THE COLOR COMPLEX
BLACK, WHITE, AND IN BETWEEN:
EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COLORISM AND DESIGN

A Thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Communications Design.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Colorism and Design</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic Design History</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Colorism</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science of Colorism</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorism and Visual Perception</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorism and Beauty</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorism and Diversity in Design</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Sources</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION: COLORISM AND DESIGN

PART 1
The modernist aesthetic and minimalist color palette of 20th century graphic design and colorism, as it relates to the African American experience, (discrimination in which human beings are treated differently based on the social meanings attached to the value of their skin color,) draw profound artistic and sociological parallels. Color theorists and art historians have analyzed the power and implication of color in design; this thesis explores the even more powerful and emotional response that colorism evokes within the African American community and how the two combined have shaped my personal experience as an African American graphic designer. I have discovered a design community that is overwhelmingly non-African American and that shares many of the same preferences and prejudices the practice of colorism advocates within African American culture. Could my success as a graphic designer be attributed to the partiality towards lightness and refinement? The answer and solution is to expose the relationship between color and aesthetic choices, from a cultural and historical context that make them such a compelling instrument.

Design is the purpose, thought or intention behind an action or object. As design has evolved one could deduce that designer’s intentions evolve with it. This is true, to an extent, but so much of what we believe as designers and even how viewers perceive what we design has been instilled in our subconscious minds through education, history, personal experience, and stereotypes. In the world of graphic design, typography, imagery, and color must all be deliberately chosen. Therefore, a designer’s aesthetic choices speak to, not only, their personal inclinations but greatly influence the perception of the viewing audience. In terms of color, a designer’s calculated selection or exclusion of certain hues and tones shape entire aesthetic movements. In 20th century graphic design, highly inspired by Bauhausian principles, there are clearly defined notions of what color means and how color, or the lack thereof, should be used. We are in a design era that associates white, or lightness, with modernity, sleekness, innovation, intellectualism, and sophistication. One must question where to draw the line between what we consider aesthetic integrity and the perpetuation of detrimental social rituals, as this association of whiteness and lightness with positive attributes further promotes colorism’s agenda.

As an African American I have always been keenly aware of race, color, and ethnicity and how it makes each of us unique. However, in my youth, the social and emotional impact of these factors were of little consequence. With age, experience, and enlightenment of the world around me, my awareness of my own race, color, and ethnicity and how others perceive it has become much more important. This has taken a particular prominence in my experience as a graphic designer.
Through the conception of this thesis I have come across compelling research and had fascinating conversations about the relationship between race, color, ethnicity and design. My findings were varied. Advancement and advocacy do exist, but the prejudices that I feared were there, but hoped would progress over time, still remain; people have just gotten better at concealing them. Statistics prove the lack of diversity within the graphic design community and it would appear as if the odds are against me, being that I am an African American woman and the industry is predominated by caucasian males. However, with society’s continual ambition toward equal opportunity and breaking diversity boundaries, will I have more opportunity and chances for advancement as an African American graphic designer with very fair skin?

Exploring graphic design history, specifically the Bauhaus and its impact on 20th century design and the history of colorism, its significance and ramifications, gives intriguing insight and helps to answer the question: Why does design couple lightness with perfection? This thesis also investigates the science of colorism, explaining how skin tones have evolved from an anthropological standpoint and how they will continue to do so. Additionally, it explores colorism and visual perception, examining the relationship between the history of colorism and design and experiments that prove color bias; exposes other industries, specifically fashion and beauty, that advocate the practice of colorism; and the experience of other African American design professionals and graphic design's lack of diversity.
The term graphic design, as we know it today, was coined in the early twentieth century by William Addison Dwiggins. A “brother” to fine art; whose objective is to convey and order information, messages, and ideas through the same elements, principles, and theories that fine artists uphold. Many factors contributed to the emergence and popularity of the graphic design industry, such as the advent of printing and the industrial revolution. But, the Bauhaus’ impact has been one of the most profound and long lasting. This school (whose name, according to the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, stands for “an eagerness to experiment, openness, creativity, a close link to industrial practice and inter-nationality,”) has inspired an unmistakable aesthetic and set guidelines and standards that most graphic designers still follow today.

The Bauhaus was founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany by Walter Gropius; an architect. The school was conceived through Gropius’ vision of improving the material world through a unification of the arts. This is best explained in The Bauhaus Manifesto, which Gropius published in 1919; a proclamation of utopian craft, which combined architecture, fine art, and design into one art form.

