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Different forms of Media and its influence on ideas of colourism on Afro-Trinidadians.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to explore the impact that the media has on ideals of colourism among the African community in Trinidad, especially within the 21st century. Technology has consistently facilitated many ideologies in society that has colonial origins and that includes colourism. The purpose is to investigate and evaluate the extent of damage that these beliefs have had on the aspects of the Trinidadian African diaspora. These include their individuality relationships, their socio-economic standings and even how they communicate with other ethnic groups in their community. There is no doubt that the ideology of racism and colourism from centuries of slavery and neo-colonialism was already ingrained within societies, however, with the advancements of technology and constant rising popularity and use of many social media mediums, these ideologies have, not only been perpetuated, but have evolved. Thus, this work will portray the experiences of the victims of colourist beliefs, how it affects their daily lives and how these beliefs transformed from the neo-colonial era to present day.

Keywords: African, social media, colourism, racism, colonialism, slavery, society, technology, skin bleaching, Trinidad

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INTRODUCTION

Rationale

Colourism is one of the most nuanced issues that society has faced. Africans have experienced and been victims of colourist beliefs that have allowed for special discrimination and prejudice toward persons with darker skin tones from persons who are a part of other ethnic/racial groups and within their own community. Therefore, this study has been done in an attempt to increase the knowledge and awareness of colourism, learn how it affects Africans in Trinidad and evaluate how prevalent the issue is.

Thesis Statement

Mass media is the one of the sole perpetrators of colourist ideals in the 21st century on the African community in Trinidad and has negatively affected those with darker skin as they are portrayed as less desirable in many aspects of life than their lighter skinned counterparts.

Objectives

This research paper's purpose is to; -

- Investigate the extent that Black people are affected by colourist ideas conserved through the media.
- Identify some of the main aspects of colourism that has an impact on Black people.
- Evaluate the consequences that the ideologies maintained by media have had on the African society.
- Scrutinize the role that colonial history and culture play in the continuation of colourist beliefs.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation comprises four chapters. Within Chapter one, the review of the literature is done to assess the information found on the topic and evaluate the connections and relevance that is provided while chapter two, is the historical context that will display the origins of colourism in the African diaspora as well as how it was implemented in daily life. Chapter three will portray the ways in which the media allows for the continuation of history's beliefs and how it affects Africans' societal standing and cultural existence in Trinidad presently. Then, chapter four will illustrate the consequences that these beliefs have had on society, both with Africans and in relation to other racial groups. In addition, the connections and similarities will be highlighted between historical and present-day practices of colourism.

Methodology

Data Collection

To complete this study, multiple types of sources were implemented. Although this particular scope of research is not new and academic sources are available, the study of the Caribbean diaspora and more specifically, Trinidad, is limited in comparison. Therefore, this research, while on an existing subject, is relatively new. To satisfy the purpose of this thesis, attention was placed on qualitative research. Being different to qualitative research, it offers a smaller sample and although it may be harder to gauge a more accurate number of persons who have been affected by and have experiences with colourism ideals being maintained by the media, it may grant a more in-depth analysis and description of the study without limiting responses and rendering the research one dimensional. Moreover, many secondary sources like peer reviewed

journal articles and newspaper articles are utilized in further attempts to improve the scope of research and compile a relevant and coherent evaluation.

Data Utilization

As a social and historical genre of study, this paper will serve to prove a rational explanation of the connection between media and colourism. The best way to express the research approach used is both hypothetical, meaning that it is fuelled by a thesis, and qualitative, meaning that personal anecdotes and written transcriptions of data are used.

CHAPTER ONE

Literature Review

Introduction

During the Imperialism Era, colonial nations within Europe, began to trade enslaved Africans for the purpose of cheap labour. A region that received a large number of Africans during the centuries of slavery was the West Indies, more commonly known as the Caribbean. From the beginning of the African Transatlantic slave trade in the 15th century to emancipation and abolition in the 19th century, although many historians are unsure as to the true number of Africans taken for labour, however, it is believed that over 12 million Africans were transported to the New World¹ and over 3 million arrived in the British Caribbean.² During the extent of African slavery, colonialists provided preferential treatment toward Africans with lighter complexions and while Africans exist in many different shades of skin tones naturally, during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and afterward, Africans with lighter skin complexions were more often than not, children who had a white parent.³ Of course, this was due to the exploitation and perpetration of sexual assault by the planters toward the enslaved Africans. Although the colonialists refused to acknowledge their mixed children, begrudgingly, they still managed to give them privileges that their darker-skinned counterparts did not receive. According to Marcus Garvey, “some in the West Indies, America and Africa believe that the closer they are to the white man in colour, the higher the social standing – and they think that an ‘aristocracy’ should be built on caste of colour rather than achievement”.⁴

¹ Hannes Schroeder et al., “Genome-Wide Ancestry of 17th-Century Enslaved Africans from the Caribbean,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 12 (March 9, 2015): 3669, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1421784112>.

