Since the young women in this study were all in their early 20s, and thus not far removed from adolescence, it was reasonable that many of the young college sorority women showed interest about how young men and women received what they saw and heard in hip-hop.

When hip-hop artists elevate light-skinned women over dark-skinned women, either in their songs, music videos, interviews, or everyday actions, multiple young women believed that this can send messages to young black children, adolescents, or black men about women’s standards of beauty, particularly in regard to skin tone. Some of these concerns have been addressed in the literature, specifically in regard to the influence of hip-hop on black adolescents’ views on colorism and physical attractiveness. Maxwell, Abrams, and Belgrave (2016) find that adolescent black women believed messages in hip-hop influence societal evaluations, such as mate selection. In Stephens and Few (2007) study, early adolescent men indicated their preferences for lighter skin when shown images of African American women in

hip-hop. As the young women in this current study shared, these messages could become especially harmful when individuals begin to internalize what they have seen or heard. Many of the young college sorority women showed concern to how hip-hop was being interpreted by younger generations and their black male counterparts.

Wanting More Inclusive Representation

Some of the young women felt that small progress had been made as to the relationship between hip-hop and statements or representations of women's skin color. However, although more dark-skinned black women were being seen in hip-hop, some hip-hop artists still ostracized dark-skinned black women by their words. Throughout this project, wanting inclusive representation was a theme that was often discussed by the young women. When speaking about inclusive representation, the young women hoped for more women diversity in regard to skin tone, hair texture, and body type and was also concerned about the portrayal of black women in hip-hop.

Although interview questions focused on young women's views about skin color and hip-hop, some participants also expressed how more body size and hair diversity among women was needed in hip-hop. Grace revealed that, in the past, she wanted a curvier body type. Although rappers often idealize fuller figures, she has now accepted her body. For Grace, one of her hopes was that hip-hop artists began to favorably embrace women of varied body sizes. She explained, "I would like to see them shed positive lighting on women of all different shapes and sizes."

In Jessica's interview, she discussed the inclusion of natural hair in hip-hop music videos. She detailed a moment of joy when first watching Anderson Paak's *Tints* music video. Accustomed to seeing hair extensions among women in hip-hop culture, Jessica was excited about Paak's visual. For her, these sorts of images needed to be shown more in music videos:

Be like Anderson Paak and include more dark-skinned women with natural hair. Quit having all these girls with these bundles. Just let the hair breathe. Just include more representation cause it makes me feel good.

Images of women wearing their natural hair in hip-hop music videos are still infrequent. Chelsea called out the need for more hair and skin tone range in hip-hop, relating it to encounters with her younger sister. She revealed how her sister desired loose curls and explained, “I feel like if these people [hip-hop artists] actually see what their work is causing they would actually want to change that.” For many young women, they have become accustomed to seeing a similar standard of beauty across hip-hop music videos – specifically one that emphasized light-skin, a curvy body, and long, curly hair as ideal phenotypic features for women. What many of the young college women called for was an increased presence of black women that mirrored their own physical features.

The portrayal of black women in hip-hop was another concern that was brought up by multiple young women. Brittany shared a recent conversation between her and her friends that detailed how dark-skinned women were often seen on social media “oiled up” and racially fetishized. She saw hip-hop in a similar manner:

I think what I hope would change is the inclusion within hip-hop and video portrayal of black women in a more, well dark-skinned women in a more respectable light. Because I think we made it yes to the videos. But are we portrayed as that girl next door, girl we see in the mall, or the girl that has the parents that we’re trying to talk to? Or are we portrayed as one of the girls in the pool half-naked?