Gropius states:

“The ultimate aim of all creative activity is a building! The decoration of buildings was once the noblest function of fine arts, and fine arts were indispensable to great architecture. Today they exist in complacent isolation, and can only be rescued by the conscious co-operation and collaboration of all craftsmen.

Architects, painters, and sculptors must once again come to know and comprehend the composite character of a building, both as an entity and in terms of its various parts. Then their work will be filled with that true architectonic spirit which, as ‘salon art’, it has lost.

The old art schools were unable to produce this unity; and how, indeed, should they have done so, since art cannot be taught? Schools must return to the workshop. The world of the pattern-designer and applied artist, consisting only of drawing and painting must become once again a world in which things are built. If the young person who rejoices in creative activity now begins his career as in the older days by learning a craft, then the unproductive ‘artist’ will no longer be condemned to inadequate artistry, for his skills will be preserved for the crafts in which he can achieve great things.

Architects, painters, sculptors, we must all return to crafts! For there is no such thing as ‘professional art’. There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman. By the grace of Heaven and in rare moments of inspiration which transcend the will, art may unconsciously blossom from the labour of his hand, but a base in handicrafts is essential to every artist. It is there that the original source of creativity lies. Let us therefore create a new guild of crafts- men without the class-distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsmen and artists! Let us desire, conceive, and create the new building of the future together. It will combine architecture, sculpture, and painting in a single form, and will one day rise towards the heavens from the hands of a million workers as the crystalline symbol of a new and coming faith.”
The Bauhaus achieved said goals; thriving in Europe from 1919 through 1933. However, due to administrative and even greater political changes during the early nineteen thirties, the Bauhaus lost many of its important professors to emigration to the United States. Marcel Breuer and Joseph Albers taught at Yale, Walter Gropius at Harvard, and Moholy-Nagy established the New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1937.

The professors of the Bauhaus were the driving force, elevating the arts and introducing new techniques and theories. Design students received instruction in typography and layout, philosophy, and color theory. Designers were taught that form follows function; meaning, the message behind the design is more important than the way it’s presented; readability and comprehension over decoration. Typography should be clean and bold. Herbert Bayer implemented a universal alphabet with simple geometric forms, all lower-case letters, and accessibility to a wide audience. Color theory courses explored color’s use beyond the spectrum and evaluated how to use and view color through a cultural context; just as colorism advocates. Josef Albers, Paul Klee, and Johannes Itten’s (author of “The Art of Color” and creator of the 12-hue color wheel) contributions to how designers understand and utilize color is unparalleled.

Itten eloquently captures the color experience through his words, “He who wishes to become a master of color must see, feel, and experience each individual color in its endless combinations with all other colors.” He also references the relationship between light and color with, “Colors are primordial ideas, children of the aboriginal colorless light and its counterpart, colorless darkness... Light, that first phenomenon of the world, reveals to us the spirit and the living soul of the world through colors.” It is very interesting to hear how color is viewed through the eyes of those who have mastered it; and even more interesting to see how our thoughts about color have evolved as designers of the 21st century. Bauhaus philosophy on typography and design structure have stood the test of time, but color, seemingly, has not.

Color theory is not a large focus at many art and design institutions of today. At most, designers are expected to know what primary and secondary colors are and how to reference color through...
a Pantone swatch book; but the education about color, its connotations and meanings, is lacking or completely overlooked. The modern aesthetic is all about white space. Every design professor I’ve studied with through both my undergraduate and graduate careers have used the phrase “it needs more white space.” Color is secondary to the void of color. We use terms like “simple,” “clean,” and “modern” to describe this use of white. Designs must first work in black and white before the addition of color; and by black I mean the typography. Designers of the “Mac generation” look to their design tools as frames of reference. With iPhones and MacBooks that are stark, sleek, and simple many of our designs reflect that same aesthetic.

The Bauhaus’ influence on graphic design is undoubted, but somehow the ideals of this institution, specifically as it pertains to color, have been diluted. A curriculum that focused so much on the importance of color has evolved to one where the absence of color is ideal.
Color theory, as aforementioned in Bauhaus philosophy, was a widely accepted practice at fine art and design institutions. However, color theory is not something only artists and designers are exposed to. Many, specifically African Americans, experience “color theory” in their lifetimes; but the name is slightly different and has a much more sinister connotation.