² The National Archives, “Caribbean Histories Revealed,” www.nationalarchives.gov.uk (Government of the United Kingdom), accessed January 27, 2022, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/caribbeanhistory/slavery-negotiating-freedom.htm#:~:text=Slavery%20and%20negotiating%20freedom>.

³ Mark M Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: The University Of North Carolina, 2008), 47.

⁴ Deborah Gabriel, *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora* (London: Imani Media Ltd, 2007), 5.

Resembling the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, presently, Africans with darker skin are treated less than ideal and are usually displayed as stereotypical caricatures in many, if not all, forms of media such as movies, games, news outlets and social media. This has brought about acknowledgement of ‘light-skinned privilege.’⁵ Thus, to understand the real influence that the media has on already existing ideas of colourism, it is integral to be knowledgeable about the definition of colourism. According to Phoenix, colourism is internal racism where there is discrimination and prejudice against persons of darker skin, giving those who have lighter skin preference due to their features being more Eurocentric.⁶ Thus, this literature review seeks to display different ideologies about colourism and its effects on persons of African descent.

‘Lighter is Better’

A social hierarchy has existed since slavery that has caused a large rift within the African community. This social hierarchy, according to Hoschild and Weaver, was caused by simply allowing darker skinned Africans to have less opportunities in many aspects in life such as employment, education and relationships in society.⁷ In Trinidad, specifically, there were many instances, and still are, of business places and corporations only allowing ‘mixed’ persons or those with lighter skin to be employed in their establishment and in certain job positions. Job titles that required providing services for the public was usually reserved for the ‘mixed women with the good hair and lighter skin’ and the darker skinned women would be given positions away from public view.⁸ It is simply fact that darker skinned persons have always been labelled as aggressive

⁵ Margaret L. Hunter, “‘If You’re Light, You’re Alright,’” *Gender & Society* 16, no. 2 (April 2002): 175, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912430222104895>.

⁶ Aisha Phoenix, “Colourism and the Politics of Beauty,” *Feminist Review* 108, no. 1 (November 2014): 97, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2014.18>.

⁷ J. L. Hochschild and V. Weaver, “The Skin Color Paradox and the American Racial Order,” *Social Forces* 86, no. 2 (December 1, 2007): 645, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/86.2.643>.

⁸ Victoria Pasley, “The Black Power Movement in Trinidad: An Exploration of Gender and Cultural Changes and the Development of a Feminist Consciousness,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001): 37, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol3/iss1/2>.

and violent in Trinidad in the news media outlets. According to Geer, over 70% of crimes that occur every year in Trinidad are committed by Afro-Trinidadians and almost all of them have been of darker skin.⁹ This being portrayed in the newspapers and other news media outlets has maintained ideas that persons of darker skin, especially Africans have the tendency to be violent which has created the prejudice toward them dissuading business owners from hiring them in fear.

Victims of Colourism

In addition to job opportunities and experiences in the workplace, darker skinned Africans also are also affected when it relates to their personal relationships, self-esteem and the treatment they receive from the rest of society. The Eurocentric standards of beauty that has been imposed during institutionalised racism has, without a doubt, negatively impacted dark skinned people of colour and in particular, dark-skinned women¹⁰. The perception that “white” features are more “suitable” has placed lighter skinned Black women in a position to be more attractive and more agreeable to many people in society, than dark skinned women which has led to internalised inferiority. DeFina and Hannon have provided data of this idea which portrayed the thoughts of adolescent girls wanting to be of a lighter skin complexion because they believed that their skin colour was indicative of their beauty and worth.¹¹ In addition, while women suffer under colourism ideologies, men, also, experience stereotypes and unrealistic expectations based on their skin colour. Having darker skin has allowed African men to consistently be racially profiled due to the beliefs that they are aggressive, violent and dangerous. Occupying the most space in prisons and

⁹ Sacha Geer, “Conjuring and Avoiding the ‘Bad Man’” (MSc Thesis, 2011), <http://hdl.handle.net/11375/21225>.

