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Empirical evidence of the effect of colorism on customer evaluations

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Abstract

Skin tone is a known influencer of earnings and social status. Its role in marketing has been primarily studied within the context of advertising while focusing on differences between Whites and Blacks. Three experiments were conducted to determine the effect of skin tone on customer evaluations of Black, Hispanic, and White males and females across two industries. In Studies 1 and 2, the Hispanic male was deemed less competent, professional, and worthy of repatronage compared to other service providers. In Study 3, the Hispanic male received higher evaluations when portrayed with a darker skin tone than lighter skin tone. Skin tone identity, ethnic identity, and colorism are found to influence the observed relationship. The research demonstrates that ethnicity matters, gender matters, and skin tone matters when evaluating service providers.

KEYWORDS

colorism, customer evaluations, ethnic identity, Hispanic male, skin tone

1 | INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that skin tone influences the level of education, employment, income, and social acceptance many members of ethnic groups are able to achieve (Herring, Keith, & Horton, 2004; Lynn, 2002). Skin tone is used by many to establish and perpetuate stereotypes (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, & Organista, 2014; Maddox, and Gray, 2002; Simpson, Snuggs, Christiansen, & Simples, 2000) and define perceptions of beauty (Frisby, 2006; Mathews & Johnson, 2015). Skin tone and appearance are also related to voters' evaluations of political candidates and election outcomes (Hunter, 2007). Filmmakers, advertisers, modeling agencies, and matchmaking web sites—all exemplify a preference for light skin tone, straight hair, and Eurocentric features (Hochschild, & Weaver, 2007), even on people of non-European ancestry. The importance societies place on skin tone is prominently reflected within many forms of media and entertainment (Keenan, 1996; Mayo, Mayo, & Mahdi, 2005). For instance, accusations have been made that the skin tones of African-American singer/actress Beyoncé Knowles, Bollywood actress Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, and several other non-White celebrities were digitally lightened for their placement on magazine covers or in cosmetics advertisements (Associated Press, 2008). With few exceptions, lighter skin tone is viewed as more aesthetically, normatively, and culturally pleasing than darker skin tone.

The stigma against dark skin tone is so powerful that skin-lightening products represent a large, growing industry (Cooper, 2016, November 26; NPR, 2009; Parameswaran, & Cardoza, 2009) projected to be worth more than $1 billion worldwide (Davids, 2016). Skin bleaching, the practice of applying depigmenting agents to specific or widespread areas of the body for lightening normally dark skin, dates back to the 1900s (Dadzie, & Petit, 2009) and it is currently a common practice within communities of dark-skinned people. The desire to lighten skin color is primarily motivated by the belief that White skin is associated with social privileges, including better job opportunities and marital prospects (Dadzie, & Petit, 2009). Traditionally a female-associated practice, skin lightening has become increasingly popular among males (Davids, 2016). Many people are undertaking the practice despite possible serious side effects, such as Cushing's syndrome, renal impairment and immune system suppression (Ajose, 2005). In general, the appeal of a lighter skin tone as a form of social capital has sparked the demand for legal and illegal skin-lightening products in many countries. These examples reinforce the notion that, right or wrong, issues pertaining to skin tone are current, real, and far reaching. It is an issue with broad influence, and marketing is not resistant to its effects.

In today's multicultural and multiracial world, taking a dichotomous view of skin tone is perhaps overly simplified. It does not represent the true diversity of skin tones and the broad racial implications associated with them. The racial composition of many countries is changing, which calls for an updated assessment of the perceptions assigned to skin tone variances. While there are studies that look at the role of race and marketing (e.g., Brewster, and Rusche, 2012; Brumbaugh, 2009; Dirks, and Rice, 2004; Donthu, and Cherian, 1994; Simpson et al., 2000; Whittler, 1989; Williams, & Qualls, 1989), there is little empirical evidence of the influence of the skin tone differences in a business

context other than advertising (Marira, & Mitra, 2013). In fact, only a few studies (Meyers, 2008, 2011) have assessed how skin tone itself influences consumer attitude. Those that have done so take a dyadic view of skin tone—light vs. dark, and focus almost exclusively on the skin tone of Black people. Responding to this gap in research, Marira and Mitra (2013) issued a call for further research into the role of colorism, "a system that grants advantages and opportunities to those that possess lighter complexions" (Hunter, 2002; Mathews, & Johnson, 2015), and the direct relation this has on business transactions. The current project answers that call.

In order to understand the impact of different skin tones on consumer attitudes and to address the gap within the literature, the authors conducted three studies to test the prediction that the skin tone and ethnicity of a front line service provider will effect customer evaluations of both the service transaction and firm. In the first study, the authors investigate the perceived differences between persons with lighter and darker skin tones. This study begins to highlight the impact of colorism and ethnicity on consumers. In the second study, they extend the first study to investigate the role of skin tone, ethnicity, and gender within a professional service context. The study addresses how ethnic identity and consumers' self-concepts influence perceptions of the service provider. Finally, building upon and extending the results of the first two studies, the authors introduce the concept of colorism as a potential mechanism for explaining the differences in service evaluations.

The major contributions of this research are twofold. First, skin tone is studied across three ethnic groups (Black, Hispanic, and White). This research thereby provides a more comprehensive picture of the impact of skin tone and ethnicity in marketing. Adding this additional group increases the relevancy of this topic to today's multicultural society. Second, three constructs are included to explain the relationship between skin-tone, ethnicity, and the service context: skin tone identity, ethnic identity, and colorism. This represents a significant addition to the theoretical understanding of how the skin tone of the service provider affects consumer evaluations and purchase decisions.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

With respect to marketing, a fair amount of research regarding race is available, predominantly relating to the prevalence of Blacks in advertisements and the attitudes that Black and White consumers hold about such inclusions (e.g., Whittler, 1991). However, scant research can be found, which assesses variations in skin tone and its effect on service outcomes such as attitude toward the service provider, service competency, and service quality.