Author Marita Golden describes colorism as “the most unacknowledged and unaddressed mental health crisis in communities of color around the world.” Colorism affects Caribbean, Asian, Indian and Latino communities. But, with most everything being simplified to black and white, the struggles of colorism affecting the African American community are much more prevalent and far-reaching.

Colorism’s roots are solidly intertwined with the beginnings of slavery and the European colonization of the Americas. Colonization created a class structure that put whiteness on a pedestal of power and domination and equated blackness with submission and sub-humanity. Slave owners used the biological differences between Africans and Europeans to justify centuries of social inequality and unjust. Unfortunately, the social and biological ties instilled by white color ideology became a part of the African American psyche. Over time, black people didn’t need their white counterparts to remind them of the differences in their skin color. They were doing it on their own and creating cultural subdivisions amongst themselves.

Audrey Elisa Kerr, Associate Professor of English and Women Studies at Southern Connecticut State University writes, “Why study complexion?: complexion discrimination is the implosion of racism—the internalization of slavery and Jim Crowism—wherein the profound and enduring residue of black social quarantine resides. Because white America went to such lengths to (supposedly) remain distinct and “purely” white, comparable demarcations of the margins and borders of race have been tested internally as part of a rhetorical curiosity about whether whiteness can work for blacks as well as it works for whites.” This belief comes from the legacy of the “field nigger” versus the “house nigger.” Slaves of darker complexion were forced to work in the fields and do hard labor; while slaves of lighter complexion worked inside the master’s home, receiving so-called preferential treatment. Even after the abolition of slavery, African Americans upheld these beliefs with rituals like the paper bag test. Kerr explains, “To believe that paper bag testing exists is to affirm an often-overlooked fact—that our everyday processes of socialization absolutely require an acknowledgment of some agreed notion of ‘average.’ It is in our attempts to position ourselves alongside ‘average’ that notions of ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ types are formed. In one sense, we could probably hearken back to Charles Parrish’s color notions and label the ‘trustworthy’ medium-brown African-American person ‘average.’ Bearing in mind, however, that blacks have established groups that mimic ‘average’ white social organizations—a mimicry that including imitations of appearance, behaviors,
and aspirations—our ideas about ‘average’ move slightly to the white ‘right.’ Consistent with these aspirations has been the concern to identify white as average, thus exaggerating the absolute inferiority of the darker individual, who traditionally cannot conceive himself as ‘neutral’ in color because his social environment insists upon the ‘objective’ facts.”

The light versus dark legacy has persisted in the African American community through our social interactions, art, literature, music, media, and even politics. Famous African American authors like Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison explore these topics in their work. Hurston is quoted as saying, “If it was so honorable and glorious to be black, why was it the yellow-skinned people among us had so much prestige?” Colorism’s affects on the black community are painful and deep rooted, but in our modern society, conversation about light versus dark seems to be more socially acceptable. Spike Lee’s controversial 1988 film “School Daze” challenged this notion; exploring the topic of colorism set against the backdrop of a historically black college. More recently the documentary “Dark Girls” explored how colorism affects women with dark skin.

Actor and singer Lena Horne was considered the ideal of “black beauty” during her career spanning the 1950’s and 60’s

In our visual and media driven society, we are bombarded with imagery which pushes a specific agenda of ideal beauty. When African American people are portrayed, the preference is toward lighter hues. Elizabeth Atkins, a biracial author and screenwriter, gives her perspective, “...there’s visual proof of it and studies that even show that lighter-skinned African-Americans are less threatening and intimidating to the mainstream, and therefore more accepted, more highly paid, more celebrated. The standard of beauty has always been the Lena Horne’s of the world, traditionally, from Hollywood and in advertising. And that still persists if you look at the standard of beauty in music videos, in movies. It’s the lighter-skinned woman with longer, straighter hair, bigger eyes and more keen features.”