¹⁰ Maxine Thompson and Verna Keith, “The Blacker the Berry,” *Gender & Society* 15, no. 3 (June 2001): 338, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124301015003002/>.

¹¹ Lance Hannon and Robert DeFina, “Just Skin Deep? The Impact of Interviewer Race on the Assessment of African American Respondent Skin Tone,” *Race and Social Problems* 6, no. 4 (September 5, 2014): 356–64, <https://doi.org/>.

serving longer sentences for petty crimes in comparison to other races, black men are constantly under attack by prejudice and those whose complexion is on the darker side of the spectrum are even more scrutinized in the judicial system.¹² Therefore, preconceived notions and assumptions about the behaviour of Africans of dark skin has led to society mistreating them based on those assumptions which has crippled their ability to exist unvictimized in both formal and informal public spaces.

Media and Colourism

Media has been one of the major agents to maintain colourism and negative attention toward not only darker skinned Africans but those of other races and ethnicities as well. Social media is digital, interactive technology that is used as mediums for communication to share information, interact and create forms of content through virtual networks or platforms.¹³ There are multiple ways in which modern media displays negativity when it relates to colourism and one of them is exhibiting the negative stereotypical traits that are connected to dark skinned men and women in media such as video games, tv shows, movies and even advertisements. African women are seen as “ghetto” and unintelligent in comparison to their lighter skinned counterparts and men are seen as violent, “thugs” and gang members. In addition to this, many times dark skinned Africans are not represented at all. Within popular celebrity spaces like Hollywood, that has widespread influence all over the world due to the sheer size of the industry, they create content like movies and tv shows with either predominantly white actors/actresses or they incorporate light

¹² Reva Ashlan, “The American Criminal Justice System and Its Impacts on the African American Community: Arrests and Sentencing” (Master’s Thesis, 2017).

¹³ Caleb T. Carr and Rebecca A. Hayes, “Social Media: Defining, Developing, and Divining,” *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 23, no. 1 (January 2015): 46–65, <https://doi.org/>.

skinned African actors/actresses due to them being more agreeable for audiences, “easier to work with” or better suited to the aesthetic of the film or show as stated by Beltran and Fojas.¹⁴ Furthermore, many advertisements cater their products to white people or those of lighter complexion and also make implications, whether intentionally or not, to the use of certain products only being suitable for light skin. Many times, according to Hazell and Clarke, even when the advertisements contain people of colour and/or dark-skinned persons, they would usually be portrayed in subtle racist and stereotypical portraits or in ways that diminish their blackness by ignoring skin colour, mistreating or neglecting their hair – which is a large part of African identity – or even disallowing black people from being involved in the background behind the scenes development process for many of their projects.¹⁵

Colourism has only been one of the many societal injustices experienced by Africans and, rooted in systematic racism, colourism has also become systematic all over the world. Internally and externally, dark skinned persons in the Black community have constantly been discriminated against based on European ideals. Being denied livelihood, wrongfully stereotyped and under-represented are just a few of the issues that are experienced by dark skinned Africans all over the world, including Trinidad, and media has been used as an international instrument to maintain these harmful ideas.

¹⁴ Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas, *Mixed Race Hollywood* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 3–7.

¹⁵ Vanessa Hazell and Juanne Clarke, “Race and Gender in the Media,” *Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 1 (May 8, 2007): 5–21, <https://doi.org/>.

CHAPTER TWO

Contextualising African Slavery

Within the British West Indies, colourism evolved as Africans became the main labour source for the Europeans' plantations on the colonies. An important characteristic of society that existed, at the time, was the differentiation of field and domestic slaves which was integral to the development of colourist ideals since they were mostly separated into these roles using skin colour and complexion. Where, those who worked on the fields were usually dark skinned and those who took care of their master's intimate affairs in the house was light skinned. Field slaves on the plantations were made to do heavy agricultural labour in harsh and inhumane conditions for over 14 hours daily doing tasks such as harvesting, planting and transporting large quantities of crops like sugarcane.¹⁶ Many times, the enslaved who worked on the fields would be overworked and punished by whippings for "infractions" such as being tired or doing the job too slowly. Domestic slaves, however, while still being enslaved, owned and lacking autonomy, was treated slightly better than the field slaves.