As it relates to advertising, a number of content analyses find that lighter-skinned Black models are more prevalent in print media than are darker-skinned models (e.g., Keenan, 1996; Mayo et al., 2005). For example, a study of advertisements and editorial photographs in women's and business magazines indicates that the skin tone of Black models in advertising tended to be lighter and their features were more Eurocentric than those of individuals in editorial photographs (Keenan,

1996). A meta-analysis by Mayo et al. (2005) found that darker Black models are often found in sports-oriented magazines, whereas lighter-skinned Black models are prevalent in fashion magazines. This suggests that advertisers accept darker skinned models as a representation of physical strength (e.g., sports) but not as a symbol of beauty (e.g., cosmetics).

Beyond content analyses, very few empirical studies have tested how variations in skin tone can affect outcomes. Most of these studies confirm the predilection for lighter skin tone models in advertising, especially among Black participants (Meyers, 2011; Watson, Thornton, & Engelland, 2010). In one study, Black participants were asked to evaluate an advertisement featuring either a light, or dark, skin tone model (Meyers, 2011). Overall, participants demonstrated a preference for the lighter-skinned model. Attitudes toward the model, ad, and brand, as well as purchase intent, were greater when the advertiser used a lighter skin tone model. In another study, the authors assessed the interaction effects of skin tone and the participant's gender (Watson et al., 2010). Results among Black men indicated a significantly stronger preference for light-skinned models as measured by model attractiveness, attitude toward the ad, and attitude toward the brand. Such results correspond well with Bond and Cash's (1992) study where Black men found lighter skin tone more attractive than darker skin tone. Prior authors surmised that the preference for lighter skin tones is historical and may stem from society's standard of beauty as perpetuated in the media (Williams, Qualls, & Grier, 1995), or from the idea that darker skin tones are sometimes associated with negative personal traits such as criminality, lack of education, or poverty (Hunter, 2002; Maddox, & Gray, 2002). The findings parallel the seemingly worldwide preference for lighter skin tone regardless of ethnicity (Hunter, 2002). This leads us to our first set of hypotheses:

H1: A non-White service provider will receive lower evaluations than a White service provider.
H2: A service provider with dark skin tone will receive lower evaluations than a service provider with light skin tone.

A body of research finds that the majority of White consumers do not react negatively to Black models found in stimuli (Appiah, 2007; Meyers, 2008; Schlinger, and Plummer, 1972; Whittler, 1989). Whites that do are either overtly prejudiced (Whittler, 1991) or older (Whittler, & Spira, 2002). Significant differences have been noted among Blacks. This is possibly due to their ethnicity and minority status. Many Blacks appear to strongly identify with models who are also Black (Appiah, 2001; Whittler, 1989) and this identification influences advertising effectiveness such as message recall (Appiah, 2007), attitude toward the ad (Appiah, 2001; Meyers, 2008; Qualls, and Moore, 1990; Watson et al., 2010), attitude toward the brand (Meyers, 2008; Watson, DeJong, & Slack, 2009), and purchase intent (Meyers, 2008; Simpson et al., 2000; Whittler, 1989).

One explanation for the impact of skin tone is found in the colorism literature (Hunter, 2007; Lancaster, 1999). As outlined by Alice Walker (1983, p. 290), colorism is the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color." Explicitly linked with skin tone, colorism is based on the idea that people with lighter complexions are deemed more attractive (Hunter, 2007), more

affluent (Mathews, & Johnson, 2015), and more socially acceptable (Hunter, 2007) than their counterparts with darker skin. Colorism is also rooted in self-esteem and self-concept (Mathews, & Johnson, 2015), which is not limited to Blacks. It exists among other ethnic groups, as is documented in studies that highlight the perceived discrimination (Fergus, 2016; Fuller-Rowell, Ong, & Phinney, 2013) and within-group racial discrimination of Hispanics (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014).

In addition, colorism contributes to social stigmatization (Crocker, & Major, 1989). In their study on the importance of skin tone, Harvey, LaBeach, Pridgen, and Gocial, 2005 found that variations in skin tone were more salient for Blacks than for Whites and this may signal the existence of a within-group stigma. This stigma is related to the implicit and explicit racial bias associated with ethnic identity (Livingston, 2002), which is the result of the dominant group's influence on minority racial attitudes (Allport, 1954). As such, these social stigmas and norms can influence evaluations of service providers and their roles in the workplace. For example, an encounter with a brown or black employee in a blue-collar role may align with a customer's archaic, negative expectations of the type of person that "should" perform menial duties. Conversely, an encounter with the same person in a White-collar role may be incongruent with the customer's norms and may result in unforeseen outcomes. Expectancy violation theory predicts that when an individual's characteristics defy stereotype-based expectations, evaluations will become more extreme in the direction of the violation. A negative violation leads to a more negative evaluation than would otherwise occur. A positive violation leads to a more positive evaluation than would otherwise occur (Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987). In this instance, a customer uses the race of a service provider as a visual cue of the provider's anticipated performance and legitimacy to be in a position (Jones, Moore, Stanaland, & Wyatt, 1998). When norms are violated in this manner, we hypothesize:

H3: A service provider with dark skin tone will receive higher evaluations than a service provider with light skin tone when both are employed in White collar jobs.