Music, specifically rap and hip hop, further reinforce Atkins’ point, with a predominance of light-skinned, long-hair exotic beauties gracing the screens of music videos. Lil Wayne said it best in his hit Every Girl, “I like a long haired, thick red-bone.” In the eyes of many African American males, light-skinned women are the standard of beauty. Beyond beauty, having lighter skin also opens up doors socially, professionally,
and politically. J. Cole, a popular hip hop artist, comments on President Obama’s political success. “Barack Obama would not be president if he were dark skinned. That’s just the truth. I might not be as successful as I am now if I was dark skin. I’m not saying that for sure, I’m still as talented as I am and Obama is still as smart as he is, but it’s just a sad truth…”

Colorism is a sad truth, and even though there is more dialogue about the topic than ever before, there are still certain groups that do not acknowledge its presence. In a world where “minority” races make up the majority of the population, yet white culture is still dominant; to admit that you are preferring someone based on the lightness or darkness of their skin is very much so deemed socially unacceptable. This has brought on tokenism; the idea that the presence of any person of color, no matter the lightness or darkness of their complexion, will suffice. This false sense of inclusion, undermines true diversity and deflects opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-color collaboration.
The origins of colorism stem from a long and haunted history; based upon hatred, ignorance, and intolerance. Will colorism, as it evolves and continues on into the twenty first century, continue to be based upon these factors? Is colorism strictly preferential; based upon cultural, societal, or aesthetic factors? Scientists and anthropologists would argue against this concept entirely. Colorism, as we’ve come to know it, is more of a theoretical and emotional institution. However, there is a science to colorism; a fact based response to why our skin tones vary in such wide array. Scientists have proven that the lightness or darkness of one’s skin is completely a matter of environmental side effects and human evolution. There are continued studies on how skin tones will continue to evolve over the next couple decades; possibly blurring the lines of colorism all together.

Anthropologist, Nina Jablonski, has devoted much of her career to understanding the importance of our skin; socially, aesthetically, and most importantly scientifically. Jablonski says, “Much of what we consider our humanity is imbued in our skin.” To fully understand humanity and how we relate and interact with one another, we must understand the human experience on a scientific level. In “Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color” Jablonski explains misconceptions of how skin color have come to be. “Skin color comes from several substances, which are visible to varying degrees in different people. For most of human history, people did not know exactly how skin got its color, so they spun creative tales and theories to explain it. Many of these explanations were ingenious products of astute observations, like that of the Greek philosopher Hippocrates, who ventured that skin became darker when it was parched by the sun over time.” Fables and wives tales of the categorization of skin color did evolve with more scientific sophistication. Jablonski continues, “In doctors’ offices and in scientific studies of skin pigmentation today, objective and reproducible measurement of skin color is important.

This was an imperfect art for centuries. The earliest classifiers of humankind, working in early-eighteenth-century Europe, used simple and imprecise color words like yellow, red, black, and white to describe skin tone. They had not observed non-Europeans in person but had only read explorers’ and traders’ reports of journeys to distant lands. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was evident that a more nuanced system was necessary to describe the many hues of human skin, and it was then that European scientists began to develop numerical codes for describing skin tone. These systems made use of numbered strips of painted paper or numbered tiles of colored enamel in different shades; the latter system gained wide circulation under the name of its developer, Felix von Luschan. These methods were an improvement over arbitrary color naming, but they failed.”

Jablonski’s 2009 TED talk “Skin color is an illusion” gives further insight to how our skin color has developed. NASA satellites are used to detect a variety of data about the environment. The TOMS 7 satellite data show the annual average ultraviolet radiation at the Earth’s surface. Jablonski references this to explain
the relationship between ultraviolet radiation and skin color. “There was a fundamental relationship between the intensity of ultraviolet radiation and skin pigmentation. And that skin pigmentation itself was a product of evolution. And so when we look at a map of skin color, and predicted skin color, as we know it today, what we see is a beautiful gradient from the darkest skin pigmentation toward the equator, and the lightest ones toward the poles.” Essentially, all of humankind originated in equatorial Africa and share the same ancestry of darkly pigmented skin. Pigments changed as a result of diaspora and evolution. Those of our ancestors living near the equator needed more melanin in their skin, which acted as a natural sun protectant, to combat the high levels of UVB and UVA. A large group of humanity moved, several times in fact, to climates where temperatures were much colder and ultraviolet radiation did not allow for the production of vitamin D. This resulted in an evolution of lighter pigmented skin.

Jablonksi closes her lecture with this, “Now what is wonderful about the evolution of human skin pigmentation, and the phenomenon of pigmentation, is that it is the demonstration, the evidence, of evolution by natural selection, right on your body. When people ask you, “What is the evidence for evolution?” You don’t have to think about some exotic examples, or fossils. You just have to look at your skin.” It is incredibly fascinating to understand how our skin has evolved over millions of years; but distressing to see how this natural selection Jablonski speaks of, has been taken out of context. Natural selection, in terms of skin pigmentation, was due to environmental factors, but at some point in our history natural selection and its connection to lighter skin tones has a connotation of intellectual and social evolution and progression. I’ve examined how this thinking was exploited in the previous section.