One of the main reasons in which Africans were forced to do labour in West Indian plantations was to replace the work lost from the rapidly dwindling numbers of the Indigenes that existed on the islands prior to the Europeans' arrival. And in the minds of the plantation owners and most of European society, using Africans to improve their economy was justifiable by a hypothesis called the "Hamitic Theory." The Hamitic Theory is the idea that the Caucasian race is more superior to the African race and that any and everything civilised and of value in the continent

¹⁶ Verene Shepherd, "Women, Work and Resistance in the French Caribbean during Slavery 1700-1848," ed. Bernard Moitt, *Engendering History*, 1995, 155-75, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-07302-0_9.

of Africa was introduced by a sub-group of Caucasians called “Hamites”.¹⁷ Biblically, the word Hamitic applied to a group of peoples who claimed to be the descendants of Ham, who was one of Noah’s sons in the Christian Holy Bible. The Book of Genesis indicates that after Noah became intoxicated, Ham disrespected him and when Noah became aware of what was done, he cursed Ham’s last child, Canaan, and condemned his bloodline to enslavement. In the Middle Ages, Christians believed that Ham was the ancestor to Africans as theologians interpreted the curse also cause observable ethnic features in all of Ham’s children, that is, “woollen hair and black skin” which was an etiological myth.¹⁸ However, in the mid-19th century, the word “Hamites” and the Hamitic theory in general developed a new meaning in which the Hamitic race was completely different and distinct from the “Negros” or “Negroid”. Due to slavery being a profitable enterprise and Africans widely being considered only useful for free labour, Western pseudo anthropologists attempted to prove that the Egyptians, who were intelligent and created advanced technology and structures, where some specific group of Caucasian who were supposedly completely disconnected from African origin entirely.¹⁹ Especially noting the features of these so called “Hamites”, they were supposedly of light brown complexion, with narrow noses and facial features with straight and sometimes wavy hair,²⁰ which was a direct juxtaposition of the features of Africans. Nevertheless, this hypothesis that fell under pseudo-science became completely discredited by the 1960’s, although there is no doubt that the ideal of lighter skinned “non-Africans” being responsible for impressive technology and architecture is based in racism and colourism as the

¹⁷ Edith R. Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis; Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective,” *The Journal of African History* 10, no. 04 (October 1969): 521, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁸ Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis,” 523.

¹⁹ Sanders, 525.

²⁰ Carleton Coon, *Races of Europe*, 3rd ed. (1939; repr., Germany: The Macmillan Company, 2012), 44.

whites used Christianity and “race science” to create an entirely new race simply to devalue and denigrate Africans’ abilities, intelligence and general existence.

Another important element to note when contextualising the enslavement of Africans regarding colourism is the acts of resistance and rebellion within the plantations in the Americas. Throughout the four centuries of chattel slavery, there were sporadic instances of violent rebellion by Africans. Such opposition reflected a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the state of bondage and, in many instances, led in even stricter methods for domination and suppression in slave owning communities. In many areas, though, the rebellions occasionally reinforced the colonial officials’ rising perception that the legacy of slavery and the slave trade was becoming unsustainable.²¹ Rebellions erupted on a regular basis the Caribbean and Latin America. Not many of the slave rebellions were methodically organised, especially in comparison to the Haitian Revolution in 1791, as majority were essentially impulsive and brief disruptions by small groups that were usually spurred by a specific injustice at points in time.²² Such revolts were typically carried out by male field slaves and were frequently betrayed by the domestic slaves who connected more strongly and felt more companionship with their owners.

As mentioned before, many of the domestic/house slaves were the offspring of the white planters who often sexually assaulted the African women who laboured on their plantations. However, they were reluctant to accept responsibility for children that they sired due to them being non-white. Although they refused to acknowledge them as legitimate children, they usually

²¹ Seymour Drescher, “Eric Williams: British Capitalism and British Slavery,” *History and Theory* 26, no. 2 (May 1987): 187, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2505121>.