For Brittany, inclusion of dark-skinned women in hip-hop not only meant an increased presence. She also placed emphasis on how dark-skinned black women were portrayed in videos. There could be a clear physical difference between the woman an artist might want his parents to meet and the woman who lingered around men in revealing clothing. Brittany described how there is a lack of femininity that is often associated with dark-skinned women, “I hate that in videos you

see these women that are this light-skinned X, Y, and Z. And it's like dang men don't want me because of my lack of femininity that comes with darker skin tones." She also recognized that proximity to whiteness, or having dominant European physical features, has often signaled grace or purity for women. Lauren, too, hoped for a more positive "connotation" towards dark-skinned women in hip-hop, and believed women of varied shades needed to be included more in the genre. She also recognized that in the past few years there had been hip-hop artists who embraced women of darker skin tones in their music videos, "I know Wale was like I'm gonna cast all brown-skinned girls." She went on to describe how Wale once spoke about the lack of visibly black women in hip-hop music videos.

The desire for more inclusive representation was not particularly about the male gaze. Sabrina, Morgan, Brittany, and Lauren discussed the importance of representation and affirmation when seeing oneself in the media. Sabrina revealed:

You have Gabrielle Union who has been getting a lot of good roles. She hasn't just been in sexual roles. You have Viola Davis who has been in a lot of shows that younger people watch. You have Angela Bassett. She's been playing in a lot of younger shows. And you know how we're always being reduced to being in shows or movies that are just about relationships. We never just get to be black people. So now you see black women doing regular stuff in regular shows. That's what I like.

In recent years, more women hip-hop artists have risen to mainstream hip-hop. However, the industry still lacks a strong presence of black women. This is evident in the participants' responses, as Cardi B, Lil Kim, and Nicki Minaj were the only women hip-hop artists mentioned in the interviews. In Sabrina's response, she brought attention to how brown and dark-skinned actresses were becoming more visible in shows that "younger people watch." This implies that young people want to see reflections of themselves in the media. However, this cannot happen without inclusive representation.

Similar to Lauren and Brittany, Alexis also believed there needed to be a more authentic representation of black women in hip-hop music videos, in addition to a more favorable portrayal of black women in hip-hop:

Hip-hop was a thing of the black community. So it would be nice if you portray beautiful black women of all skin tones in hip-hop music videos. It would be nice if there was a more adequate portrayal of African American women and what women looked like realistically.

For Alexis, an adequate portrayal of black women in hip-hop should be one that was representative of skin color and size. This was a common theme among the participants. For many of the women, inclusive representation meant having varied and more positive, authentic images of black women in hip-hop. These images can serve as a source of affirmation for young black women, particularly when seeing a reflection of themselves in the media. Similarly, Stephens and Few (2007) note that successful women rap artists “who are not light-skinned provide young African American women with a standard to emulate and contribute to their own definitions of what is beautiful” (264). The young women in my study recognized that black women range from all different shades, body sizes, and hair types. Hip-hop, being birthed from black communities, needed to further embrace diversity within the black community.

Conclusion

Although research on colorism and hip-hop is limited, scholars have mainly examined this topic from the views of black adolescents. This research builds on the literature by examining the views of black college sorority women. Black sororities have been important for black college women in multiple ways, providing opportunities for leadership, community service, and forming close bonds (Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo 2018). In this study, friendship ties were especially valuable as the young women navigated their minority status at a predominantly white university.

Black sororities also have a unique history with colorism and stereotypes, but there is limited academic research on black sorority women's views about colorism. In addition, given their higher education status, I argue that studying this group of women offer a unique insight about the relationship between colorism and hip-hop. The young women discuss both educational experiences and sorority membership in explaining their viewpoints. More specifically, I examine how the experiences of being in college shape black college sorority women's views on colorism and hip-hop. This is especially important as the voices of black college women students are often lost in the larger narrative of college students (Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo 2018:1).