According to “The Changing Face of America” an article by Lise Funderburg, featured in National Geographic; the differences between what’s considered black and white may be obsolete in the next couple of decades. As multiracial people become an ever more prevalent population, black is diluted and white is made brown. “The U.S. Census Bureau has collected detailed data on multiracial people only since 2000, when it first allowed respondents to check off more than one race, and 6.8 million people chose to do so. Ten years later that number jumped by 32 percent, making it one of the fastest growing categories. The multiple-race option has been lauded as progress by
individuals frustrated by the limitations of the racial categories established in the late 18th century by German scientist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who divided humans into five “natural varieties” of red, yellow, brown, black, and white. Although the multiple-race option is still rooted in that taxonomy, it introduces the factor of self-determination. It’s a step toward fixing a categorization system that, paradoxically, is both erroneous (since geneticists have demonstrated that race is biologically not a reality) and essential (since living with race and racism is). The tracking of race is used both to enforce anti-discrimination laws and to identify health issues specific to certain populations.

The census and science are proving that human-kind is continuing to evolve. Skin may not be changing due to the environment, but rather, a social and political climate that is becoming more acceptant, tolerant, and forward thinking. But with progress comes acknowledgment of how far we still need to go. Funderburg explains, “Certainly, race still matters in this country, despite claims that the election of Barack Obama heralded a post-racial world. We may be a pluralist nation by 2060, when the Census Bureau predicts that non-Hispanic whites will no longer be the majority. But head counts don’t guarantee opportunity or wipe out the legacy of Japanese-American internment camps or Jim Crow laws. Whites, on average, have twice the income and six times the wealth of blacks and Hispanics, and young black men are twice as likely as whites to be unemployed. Racial bias still figures into incarceration rates, health outcomes, and national news: A recent Cheerios commercial featuring an interracial family prompted a barrage of negative responses, including claims of white genocide and calls for “DIEversity.”

Science examines the changes we make on a biological level; the progress humanity makes on a social and emotional level may not progress at the same rate. The hope is that the changes implemented through continued evolution do eventually erase colorism and foster opportunities for appreciating humanity for more than just skin. “If we can’t slot people into familiar categories, perhaps we’ll be forced to reconsider existing definitions of race and identity, presumptions about who is us and who is them.”
As compelling an argument the science of colorism makes, it’s an unfortunate truth that the social relationship between color and preference hold just as much weight, if not more, than any scientific fact. Many factors contribute to one’s visual perception of color (cultural, educational, socio-economic, etc.) and the relationships that individuals have with certain colors vary greatly due to this. There have been many tests created to collect and synthesize how people view color and the associations that innately result from it. There are two tests in particular that examine color as it relates to color theory and design choices, and color as it relates to colorism and social stigma. The Kandinsky questionnaire and Doll Test, respectively, give intriguing insight into colorism and visual perception.

Wassily Kandinsky, artist and professor at the Bauhaus, took particular interest in the relationship between color and form. Kandinsky created a simple questionnaire, which he tested on his students, where three simplistic geometric shapes (circle, square, and triangle) were to be matched with the three primary colors (red, yellow and blue.) The answers to this test revealed interesting parallels between how artists, and even none artists, perceive color and form. Kandinsky’s expectations matched that of the majority of the questionnaire results. Yellow is a “sharp” color and therefore associated with the triangle, red is “earthbound” and associated with the stability of the square, and the color blue is “spiritual” and circular. This survey supported Kandinsky’s belief that science and art are intertwined.

Similarly, the Doll Test (originally conceived in the 1940’s by African American psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark and revisited by Anderson Cooper in 2010) analyzed how children perceive color and its associations with certain characteristics. In the original test, African American children in both segregated schools in Washington, DC and integrated schools in New York, were presented with two identical dolls and asked questions like “Which doll would you like to play with? Which doll is the good doll? Which doll is the smart doll? Which doll looks like you?” One doll was white with blonde hair and the other brown with black hair. The findings in both schools showed a preference toward the white doll, but in the segregated schools the sense of negative self perception attached to having darker skin was much more profound.