²² A.J. Williams-Myers, “Slavery, Rebellion, and Revolution in the Americas,” *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 4 (March 1996): 390, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002193479602600401>.

achieved slightly better living conditions than that of the “regular” field slaves.²³ Some examples included their residence, clothing, food and nature of work. African field slaves lived in barrack type buildings where dozens of them slept in one open area with little to no demarcation, on bare floors and, sometimes, among the animals used on the plantations.²⁴ In contrast, domestic slaves usually lived in the houses with their masters in storage rooms or in extra connections to the main plantation houses for easy access for the purpose of preparing meals, answering to their master’s call or to keep an eye on the children.²⁵ In addition, while domestic slaves were clothed with the planters’ and their wives’ hand me down clothing that either suffered rips/damage or simply went out of style by European standards, field slaves were given scraps of cloth, were sometimes barely clothed and had to wear the same set of clothing for months even after they were completely in disrepair.²⁶ Also, their nature of work was wildly different to that of field workers as the latter took part in strenuous, physical activities in harsh weather conditions while those who worked in the houses had to complete tasks that were more delicate such as cooking, cleaning or helping take care of children.²⁷ Africans in the plantation colonies were exploited and subjugated regardless of their position, roles or relationship to the planter, however, there is no doubt that the Africans who did the majority of their work indoors received a level of preferential treatment that was simply not experienced by those who worked on the fields.

²³ Andrea Dennis, “A Snitch in Time: An Historical Sketch of Black Informing during Slavery,” *Marquette Law Review* (Georgia: University of Georgia School of Law, 2013).

²⁴ Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870*, 2nd ed. (New York, Ny: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 45.

²⁵ Thomas, *The Slave Trade*, 47.

²⁶ Thomas, 48.

²⁷ Thomas, 50.



Fig.1 The New York Times, *London's Legacy in the Slave Trade*,
Painting depicting domestic slave with her master's wife.



Fig.2 The Caribbean History Archives, Painting depicting Field Slave

Their positions and relationships with their owners made the domestic slaves specifically malleable and hesitant to be involved anything that may anger their owners in fear of being punished and their lifestyles being taken away to be replaced by hardship. Thus, there were many instances of light skinned labourers informing the planters of the disruptive plans of the others in order to gain favour. Slave owners and white people in general, were reliant on African spies for the purpose of defending both their collective and individual interests while also preserving the system of slavery.²⁸ Whites profited from the information about African transgressions such as future plans and those involved in the destruction of property but they also profited from the Africans' constant attempts to police their own community for validation.

²⁸ Dennis, "A Snitch in Time."

Therefore, the affinity that the planters had toward the domestic servants during slavery due to the “trust” and relationships that were developed between them caused the field workers to be scornful toward them because of the better treatment they received. This led to the domestic slaves separating themselves from the rest of workers on the plantations since they did not see themselves as people of “colour.” The group so closely identified with their plantation owners that it was easy to believe that they were accepted as white, especially after experiencing the stark difference in how they were treated in comparison to the dark-skinned field workers.²⁹ Their complete isolation from each other also left little to opportunities for them to interact and communicate with each other which was also a factor in the growing contempt between both groups. And as such, these conditions led to the domestic slaves, many of whom were light skinned, to be preferred, taught and treated better by the whites than the field slaves who were usually darker skinned which led to wider society following suit.

²⁹C.W Harper, “House Servants and Field Hands: Fragmentation in the Antebellum Slave Community,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 55, no. 1 (January 1978): 53.

CHAPTER THREE

Subjectively, in the 21st century, media influences many aspects of daily life in society that ranges from popularising music to providing false narratives about information of specific topics to affect people's knowledge. One of the ways that media has skewed society's perception is the way that races are constantly stereotyped, especially Africans. In popular music, tv shows, video games and social media, dark skinned Africans are portrayed to be the lesser desired category to others as they are perceived to be more aggressive, less intelligent, more inclined to be criminals, and less attractive quite similarly to the principles that were popular during colonialism. These ideologies that have existed since European neo-colonialism and although its discriminatory nature has been exposed and is in the process of being refuted, there is still a long way to go for society to effectively disregard centuries of beliefs and stereotypes about this specific group of people and allow persons to live in true equality. African people, specifically, have already had issues with fighting for representation in all versions of media and digital media heavily impacts how people in society perceive each other and how individuals perceive themselves. The reason why representation needs to be authentic is because it can motivate generations, break barriers and expectations and can completely shift ideas.³⁰ However, many of the "representation" that exists in the media end up being affirmations of the same stereotypes that are harmful to the communities that constantly petition for persons that look like them to be included.