This study contributes to the literature on colorism and black college sorority women. I find that college has been an important life stage in which black sorority women were able to develop meaningful connections with their peers, further accept their own and others' identity, and better confront skin color messages in hip-hop. This was most demonstrated when the women shared having a greater sense of awareness and confidence. For many young women, sorority membership helped in their confidence. The importance of service and positive friendship ties often led them to join a sorority. Within these sororities, young women shared stories of receiving positive affirmations from sorority sisters, feeling a sense of comfort in being themselves, and having a mentor who champion pro-blackness. In addition, some young women spoke about the assurance they received from college friends. These friendship ties were significant for the women, especially as black women in higher education often report feeling isolated in their social and academic experiences (Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo 2018:41). Other women in this study felt that they began to mature and become more aware and educated about their own or other peoples' identities from aging and being in a college environment. In

addition, some women expressed concern to how adolescent women and young black men were affected by skin color messages in hip-hop. Young women also reflected on the importance of inclusivity in hip-hop, emphasizing the need for images that reflect the wide range of black women that exist in society. Altogether, confidence and awareness is not only beneficial to how black college sorority women confront skin tone bias in hip-hop. Scholars also cite confidence as a necessary quality for black women's college success (Winkle-Wagner, Luedke, and McCallum 2017).

My findings also contribute to the literature in how we view intersectionality. During this study, I consider the dynamic nature of the women's lives, particularly as they transitioned from adolescents to young college women. Adolescence was often marked by a lack of understanding about people's identities and insecurities about self. As young college women, however, they frequently recognized the significance in becoming older, being in a college environment, and close friendship ties for confronting skin color messages in hip-hop. The way we examine intersectionality must differ from black adolescent women to black college women. Although overlaps may exist in experiences, being an adolescent black woman is different than being a black woman in college.

This study highlights the intersecting categories of black college sorority women. Black women pursuing college degrees, they represent at least three intersecting categories – race, gender, and educational status. As Murphy and colleagues (2009) argue, these categories were interwoven in the young women's daily lives. Participants shared the importance of bonding with other black women while in college, seeing positive images of black women on television, becoming educated about skin color bias in the classroom, and wanting to see more authentic representations of black women in hip-hop culture.

Gendered racism was very noticeable in participants' lives as children or adolescent women. The young women shared intimate moments of feeling "unpretty" and isolated from some of their favorite artists related to only seeing one standard of beauty, particularly one that excluded brown or dark skin. Similar to prior literature on colorism and young black women (Wilder 2010; Hunter 2005), we see that childhood and adolescence are often times when young women begin to notice that different values are placed on different skin tones.

Although participants were not asked to determine their skin tone, most young women described their skin color at one point during the interview. This standpoint was particularly useful. In learning about how the young women saw their own skin tone, I was able to better understand their narratives. More specifically, I gained more insight on how the women viewed colorism in hip-hop while in college.

Henry (2010) finds evidence that the effects of hip-hop on black women can be either degrading or empowering (244). From this study, we see that experiences in college and sorority membership can be relevant in how women process messages in hip-hop. Altogether, experiences in college appeared to be an important time in which many of the young women gained a greater acceptance of themselves and others. More specifically, I find 1) college was a time where black sorority women gained awareness and confidence in regard to their own identity and the identity of others. This gained confidence and awareness were important in helping to counter and confront skin color messages seen or heard in hip-hop. 2) black sorority women were concerned about how children, adolescents and young black men received hip-hop's messages. Much emphasis was placed on how young people may be vulnerable to internalizing skin color messages. 3) black sorority women felt that more inclusive representation was needed for women in hip-hop. More specifically, they hoped for more skin

tone, hair, and body type diversity for black women in hip-hop. Some women also called for a more positive portrayal of black women within the genre.

The main limitation in this study is the number of participants interviewed. I later recognized that a greater number of black sorority women may have offered more depth on the topic. Due to time constraints and limited access to black sorority members at the university, I decided to limit my participants to 12 young women. Although this was a relatively small number, most of the participants offered detailed responses that provided major insight about their views on skin tone bias in hip-hop.

More research is needed on black college women broadly. Given the focus of this study, more work is also needed on black college sorority women's views on colorism and hip-hop. Although hip-hop has been cited as a potential influence on some black college women (Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo 2018; Henry, West, and Jackson 2010; Henry 2010), less is known about black college sorority women's own views about messages in hip-hop. As mentioned earlier, together with their educational experiences and sorority membership, black college sorority women occupy a unique position that can influence how they view hip-hop. In addition, although many of the young college women expressed a growing sense of confidence during their time in college, some women spoke about moments of "slipping back" into feelings of insecurity. It is important to continue to examine the challenges black college women face and be knowledgeable of their challenges both in and outside the classroom.