Fast forward to 2010; schools have been integrated for over sixty years and President Obama has been in office for two. One would deduce that revisiting this test would result in a much different conclusion. The format was slightly altered, now including African American and Caucasian children. The two dolls were also replaced with simple illustrations of children ranging in color from black to white. Child psychologist Margaret Beale Spencer gives her evaluation, “The tests showed that white children, as a whole, responded with a high rate of what researchers call “white bias,” identifying the color of their own skin with positive attributes and darker skin with negative attributes. Black children, as a whole, have some bias toward whiteness, but far less than white children. All kids on the one hand are exposed to the...
stereotypes. What’s really significant here is that white children are learning or maintaining those stereotypes much more strongly than the African-American children. Therefore, the white youngsters are even more stereotypic in their responses concerning attitudes, beliefs and preferences than the African-American children.” This test reveals that even through the eyes of children, color carries much more meaning than what the eye can see. The meanings attached to our color are passed down to our children through the experience, stereotypes, and misjudgments of our ancestors. Spencer continues, “We are still living in a society where dark things are devalued and white things are valued.”

I wanted to test this theory myself and create my own survey, which explored how people feel the color of their skin has helped them advance socially and professionally. I asked participants the following questions:

1) Do you believe that race is a factor in how people interact with one another?
2) Have you ever interacted with or avoided someone simply because of the color of their skin?
3) Do you feel that your racial identity has helped you achieve success? (career, friendship, relationships, etc.) Please explain?
4) Do you feel that the tone (lightness or darkness) of your skin has helped you achieve success? Please explain?
5) Have you ever experienced discrimination or negativity due to the tone of your skin? Please explain?
6) Do you feel like your life would be different, whether negatively or positively, if your skin tone was different? Please explain?

Please refer to the color bar above for the following questions

7) Pick the color that would make a good coworker or that you’d like to work with.
8) Pick the color that looks the most professional.
9) Pick the color that looks the least professional.
10) Pick the color that’s most representative of a caucasian person.
11) Pick the color that’s most representative of an African American person.
12) Pick the color that’s most representative of you.
The results were varied but had one consistency; no matter what the age, gender, or color of the participant, they all agreed that color does make a difference in how we interact with one another. Participant Angel Bramlett shares her answer to question number three, “I feel that being light-skinned and African American I don’t have somewhat of the total stigma that comes with black people. As far as relationships, I’ve always had a better shot with guys, simply because most African American men look or are more attracted to lighter skinned females in my circumstances growing up. As far as friends, most of my friends are similar to skin tone as me, with few exceptions, not by choice but because it just happened that way.” Participant Candace Rogers shares her personal experience, “In my adolescence, I knew that I would experience negative situations with Caucasian people. But never in my dreams did I expect such hatred from my own race. It’s disheartening, and I would love to redirect this self-hate into understanding the root of where it comes from.”

All of these tests, my survey included, reveal that color and how we perceive it will always be intrinsically united. Every color has a story, from the primary colors to the tonal range from pale pink to deep brown. Color evokes emotional responses in the art we create, our self esteem, and our opportunities.
With colorism’s strong ties to visual perception and the arts, it’s no shock that this practice has permeated other artistic industries. The fashion and graphic design industry are closely related and recently, both have come under fire for their lack of diversity. The fashion industry, specifically, has been accused of “whitewashing” the runway and perpetuating the ideals of colorism and tokenism on the catwalk and using aesthetic integrity as justification. More attention must be paid to how much influence both of these industries have on shaping standards of beauty.

In response to the underrepresentation of models of color in the Fall 2013 fashion shows, Bethann Hardison, former model, activist and member of The Diversity Coalition, sent out letters to heads of Fashion Week in New York, London, Paris, and Milan. The letter reads:

“Eyes are on an industry that season after season watches design houses consistently use one or no models of color. No matter the intention, the result is racism. Not accepting another based on the color of their skin is clearly beyond ‘aesthetic’ when it is consistent with the designer’s brand. Whether it’s the decision of the designer, stylist or casting director, that decision to use basically all white models, reveals a trait that is unbecoming to modern society. It can no longer be accepted, nor confused by the use of the Asian model.”