People are either unaware or refuse to acknowledge that "light skinned privilege" exists. In Hollywood and many different spheres of movie production it is noticeable the pedestal they

³⁰ Dwight E. Brooks and Lisa Hebert, "Gender, Race, and Media Representation," *Handbook of Gender and Communication* 16 (2006): 298.

hold those with lighter skin as seeing darker skinned celebrities as idols of beauty in media. Many cinematographers find it simpler to stage and light a setting if their models and/or actors have lighter complexions.³¹ It simply “sells to the public” and highlights the cycle that colourism exists where harmful beauty standards in society that are taken advantage of by those who create content to popularise their media which then lead to the maintenance of the same beauty standard. According to a report done on representation in media and movies, Black women account for 6.1 percent of all the characters that are portrayed in family films that were released in 2019, however, this survey revealed certain flaws which noted that roughly 80% of black characters who were female have light complexions.³² This suggests that even though there are attempts to diversify roles, colourism remains pervasive for the sake of higher popularity. More than half of the Africans who were already light skinned and/or mixed that were casted in these movies even had hairstyles that conformed to the European ideals of beauty, that is straight wigs, or “good hair” that was wavy as opposed to coiled, rather than hairstyles that suited African hair.³³ Considering the large influence that the Western cinema and films have on the rest of the world and the Caribbean, particularly, it is unquestionable that the value and beauty to which Hollywood seems to hold lighter skinned women has been translated to the minds of those in Trinidad and Tobago as well. This is seen in local tv shows and media production where lighter skinned persons are casted to portray forms of information for the sake of being more agreeable to the public. An example is that of the news anchors that have worked on the local Trinbagonian television station called “TV6”. Since their conception, they have consistently casted persons who were either non-African

³¹ Naeemah Clark, “In My Words: Media Shades the Truth When It Comes to Colorism,” Elon University (Eric Townsend, April 8, 2014).

³² Ninochka McTaggart, Vanessa Cox, and Caroline Heldman, “Representations of Black Women in Hollywood,” *Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media* (California: USC Viterbi, 2021).

³³ McTaggart, Cox and Heldman, “Representations of Black Women.”

or light skinned which can only be assumed to be by design. Especially considering the large statistics of African people that exist in the multi-faceted island which stands at about 40 percent as of 2020,³⁴ which encourages the idea that the number of persons who are dark skinned and have the qualifications would be a high number as well. Therefore, productions all over the world make the calculating decision to exclude dark-skinned Africans from being participants within their creations for the purpose of “agreeing” with a wider audience which alienates the community from society due to lack of representation.

The media’s portrayal of popular music is yet another way in which colourism ideals is perpetuated. Music has the ability to transport across cultures and transcend languages and with these abilities, they disseminate colourism. Dancehall is a genre of music that strongly influences the Caribbean and Trinidad and Tobago in particular that contain many messages of preferring lighter skinned women to darker skinned women visually and promote bleaching/lightening of the skin. Originated in Jamaica around the 1960’s, dancehall has roots in a country and region that was severely affected by colonialism and was popularised in other islands like Trinidad and Tobago.³⁵ These ideas are effectively dispersed since it is being relayed by people that are easier to relate with as they grew up in the same communities, speak the same language and have the same history.

As mentioned before, many popular dancehall artistes highlight light skinned women’s beauty to that of their darker skinned counterparts. Not only do they purposefully cast mixed and light skinned women in their music videos to portray the “unattainable, attractive and sought after”

³⁴ The World Bank, “Population, Total - Trinidad and Tobago | Data,” data.worldbank.org, 2020.

³⁵ Norman C Stolzoff, *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*, 2nd ed. (2002; repr., Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2016), 4.

type of woman, but they also use words like “mixed”, “creole”, “lightskin” and even using the Americanised term, “red bone” to describe the women that they are attracted to and who deserves their attention. There is scientific evidence that implies that the attitudes about the value of someone’s personal attractiveness and self-importance are formed in childhood as stated by a study by Landau.³⁶ Young people, arguably, have the highest demographic of people that actively listen to the dancehall and are exposed to it, which make them especially susceptible to the ideas displayed. The lack of representation and blatant disregard for those who did not fit the “attractive scale” displays the continuation of neo colonial ideals where Eurocentric features are what should be praised and exposing this to young people melds their minds to the belief that, in turn, allow for the perpetuation of colourism.