Within the context of colorism, a strong ethnic identity leads to preferences for members of one's own racial group in advertisements (Brumbaugh, 2009; Green, 1999; Schlinger, and Plummer, 1972; Williams et al., 1995). Ethnic identity is defined as "the degree to which one acknowledges his or her membership in, and feels a sense of 'belongingness' to, a particular ethnic group. It is the degree to which perceived group values are internalized within the person's own self-concept" (Harvey et al., 2005, p. 240). Individuals who place great importance on skin tone believe that it plays an important role in everyday life and it reveals a great deal about a person (Harvey et al., 2005). The degree to which a person identifies with their race has been recognized as a possible influencer on marketing, particularly advertising effectiveness (Brumbaugh, 2009).

Those who closely identify with their ethnic group show a strong preference for products that highlight their ethnicity (Donthu, & Cherian, 1992; Whittler, and Spira, 2002; Xu, Shim, Lotz, & Almeida, 2004). For example, children who are high ethnic identifiers prefer dolls with skin tones that match their own (Cui, 1997). Meyer (2008)

found that Blacks who possess a strong ethnic identification have more favorable attitudes toward a darker-skinned model in an advertisement than do Blacks with a weak ethnic identification. Individuals with darker skin tones tend to score higher in ethnic identity than their counterparts with lighter skin tones (Harvey et al., 2005). Conversely, individuals who feel dissociated from their ethnic identity may present less favorable attitudes toward those who share that same identity. Thus, the colorism effect relates both to the self-concept of the individual and how they project that evaluation upon others.

The combination of these theories leads the authors to present the following hypotheses:

H4: Persons with a strong ethnic identity will give lower evaluations to a service provider with light skin tone than a service provider with dark skin tone.

H5: Persons with a strong skin tone identity will give lower evaluations to a service provider with light skin tone than a service provider with dark skin tone.

H6: Colorism will moderate the relationship between the service provider's skin-tone and consumer evaluations.

3 ⏐ METHODS

3.1 ⏐ Study 1

3.1.1 ⏐ Stimuli development and procedure

The purpose of the first study is to vet the research stimuli and benchmark the impact of skin tone, ethnicity, and the gender of the service provider, as they pertain to two measures of service provider performance: professionalism and service competency. A two-phase pretest was conducted to confirm the perceived ethnicity and skin tone of persons in digital photos purchased from a provider of online stock photography.

Qualtrics, an online survey portal, was used for data collection and participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions for all studies in this project. A total 542 undergraduate students at a university in the southeastern United States evaluated one of 30 photos. Each photo was of a Black, Hispanic, or White male or female. Each model was forward facing, similarly posed and dressed, and smiling. Participants also identified the ethnicity and age range of the person in their photo. Students received participation credit from the university for their involvement in the study. The male and female photos most frequently identified as representative of the three ethnic groups were selected for use in phase two of the pretest.

While attending a cultural event in the Midwest United States, 58 nonstudents were solicited to participate in the second phase of the pretest. Of those participants, 25% were 18–24 years old, 27% were 25–34 years old, 19% were 35–44 years old, 15% were 45–54 years old, and 14% were over 55 years old. Sixty-three percent of the participants were White, 18% were Hispanic, and 12% were Black. Fifty-four percent were female. Baseline data collection was conducted to confirm general customer attitudes. The skin tone of persons in each photo adopted from the first phase was digitally manipulated by a graphic

FIGURE 1 Study 1 example of stimulus material [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

artist to create a light and dark skin tone version (see Figure 1 for an example). Participants were randomly assigned one of 12 photos to rate as 1 = "Very light skin tone for that ethnic group" to 7 = "Very dark skin tone for that ethnic group". Participants also rated the person's professionalism and business competency based solely on the photo.

3.1.2 | Study 1 results

The effectiveness of the skin tone manipulation was confirmed for the Black models ($t_{(18)}$ = 33.01, p < 0.001, M_{Dark} = 6.11, M_{Light} = 3.09, SD = 0.90) and the Hispanic models ($t_{(19)}$ = 27.07, p < 0.001, M_{Dark} = 5.94, M_{Light} = 3.21, SD = 1.01) but not for the White models ($t_{(18)}$ = 1.67, p = 0.33, M_{Dark} = 4.12, M_{Light} = 3.78, SD = 0.61). These findings parallel earlier research that indicated skin tone differences are not noticeable for Whites, as skin tone is not seen as a factor in a White person's social identity (Cooley, 2011).

The relationship between [3 (ethnicity: Black, Hispanic, White) × 2 (gender: female, male) × 2(skin tone: dark, light)] was tested. ANOVAs revealed that ethnicity had a significant main effect on professionalism ($F_{(57)}$ = 2.49, p < 0.05), and competency ($F_{(57)}$ = 4.52, p < 0.01). Significant two-way interactions between gender and ethnicity were observed. The Hispanic male was perceived as significantly less professional ($F_{(56)}$ = 8.89, p < 0.001) and less competent ($F_{(56)}$ = 2.46, p = 0.03) than the other individuals. The three-way interaction between the independent variables was not significant ($F_{(56)}$ = 1.14, p > 0.05). All participants correctly identified the ethnicity of the person in the picture they were assigned. All of the persons in the pictures were perceived to be in the 26–34 age range. Collectively, these findings support H1, which suggest that a non-White service provider will receive lower evaluations than a White service provider. The results for Study 1 are displayed in Figure 2 and Tables 1 and 2.