Because hair texture and body size were also frequently brought up during the interviews, future researchers may also extend their focus to black college sorority women's views on standards of beauty broadly, and within hip-hop specifically. Although hip-hop culture has often embraced European standards of beauty associated with women's hair and skin color, it has also

embraced curvier bodies that are more connected to African features. Future research can explore this contradictory relationship.

This study recruited participants from a predominantly white institution. Future studies may focus on black college sorority women from historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). HBCUs are not only learning institutions, but have also been sites of cultural empowerment. Although black women face challenges at both institutions, a common obstacle at PWIs is the isolation experienced by black students (Zamani-Gallaher and Polite 2013; Shaves and Moore 2014; Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, Roman 2016). HBCUs, although found to be both supportive and restrictive of diverse expressions of black womanhood, have long been touted as spaces for African American women to develop self-worth (Njoku and Patton 2017:143; Player 1947). The experiences and views of sorority women in regard to skin tone and hip-hop women may differ at these institutions.

Finally, in regard to practical applications, this study calls attention to the need for targeted efforts among colleges and universities to implement future programs that encourage positive relationships among black women. Although PWIs traditionally develop opportunities for African Americans to come together (Hannon et al. 2016:664), I argue more programs are needed that focus on both race and gender. These programs are particularly needed at predominantly white campuses, because it is that important black college women have their voices heard by their peers (Porter 2017). This argument is consistent with empirical studies that have placed emphasis on the need for spaces of dialogue and connection for black college women (Porter 2017:98; Patton 2006; Porter and Dean 2013). In 2015, the University of Virginia developed *Black College Women* (BCW). A program for black women across campus, two of BCW's goals are to “nurture an internal love and respect for Black women's lives and

bodies” and “engaging young women in advocacy for one another” (University of Virginia, Office of African-American Affairs 2019). For the black sorority women in this study, both a college environment and sorority membership (friendship ties) were influential in how the young women viewed colorism and hip-hop. More student organizations are needed that encourage friendship and positive identity among black women that are not limited to sororities.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Research Protocol Approval Letter.



To: Whitney R Frierson
From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
IRB Committee
Date: 10/08/2018
Action: **Exemption Granted**
Action Date: 10/08/2018
Protocol #: 1805122717
Study Title: A Study of Black Female College Students in Black Greek Letter Organizations
Perceptions of Colorism and Rap Music

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Brandon A Jackson, Investigator

Appendix B. Interview Guide.

1. How old are you?
 - a. What year are you in school? What are you studying?
 - b. What do you want to do?
2. I am interested in how black college women in black sororities understand colorism in hip-hop. Are you familiar with the concept of colorism? How do you think about it?
3. Has your skin color played a role in your life? Tell me how.
4. Have you ever experienced colorism? How did that make you feel?
5. What made you want to join a sorority? (Adapted from *Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011 study*)
6. Have you ever experienced colorism from others while being in your sorority? What was that like? (Adapted from *Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011 study*)
7. Have you and your sorority sisters talked about colorism? If so, what have you all talked about?
8. How often do you watch hip-hop videos or listen to rap music?
9. What artists do you listen to or watch?
10. Do you hear or see messages about skin tone in hip-hop? Tell me about that.
 - a. How do you feel about that?
11. Have you seen anything specific in hip-hop that might be related to colorism? How does that make you feel?
12. When did you first notice colorism in hip-hop? How did that make you feel?
13. How do you feel while strolling (a synchronized dance routine) to rap music?
14. How has colorism in hip-hop affected your ideas about skin tone?
15. Has colorism in hip-hop affected your interactions with other black men and women? Can you explain? (Adapted from *Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011 study*)
16. Do you think hip-hop influences the way other people view skin tone? How does that make you feel?

17. Is there anything you would like to see changed about skin color related messages in hip-hop?

18. Is there anything I should know to understand colorism in hip-hop better?