In addition, skin bleaching is a popular topic that is referred to in dancehall music. Skin bleaching is the process of lightening one’s skin colour and is commonly used for medical reasons to even out instances of hyperpigmentation in the skin due to aging spots and/or acne scars. However, the majority of the persons who bleach their skin is for aesthetic reasons, that is, to appear lighter and “prettier”.³⁷ Altering one’s appearance in such a drastic manner indicates that they are unsatisfied with how they look and are viewed in society and dancehall artistes such as “Vybz Kartel”, who is quite influential among the youth of Trinidad and Tobago, have not only publicly encouraged skin bleaching but he also does it himself. This allows for society and African people in the Caribbean in particular to be influenced by the connotations connected to using chemicals to lighten one’s skin that not only stimulate self-hate, insecurity and inadequacy among

³⁶ CNN and Elizabeth Landau, “Beholding Beauty: How It’s Been Studied,” CNN, March 3, 2012.

³⁷ Meagan Jacobs et al., “Fifty Shades of African Lightness: A Bio-Psychosocial Review of the Global Phenomenon of Skin Lightening Practices,” *Journal of Public Health in Africa* 7, no. 2 (December 31, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4081/jphia.2016.552>.

dark skinned people, but also place them in mortal danger as most of the chemicals that are promoted to lighten skin are carcinogenic and dangerous. There is no doubt that using skin lightening products for the sake of becoming “prettier” is anti-Black as it heavily implies that the skin tone had before using bleaching products was ugly and unacceptable since it did not fit Eurocentricity.

CHAPTER FOUR

To effectively understand the role that different forms of media has played in the perpetuation of colourism in Trinidadian society, it is important to note the experiences of persons existing within the space. Colourism ideals that stem from racism affects dark-skinned Africans in many different ways, however, it does not just occur in a vacuum. This issue also affects those who live in society but are not Africans as well. Of the six (6) respondents, two (2) of them were adolescent African people, two (2) were adult African people and two (2) were adult non-African people of colour.

Firstly, it is important to note that the spectrum of “light and dark” skin colour exists to be the most impactful for people of colour in society. Two of the African male respondents, in the adolescent and adult category were unable to answer the question effectively while stating that “it doesn’t matter” while all three of the female respondents and the male non-Black respondent answered with their perception of their skin complexion. According to Reece, intersectionality is an aspect that needs to be taken into consideration when evaluating issues in society.³⁸ Women and men suffer under colourism differently as men, while victims of wider issues like racism, are not affected in the same ways in terms of colourism as women would be due to their dominant position in society regardless.³⁹ Thus, this is noticeable in the variation of answers received from the female respondents in comparison to the males.

³⁸ Robert L. Reece, “The Gender of Colorism: Understanding the Intersection of Skin Tone and Gender Inequality,” *Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy* 4 (March 11, 2020): 47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41996-020-00054-1>.

³⁹ Reece, “The Gender of Colorism,” 47.

Moreover, all of the respondents have stated that they noticed when there were little to no Africans and/or dark-skinned Africans in the content that they consumed. This portrays the ways in which exclusion is stark in the movie production industry, especially of races that differ from the “norm” which is Caucasians or “white passing” people of colour. The two adolescent African respondents, while seemingly unable to place their thoughts into words, simply stated that they believed that the persons who were tasked with creating content simply did not care to have Black people within their production because of racism. The two adult Africans that were interviewed stated that they did notice the lack of representation but would usually ignore it for the sake of consuming content. However, the two non-Black adults, stated that they completely did not notice and felt that because it is the norm for white people to dominate the roles in television, it would be “weird” to expect anything else. This highlights the vitality of representation in media as western ideals like, Eurocentric beauty, food and behaviours are constantly portrayed while other races and ethnicities are completely ignored while simultaneously etching within society that since this is what is “required” to be accepted, then they, too, should follow these behaviours and ideals.⁴⁰

The two adolescent respondents in the interviews have indicated that they noticed instances of colourism in different forms of media. An example is that of some of the video games that they play. The male respondent specifically stated that in one of the games he plays named “Genshin Impact,” there are two characters out of the dozens that have darker skin than the rest and although they are not explicitly stated that they are emulations of African people, they are noticeably different. What the respondent says about this, however, is that for the two characters, their descriptions focus more on their skin colour in comparison to the other pale characters where they

⁴⁰ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, 2nd ed. (1995; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 173.