3.1.3 | Study 1 discussion

While only a preliminary investigation, this study identified significant gender and ethnicity differences in customer perceptions of service professionals. Previous research in the services marketing literature suggests that, in the minds of customers, employees are the organization (Cowart, & Brady, 2014; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Thus, a negative evaluation of a stereotyped employee may very well
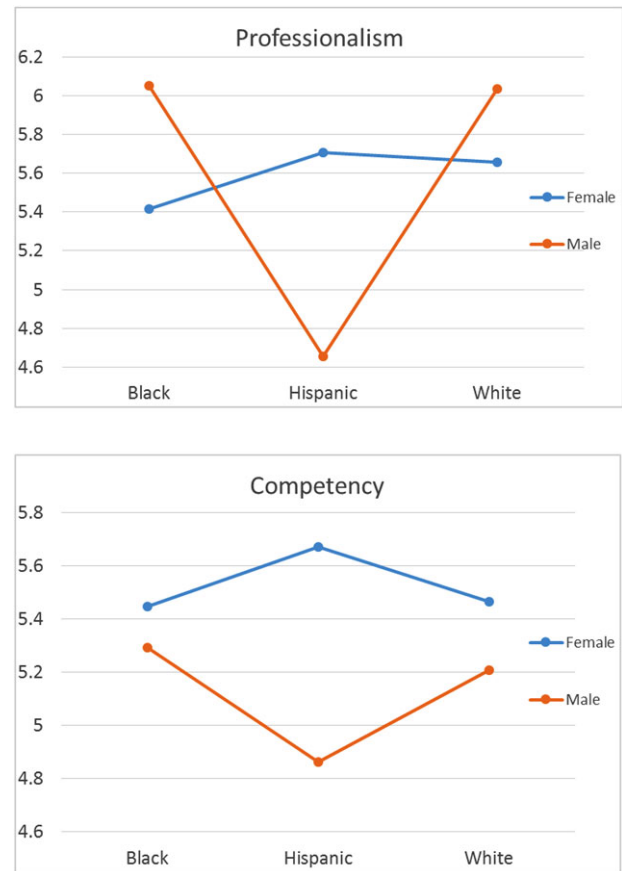

FIGURE 2 Study 1 means plot [Color figure can be viewed at wiley-onlinelibrary.com]

extend to a negative evaluation of the service provider. This issue may be especially important for frontline service jobs where the employee–customer interface is an intricate part of the service experience. For instance, a study by Klassen, Clayson, and Jasper (1996) indicated that a salesperson's appearance could affect customer perceptions of store image and store management. Research by Cowart and Brady (2014) revealed that evaluations of overweight frontline service employees were transferred to the restaurant and retailer where they worked. The current study adds skin tone to the list of stigmas that customers may use to evaluate service personnel. It is interesting to note that

TABLE 1 Means and standard deviation for Study 1—Professionalism

Professionalism			
Gender		Mean	SD
Female	Black	6.1571	0.84454
	Hispanic	6.0350	0.84960
	White	6.1243	0.86326
Male	Black	6.1231	0.84929
	Hispanic	5.4842	1.06607
	White	6.3053	0.71696

TABLE 2 Means and standard deviation for Study 1—Competency

Competency			
Gender		Mean	SD
Female	Black	5.4482	1.39135
	Hispanic	5.6724	1.20507
	White	5.4655	1.25956
Male	Black	5.2931	1.40186
	Hispanic	4.8620	1.38219
	White	5.2068	1.01322

lower evaluations were assigned to the Hispanic male, although no information was provided about the person in each photo. This implies the existence of implicit racial or gender biases.

In Study 1, the authors extend the findings of earlier researchers (e.g., Watson et al., 2009) by establishing that ethnic bias exists outside of the White versus Black dyad, as well as outside of the advertising context. Although the ethnic composition of the sample in Study 1 was reflective of the United States population, random assignment to experimental conditions resulted in an insufficient number of Black and Hispanic participants evaluating photos of Blacks or Hispanics. Thus, the authors could not analyze the moderating effect of participant ethnicity or skin tone on the dependent variables. A second study was proposed to evoke the effect of skin tone differences, which were not significant in the first study, and to test the observed phenomenon within the services context. Finally, a second study using a larger, non-student sample was necessary to confirm the external validity of the initial research results.

3.2 | Study 2

3.2.1 | Sample and procedure

Two hundred forty-two adults from Amazon's Mechanical Turk customer panel voluntarily participated in this study in exchange for a small cash incentive. Of them, 17% were 18–24 years old, 46% were 25–34 years old, 17% were 35–44 years old, 12% were 45–54 years old, and 9% were over 55 years old. Seventy-nine percent of the participants were White, 13% were Hispanic, and 6% were Black. Fifty-one percent were female. Participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a [3 (ethnicity: Black, White, Hispanic) × 2 (gender:

female, male) × 2(skin tone: light, dark)] between-subjects experimental design. They were given a cover story that they would complete two, short, unrelated studies.

First, each participant read a brief scenario adapted from Cowart and Brady (2014) in which he/she was asked to envision himself/herself as a consumer hiring a tax preparer for the first time. The details of a routine exchange were outlined and participants were shown one of the 12 digitally manipulated photos from Study 1, which ostensibly depicted their tax preparer. Participants reported their repurchase intention, using a five-item validated semantic differential scale created by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) (e.g., "What is the probability that you would return to this service provider?"). The positive anchors were "Likely," "Existent," "Possible," "Certain," and "Definitely Would." Participants completed two single-item Likert scales as well: (1) "Is the service provider competent?" and (2) "Is the service provider professional?"