While racism and colorism are related but separate entities, Hardison’s reference to the use of Asian models as a representative for all ethnic models brings up an interesting point. By using non-white models with skin that is as close to white as possible, fashion houses can fill the quota for ethnic or “models of color” while not disrupting the aesthetic integrity of their show. Emily Yakashiro, author of the article “Colorism and the catwalk: A closer look at Bethann Hardison’s anti-racism campaign in the fashion world” gives her opinion. “Clearly, Hardison is on to something: being Asian in appearance works as a weird sort of white privilege in the fashion world; even in the whitest of shows an Asian model still manages to get a booking (albeit just one Asian model oftentimes). We haven’t heard that Wang Xiao and Soo Joo Park are competing for one spot in a show as part of the ‘one Asian girl’ policy in the way that Chanel Iman and Jourdan Dunn hear that a show ‘already has one black girl.’ Indeed, it seems that there are far fewer black models (if any at all) working at Fashion Week, not to mention there are barely any South Asian models, no Native American models, no darker-skinned Latina models.”

In an industry that celebrates beauty and shapes the general public’s idea of what beauty is, one would hope that there would be more celebration of beauty’s diversity. Consumers of fashion come in all shapes, sizes, and colors, but the
Model Cameron Russell expounds on this point in her 2012 Ted Talk entitled “Looks aren’t everything. Believe me I’m a model.” Russell explains her experience as a model, “So the first question is, how do you become a model? And I always just say, ‘Oh, I was scouted,’ but that means nothing. The real way that I became a model is I won a genetic lottery, and I am the recipient of a legacy, and maybe you’re wondering what is a legacy. Well, for the past few centuries we have defined beauty not just as health and youth and symmetry that we’re biologically programmed to admire, but also as tall, slender figures, and femininity and white skin. And this is a legacy that was built for me, and it’s a legacy that I’ve been cashing out on. And I know there are people in the audience who are skeptical at this point, and maybe there are some fashionistas who are, like, ‘Wait. Naomi. Tyra. Joan Smalls. Liu Wen.’ And first, I commend you on your model knowledge. Very impressive. But unfortunately I have to inform you that in 2007, a very inspired NYU Ph.D. student counted all the models on the runway, every single one that was hired, and of the 677 models that were hired, only 27, or less than four percent, were non-white.” Beauty is subjective, but as Russell describes, the ideal of beauty, for much of our history, has been the white woman. Tastes are changing, but not enough that proximity to whiteness in either skin tone or features, still make women more appealing. Bauhaus painter Paul Klee said, “Beauty is as relative as light and dark. Thus, there exists no beautiful woman, none at all, because you are never certain that a still far more beautiful woman will not appear and completely shame the supposed beauty of the first.”

Vogue magazine is arguably the culmination of beauty, fashion, photography, and graphic design. Even in all its glory, this publication which is revered as the bible of the fashion world has also preyed victim to colorism and tokenism. Vogue magazine has been in publication since 1892 and an African American woman did not make the cover until more than eighty years later. Beverly Johnson was the first black model to grace the cover, and many African Americans would argue that she is a black woman of lighter skin tone. After surveying all 32 American Vogues with African American cover models the majority feature light-skinned women; with the exception of Oprah Winfrey, Naomi Campbell, and Michelle Obama, among few others. Of these 32 covers 16 of them use the same woman twice or more. Beverly Johnson was on the cover three times and fair-skinned celebrities like Halle Berry and Beyoncé were both on the cover twice.

Color bias permeates so many facets of our society. Even those who are deemed beautiful are subject to insecurities about how beautiful they are, based on the color of their skin. With recognition of its existence, comes hopeful resolution. Specifically in the fashion and beauty industry where the perpetuation of colorism and tokenism is so well documented.
The profession of graphic design is largely predominated by white males. Eddie Opara, partner at the New York design group Pentagram, confirms, “Design is largely a white man’s world, although blacks are rising in its ranks. But it is disappointing that there aren’t more of us.” Aesthetically, graphic design has a tendency towards lightness, but has this same tendency taken over the the number of designers of color in the industry? Statistical data would answer this question with a yes. There are several factors that contribute to this; like the number of art programs in predominately black schools, the number of African American enrollees in higher education art and design programs, etc. However, there are very few African Americans who have broken this barrier and gained huge success in the design industry. It would seem that colorism has become an agent for reducing the diversity of contributors to the graphic design field, as well.