were described using words like “exotic” or having a “scary” appearance. According to Waring, using the word “exotic” is reserved for plants and/or animals where these items are originated from different countries/places and are imported.⁴¹ Stating something as exotic may be of the intention of people to be a compliment, but in actuality it is a backhanded phrase where it reminds those who have darker skin are less human and less regular than people who fit Eurocentric ideals of beauty or “normalcy”. In addition to this, one of the adults of African descent also noticed another way that colourism was promoted. She stated that when she uses photograph “filters” on her social media platforms she noticed that many of them with the descriptions of “improving her beauty” or enhancing her features lighten her skin tone and edit her nose to be narrower than it actually is. Obvious African features such as dark skin and broad/wide noses being suppressed and changed into the opposite under the guise of being “prettier” is anti-Black and promotes colourism as it implies to those who use the widely used platform that a person’s beauty and worth is based on their complexion.⁴²

As mentioned before, many of the messages within popular Caribbean music like dancehall is the practice of skin bleaching. While the male adolescent respondent was indifferent to the idea of bleaching his skin. The female adolescent interviewee has admitted to considering using “lightening” products that she has seen in the local beauty supply store. Coincidentally, her favourite dancehall artiste is Vybz Kartel, who has been mentioned within the research paper and is an avid user of skin bleaching products that he has stated makes him “prettier” and highlighted his features.⁴³ The influence that popular celebrities have on younger people, in particular, is quite

⁴¹ Chandra D. L. Waring, “‘They See Me as Exotic... That Intrigues Them:’ Gender, Sexuality and the Racially Ambiguous Body,” *Race, Gender & Class* 20, no. 3/4 (2013): 302, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43496947>.

⁴² Reece, 49.

⁴³ Dustin T. Duncan, “Dancehall Music and Skin Bleaching: Destructive Fashion or Internal Foe?” *HuffPost* (Harvard School of Public Health, March 6, 2013).

high. Due to the heavy endorsement from these artistes, it is now seen as a fashionable cosmetic choice although it is dangerous to one's health as it causes skin cancer. The damage would not only be physical, however, as the promotion of bleaching would also incite self-hatred that can encourage the perception that dark skin is unseemly and unattractive in comparison to lighter skin which would normalise harmful colourist ideals. In addition to this, the older respondents have stated that they were indifferent to the idea of bleaching their skin and it is important to note that these persons do not have an affinity for dancehall music. Therefore, not only is it accurate to say that dancehall is a vehicle for the promotion of colourism, but it is also viable to say that young women, in particular, are affected by the unnecessary ideal of beauty.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Duncan, "Dancehall Music and Skin Bleaching."

CONCLUSION

Unquestionably, colourism is an institutionalised societal issue that has victimised people of colour and African people specifically. Stemming from a history of neo-colonialism and slavery, it has consistently maintained the acceptance of Eurocentric beauty ideals. The separation between the light-skinned and dark-skinned African slaves on the Caribbean plantations had a large impact on the perception of the importance of skin complexion in society and what was expected of each group. As such, this established the ideals of colourism as media, that is, television shows, movies and music have consistently maintained the practice of portraying light skinned or mixed African women for the sake of attempting to be diverse while simultaneously ignoring those who are not “appealing” to wider society. In addition, popular Caribbean culture such as dancehall music has made it difficult to accept one’s appearance considering the pedestal that those with influence has placed Eurocentric features on, claiming that lighter skin is more attractive. Skin bleaching, a harmful practice, is one of the practices that these artistes have promoted in order to achieve the aforementioned traits for the purpose of being fashionable. Thus, mass media is proven to be one of the main mediums that maintain colourism ideals in Trinidad.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

To enhance the study of colourism and how the media maintains its ideas to affect Africans in Trinidad, an interview was done with six (6) interviewees where two (2) of them were adolescent African people, two (2) of them were adult African people and two (2) of them were adult non-African people of colour. The questions were as follows.

1. Which part of the spectrum do you believe you fall under? “Light skinned” or “Dark skinned.”
2. Do you believe that you are treated different because of your complexion?
3. Do you notice when there are not much African or dark-skinned actors in movies or tv shows? What are your thoughts?
4. Other than movies and music, do you notice any other media that continues colourist ideals?
5. Have you experienced either done to you or others discrimination because of your skin complexion? How has it affected you?
6. Do you believe that men and women are affected differently by colourism? How so?
7. In your opinion, how does popular music in Trinidad, such as, Dancehall, affect your perception of dark skin?
8. Have you ever thought about bleaching your skin? Why/Why not and what encouraged your desire/aversion to do it.