In a fictitious second study about cultural awareness, participants answered questions about skin tone identity (e.g., "As a member of my ethnic group, the shade of my skin tone plays an important role in my everyday life."), which was measured by a three-item scale created by Harvey et al., (2005). They also answered questions regarding their ethnic identity (e.g., "I feel a lot of attachment toward my own ethnic group."), which was measured by a 10-item scale created by Yancey, Aneshensel, and Driscoll (2001). Construct reliability for the scales ranged between 0.75 and 0.97 (Cronbach, 1951). As manipulation checks, participants were asked two questions, "What was the occupation of the service provider in the scenario?" and "What was the skin tone of the service provider in the scenario?" The latter used a Likert-scaled response set ranging from 1 = "very light for that ethnic group" to 7 = "very dark for that ethnic group." Finally, participants provided basic demographic information.

3.2.2 | Study 2 results

Results of the manipulation checks confirmed the effectiveness of the skin tone manipulation ($t(241) = 8.71$; $p < 0.01$), ($M_{Dark} = 5.24$, SD = 0.66 vs. $M_{Light} = 2.88$, SD = 0.50). Six people were removed from the study due to incorrect responses to the quality check questions, leaving a usable sample of 236 participants. Next, ANCOVAs were conducted to compare mean differences for the dependent variable. There was a significant main effect for ethnicity ($F(226) = 4.42$, $p = 0.013$), where Hispanics were evaluated significantly lower than Blacks and Whites. There was also a significant main effect for gender of the service provider ($F(226) = 3.13$, $p = 0.048$), where males were evaluated lower than females on repurchase intention. There were significant two-way interactions between service provider gender and ethnicity ($F(226) = 6.33$, $p = 0.002$) and skin tone and service provider gender ($F(226) = 5.49$, $p = 0.005$). Post hoc analysis revealed that across ethnic groups, evaluations for the female models were similar ($M_{Hispanic} = 6.04$, $M_{Black} = 6.16$, $M_{White} = 6.12$). Evaluations were significantly lower for Hispanic males than for other males ($M_{Hispanic} = 5.23$, $M_{Black} = 6.12$, $M_{White} = 6.31$), thereby confirming the results from Study 1. The three-way interaction between the independent variables

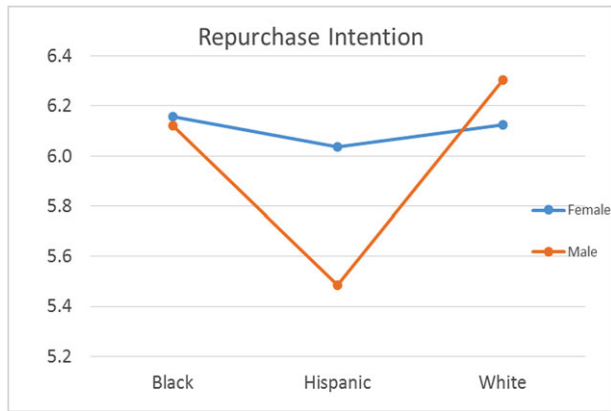**FIGURE 3** Study 2 means plot [Color figure can be viewed at wiley-onlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 3 Means and standard deviation for Study 2—Repurchase intention

Repurchase Intention			
Gender		Mean	SD
Female	Black	6.1571	0.84454
	Hispanic	6.0350	0.84960
	White	6.1243	0.86326
Male	Black	6.1231	0.84929
	Hispanic	5.4842	1.06607
	White	6.3053	0.71696
	Total	5.9722	0.94883

was not significant ($F(226) = 1.54, p = 0.217$). The results of Study 2 are depicted in Figure 3 and Table 3.

Analyses indicated that the ethnic identity ($F_{(226)} = 7.64, p = 0.006$) and the skin tone identity ($F_{(226)} = 15.99, p < 0.001$) of the participants were significant covariates in the hypothesized relationship. Participants with strong ethnic and skin tone identity were more likely to provide higher evaluations of minority service providers, indicating support for H4 and H5.

3.2.3 | Study 2 discussion

This study introduces the role of racial identity and skin tone identification as driving factors in the evaluation of a service provider's skin tone, implying that a consumer's identity influences how that person relates to persons providing services. Similar to Study 1, participants conveyed significantly lower repurchase intention for the Hispanic male than the Black or White males, or any of the females. This may be partially due to acculturation responses, as participants may respond to service providers negatively when they do not fit the expected cultural heuristics (Faber, O'Guinn, & McCarty, 1987). In Study 3, the authors focused on the Hispanic male to discover the underlying mechanism for the observed phenomenon. Colorism is measured in Study 3 and it is tested as a moderator of the observed relationships.

3.3 | Study 3

3.3.1 | Sample and procedures

One hundred sixty-five different adults from Amazon's Mechanical Turk customer panel participated in this study in exchange for a small cash incentive. Of them, 16% were 18–24 years old, 36% were 25–34 years old, 30% were 35–44 years old, 11% were 45–54 years old, and 8% were over 55 years old. Seventy-three percent of participants were White, 9% were Hispanic, and 8% were Black. Fifty percent were female. Participants were randomly assigned to a [2 (skin tone: dark, light) × 2 (profession: white collar, blue collar)] between-subjects, scenario-driven experiment. Skin tone was operationalized via the two digitally manipulated photos of the Hispanic male from the previous studies (see Figure 1). The procedure from Study 2 was repeated, except participants now read a scenario in which they assumed the role of a customer who hires either a tax preparer or a lawn care provider for the first time. All measures and variables from Study 2 were retained for Study 3. In addition, colorism was assessed with the self-concept subscale (e.g., My skin tone is an important component of who I am) and the impression formation subscale (e.g., You can tell a lot about a person by their skin tone) adopted from a colorism scale developed by Harvey, Hudson Banks, & Tennial (2014). Each subscale consisted of four, 7-point Likert-scaled items (endpoints: strongly disagree/strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.86$ and 0.89, respectively). All of the measures in the study demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's αs ranging from 0.78 to 0.90 (Cronbach, 1951).

3.3.2 | Study 3 results

Three participants were removed from the sample for failure to correctly answer the manipulation check. This left a final sample of 162 participants. For the quality check, participants who viewed the dark condition ($M = 5.24, SD = .57$) described the service provider as significantly darker than participants who viewed the light condition ($M = 2.28, SD = 0.63$). ANCOVA were conducted to compare mean differences for the dependent variable. Mean comparisons indicated a main effect for skin tone identity on repurchase intention ($t_{(161)} = 10.46; p < 0.001$). There was a significant main effect of profession on repurchase intention ($F_{(161)} = 19.58, p < 0.001$) with the tax preparer ($M = 5.30$) receiving significantly lower evaluations than the lawn care provider ($M = 6.19$). A significant main effect was not observed for the effect of skin tone on repurchase intention ($F_{(161)} = 1.84, p = 0.094$). However, there was a significant two-way interaction between profession and skin tone on repurchase intention ($F_{(161)} = 4.28, p = 0.04$). The Hispanic tax preparer received significantly lower evaluations when depicted with light skin tone ($M = 4.40$) than with dark skin tone ($M = 5.89$). The lawn care provider received similar evaluations when shown with light skin tone ($M = 6.18$) and dark skin tone ($M = 6.19$). This supports H3, which stated that a service provider with dark skin tone will receive higher evaluations than one with light skin tone when both are employed in white-collar jobs. The relationship was moderated by colorism with participants who rated high on the colorism scale indicating lower repurchase intention for the tax preparer with light skin tone than participants with
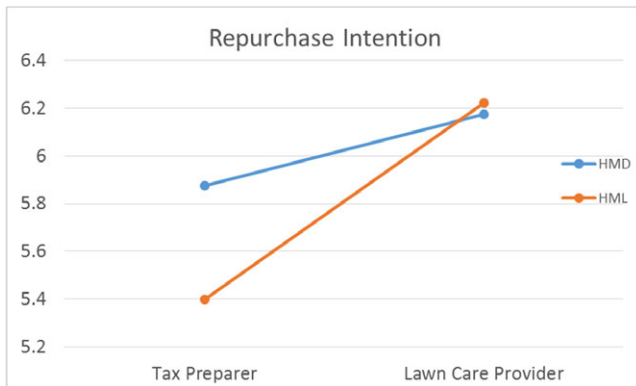
FIGURE 4 Study 3 mean plot [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

lower colorism scores ($F_{(161)} = 4.14$, $p = 0.04$, $M_{\text{High Colorism}} = 5.90$, $M_{\text{Low Colorism}} = 4.52$]. This provides support for H6.

Furthermore, the findings of Study 3 indicate that the participant's skin tone influenced his/her perception of the person in the photo. A main effect of participant skin tone on the perceived competence of the service provider [$F_{(160)} = 22.06$, $p < 0.001$] and an interaction between the participant's skin tone and the service provider's skin tone [$F_{(157)} = 3.97$, $p < 0.01$], ($M_{\text{Dark male}} = 7.00$ vs. $M_{\text{Light male}} = 2.50$) was observed when the participant had dark skin tone relative to others in her/his ethnic group. There was a main effect of participant skin tone [$F_{(160)} = 22.63$, $p < 0.001$] and an interaction between the participant's skin tone and the service provider's skin tone ($F_{(157)} = 3.79$, $p < 0.01$), ($M_{\text{Dark male}} = 7.00$ vs. $M_{\text{Light male}} = 2.45$) on the perceived efficiency of the service provider. This occurred when the participant had dark skin tone relative to others in her/his ethnic group. There was a main effect of skin tone on the perceived work effort of the service provider ($F_{(160)} = 13.13$, $p < 0.001$), ($M_{\text{Dark male}} = 6.15$ vs. $M_{\text{Light male}} = 3.50$) when the participant had dark skin tone relative to others in her/his ethnic group. The results of Study 3 are displayed in Figures 4 and 5.

3.3.3 | Study 3 discussion

When the Hispanic male was depicted as a tax preparer with light skin tone, he received significantly lower evaluations than when he was depicted as a tax preparer with dark skin tone. There was no statistically significant difference between evaluations ascribed to him as a lawn care provider with light skin tone or dark skin tone. Participants' self-concept (i.e., colorism) was influential in these outcomes. The tax preparer with a light skin tone was deemed significantly less competent, efficient, and hardworking than the tax preparer with a dark skin tone and this result was largely driven by participants who self-identified as darker than others in their ethnic group. (No participants identified as "much darker.") In addition, participants who scored significantly higher on the colorism scale assigned lower evaluations in general to the Hispanic male with light skin tone. Collectively these findings confirm H4, where those with a strong skin tone identity will give lower evaluations to a service provider with light skin tone than a service provider with dark skin tone.
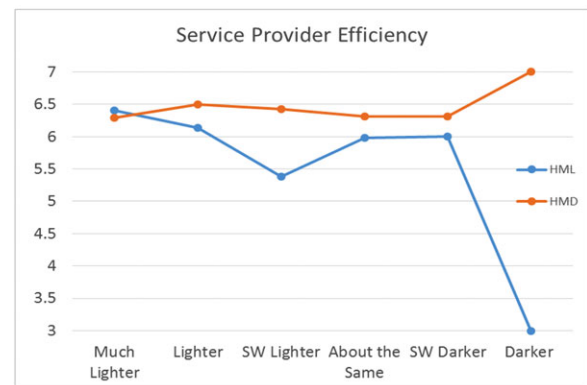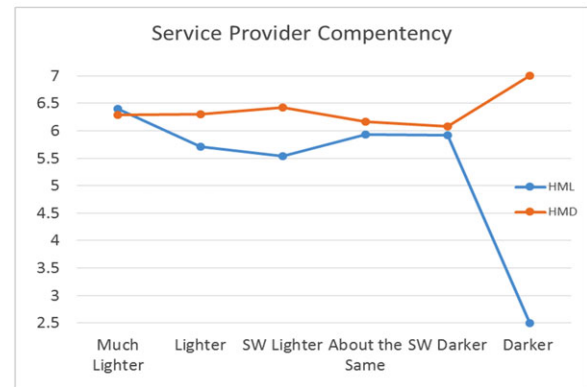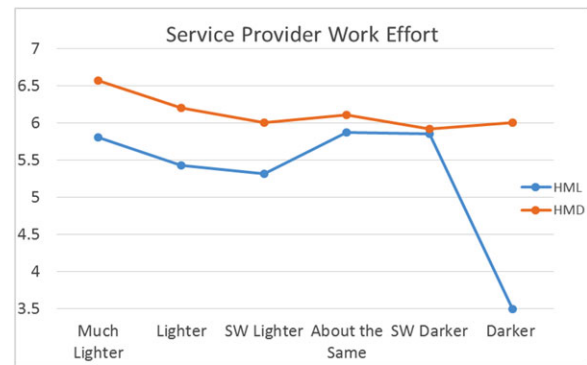

FIGURE 5 Study 3 subject skin tone identity plots [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

In this study, the authors identify a moderator of the relationship between colorism and customer evaluations of frontline service personnel. The results of Study 2 indicated that when a Hispanic male is in a white-collar job, patrons provide lower evaluations of him than of non-Hispanic males in that role. In Study 3, persons with dark skin tone were most likely to question the aptitude of the Hispanic male with light skin tone, but not the Hispanic male with dark skin tone or the Hispanic male in a blue-collar role regardless of his skin tone. Thus, the muting effect of job category (i.e., profession) reversed the stigma associated with dark skin tone for the majority of participants. The finding suggests that a Hispanic male with dark skin tone who is employed in a "professional" occupation may garner a more positive evaluation than a Hispanic male with light skin tone, especially from members of the ethnic community who have a heightened awareness of their own darker skin tones.

4 | CONCLUSION

The primary objectives of this research were to extend the services literature by providing an empirically supported theoretical explanation for the effects of skin tone differences on customer evaluations of service providers. Colorism was identified as a primary theoretical contributor to the development of this research, where the relationship with one's skin tone is reflected upon the evaluations of another based upon their skin tone. In Study 1, the basic tenets of colorism theory were tested to document the assignment of skin tone stigma across three ethnic groups (Black, Hispanic, and White) and both genders. In Study 2, the generalizability of the preliminary findings were tested with a larger, nonstudent population. In Study 3, the colorism effect was measured and employment type was manipulated to attenuate the stigmatization observed in Studies 1 and 2. As indicated by colorism theory, individuals who rate themselves high in skin tone importance and ethnic identity are more critical of individuals who are perceived to not share that identity. That perception may be heavily correlated with the perceiver's skin tone. The results of the current research highlight the reciprocal nature of colorism, wherein those who express bias may also perpetuate bias. In an experiment using two service industries, results showed that differential skin tone influences customer evaluations of frontline service personnel. This is a profound result as it indicates a situation in which the effects of colorism are attenuated.

The history of countries such as Australia, Brazil, South Africa, and the United States include the development of strict caste systems based on traditions of ethnocentrism and skin tone differences (Bonacich, 1972). Persons with light skin tone received more favorable treatment and work assignments in comparison to persons with dark skin tone in these hierarchies. These privileges allowed lighter skinned minorities to become more educated (Wirth, & Goldhamer, 1944) and to acquire more possessions (Frazier, 1957) than their darker counterparts. Ethnic group members with light skin tone are sometimes seen as favored or privileged for that reason. Colorism is a consequence of these separatist systems and it is active in many societies today (Hunter, 2007).

In the current project, the authors empirically test the concept of colorism, prejudicial treatment based on skin tone (Hunter, 2007; Lancaster, 1999), across three ethnic groups simultaneously. An investigation of colorism toward Hispanics was added to the dichotomous study of Black and White populations, which had been previously conducted by researchers. The authors also measured responses from a diverse participant pool rather than focusing solely on in-group perceptions as earlier researches had done. It is interesting to note that significantly lower evaluations of Blacks were not observed in these studies. Instead, the authors found in Studies 1 and 2 that stereotypes formerly prescribed to Black males, as the epitome of a manual laborer in American society (Dixon, & Maddox, 2005), may now be bestowed upon Hispanic males.

There is historical precedence of the negative portrayals of Hispanics as illegal immigrants and criminals in mainstream American media (e.g., Faber, O'Guinn, & Meyer, 1987). While subjects in this research only viewed a single image, a possible reason for the observed phenomenon may be subjects' prior media exposure. When depicted in North American media, Hispanics have been confined to a narrow set of stereotypes, which include characterizations as criminals, aggressive lovers, comic buffoons, and imbeciles (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Otriz, 2007). Cultivation theory proposes that long-term exposure to television's selective messages ultimately shifts viewers' social perceptions toward the television version of reality, regardless of its accuracy (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). When such stereotypes are activated, they have the potential to bias incoming information in ways that are consistent with the stereotype (Hamilton, Stroessner, & Driscoll, 1994). Thus, in our studies subjects may have formed negative stereotypes of Hispanics through prior exposure to negative images in the media, which led to subsequent judgments when the group-related photo stimuli were presented.

The current research adds to the nascent literature on the relationship between skin tone and earnings (Kreisman, & Rangel, 2015), skin color and advertising (Watson et al., 2010), and skin tone and health issues (Sweet, McDade, Kiefe, & Liu, 2007) to establish a relationship between skin tone and service evaluations. As Celious and Oyserman (2001) indicated, and this study reiterates, a skin tone that is advantageous in one context may be adverse in another. For members of ethnic groups who have little contact with Whites in their day-to-day lives, skin tone discrimination from in-group members may be a more relevant source of discrimination and status threat. For example, a light skin tone can be advantageous for a Hispanic person when interacting with Whites, but unfavorable when interacting with Hispanics if the person is perceived to be "ethnically impure" either literally or figuratively (Herring et al., 2004; Hochschild, & Weaver, 2007).

A major shift in the racial composition of the United States has begun, with the Hispanic population experiencing the greatest growth. Hispanics are an interesting group to study within the context of colorism because there are Hispanics who identify as White, Black, Indian, and "other." The initial findings of the present study suggest that, across ethnicities, dark-skinned Hispanic male service providers may be perceived in a less positive manner than their counterparts by the general public. Interestingly, the Hispanic male with dark skin tone received higher evaluations than the light skin tone Hispanic male when working in a professional business position. The authors herein determine that colorism played a central role in that evaluation and that a person with darker skin tone and a heightened awareness of his/her own skin tone is most likely to make this assessment. Furthermore, the findings of this research help debunk the skin-tone paradox, which posited that most members of ethnic groups see the fight against racial hierarchy as requiring their primary allegiance. Thus, they do not see, or do not choose to express concern, about the internal hierarchy of skin tone (Hochschild, & Weaver, 2007). The current findings indicate that the expression of concern for the internal hierarchy exists and it is potent.

Many people in society believe that gender, ethnicity, and skin tone issues are extinct. This research documents that this is not true. The studies address these provocative topics to determine how they can impact marketplace outcomes. By presenting evidence on the relevance of skin tone in marketing outcomes beyond the traditional dichotomous racial classifications, the authors challenge the notion of race as traditionally employed. This study demonstrates that

differences in judgments based on a manipulation of skin tone can elicit stereotypical knowledge associated with Hispanic males. Ethnicity matters, gender matters, and skin tone matters.

5 | IMPLICATIONS

While colorism theory asserts that persons with dark skin tone receive harsher outcomes compared to persons with light skin tone, this research documents the opposite. The intent is not to repute the theory but to expand it outside of the dark/light context to consider a continuum of shades. The authors make several critical contributions to the existing literature on impression formation and customer choice. First, they determine that colorism may lead to negative evaluations of Hispanic males in frontline service positions. Second, they demonstrate that employment type may be an effective technique for manipulating the negative evaluations. Furthermore, the findings confirm that customers consider the skin tone of a frontline employee to be pertinent to repatronage decisions. Despite gainful employment in a fast-paced industry (which refutes negative stereotypes associated with ethnic groups such as laziness), colorism evoked negative evaluations of the Hispanic male employee in the service firm. These results provide further evidence of the profound influence employee physical characteristics have on impression formation processes. In its most extreme form, colorism may result in customers refusing to transact business with certain types of people (Bellizi, & Hasty, 1998). It may also result in much more subtle customer behaviors such as lower tips or requests to be served by a specific employee.

Colorism is not likely to decrease unless public attitudes change and laws are enacted to address it. To date, no such laws exist. This research answers the call to investigate the role of stereotypes on the formation of customer evaluations (Cowart, & Brady, 2014). Individuals with dark skin tone report that colorism affects nearly every aspect of their lives (Mathews, & Johnson, 2015). It appears this may include interactions with service clients. In general, it is important for managers to understand how customers perceive frontline service employees and to take steps to positively influence the formation of customer attitudes whenever possible. Skin tone variances were chosen as the topic of analysis based on their global importance, increased prevalence, and salient stereotypes. This research is intended to generate knowledge on the aspects of the service environment that foster or thwart consumer patronage. It is intended to initiate meaningful dialogue among researchers and practitioners on the best practices for attracting and satisfying customers. Understanding consumer reactions to employees with dark skin tone is vitally important given the increase in the population of ethnic groups across the globe. This research introduces a timely and relevant topic, which is of great interest to politicians, lawmakers, educators, and marketers.

6 | LIMITATIONS

As in most studies, this research had several limitations that should be noted. Participants subjectively self-identified their skin tones and

the skin tones of the models in the photo stimuli based on their personal perceptions of light and dark skin tone. The importance of racial perception was important in the current study and it underscores the racial biases that exist. However, future researchers should consider employing an objective skin tone measure to estimate skin color differentials in order to address the subtler differences that occur within racial groups.

In addition, cross-cultural research should be conducted to determine the external validity of the current findings outside of the United States, particularly in countries where the Hispanic population is majority. Only one person represented the organization in the current studies. Future researchers should determine if the presence of other Hispanic or non-Hispanic employees will influence colorism in the marketplace. Finally, researches should test a model of the observed phenomenon, which includes the current constructs and others that may contribute to the observed phenomenon.

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