AIGA is one of the oldest and highly regarded professional organizations for designers. Since its establishment in 1914 membership has reached more than 22,000. With these impressive numbers, came a recent survey of AIGA members. Of graphic designers who responded, 2 percent were black, 4 percent Hispanic/Latino, 6 percent Asian/Pacific Islander and 2 percent other. The statistics are staggering and downright upsetting. Of course these numbers only represent those who identify themselves as members of this organization; which means the number of designers of color (specifically black) on a national or global level are probably even less.

The underrepresentation of black people in graphic design is due in large part to design history. African American graphic designer Alice Rawsthorn explains, “Historically, design has had difficulty with diversity. Culturally, it was dominated by European Modernism throughout the 20th century, when its values shaped industrial design worldwide, even in North America.” European ideals shaped the design culture and when implemented in North America at a time when the presence of blacks, of any skin tone, in design schools or in a professional capacity was scarce to nonexistent; this sets the tone for very low diversification in the field. Unfortunately, the number of African American students enrolling in fine art and design programs of higher education are still very low. It’s not a question of whether or not these students possess any less talent than their white counterparts, but a question of whether they feel welcomed and valued and if the investment in an art education will pay off. Rawsthorn says, “The fewer the visible role models, the greater the likelihood that talented young black people will continue to miss out on careers in design. The rest of us will lose out too. We need the best possible designers, and won’t get them if they only come from selected areas of society. And design culture will stultify unless it reflects society as a whole.”

Beyond the low number of students of color pursuing careers in graphic design and the even fewer finding high levels of professional success, we must acknowledge the consumer. Graphic design’s audience is far wider than the small group that creates it. How can designers...
effectively speak to a culturally diverse audience when there is little diversity at the firms where the design is created? Joel Towers, executive dean of Parsons The New School for Design, weighs in, “For the design fields to be as underrepresented as they are means that the quality and relevance of the work to a broad and diverse population is really just problematic. You don’t have the richness of ideas and possibilities that are presented by having multiple perspectives going into the work.”

For the limited number of black designers who do find success, is there any concern for their future predecessors? When black design professionals and students do not bring awareness to or acknowledge the fact that they are the only person of color amongst them, progress will not and cannot be made. Graphic design may be stuck in the same paradox as the fashion industry; practicing tokenism to fill the void for black designers and colorism by employing a large population of Asian designers. Rawsthorn says, “Does the relative scarcity of black designers matter? After all, there has been progress. The Organization of Black Designers in the United States has more than 10,000 members.

The successes, like Mr. Burks and Ms. Anderson, prove that gifted black designers can have stellar careers. And some prefer not to discuss the issue, often for fear of being defined by it.” Designer Stephen Burks shares his experience, “Of course some inequality still exists, but I’ve never personally felt discriminated against. I would hope that the color of my skin doesn’t change the way people see my work, or in any way change the voice or impact my work can have.”

Burks hopes are that of every designer and specifically every designer of color. I understand the feeling of being one of very few black students in a design program and working harder to ensure that my work was noticed, but not wanting to exploit the fact that I was a designer of color. Every designer has a particular point of view and something unique to offer the design field. By stifling the opportunity for black representation in the graphic design industry, we limit the progression of the arts and the progression of society as a whole.
A partiality towards lightness has steadfastly asserted itself in several facets of society; artistically, historically, scientifically, socially, and professionally. My research suggests that some progress has been made; however, this progress has not been significantly substantial and the pace - sluggish. Of course, it’s foolish to believe that centuries of a color ideology can be undone overnight, but as science suggests, the obsolescence of colorism is likely inescapable. What can designers do now; either utilizing the vetted notions of 20th century design aesthetics or completely challenging them, to neutralize colorism? Creating awareness, through design, about the emotional and sociological interconnections of colorism produces opportunities for dialogue, enlightenment, and its eventual abrogation. Along with possibilities for education, graphic design can be used as an agent to change colorism’s connotation; making tonal diversity a positive.

The term colorism was completely new vocabulary for many of my peers and even my professor as I embarked on this journey. Education and awareness are two of the greatest tools at our disposal; and if I created an opportunity for even one person to look at design and color in a new way, I have succeeded. This thesis was born of my experience as an African American designer feeling, at times, like I was alone. There are certain topics that are never discussed and I wanted to explore themes that were relevant to my own experience but would be impactful on a larger scale. Audrey Elisa Kerr writes, “We must continue to look critically at black life with an awareness that African-American culture is changeable and, in fact, does change. To bury this curious past is to prevent our understanding of these dynamics in the present; it is here, in the present, that these residuals of complexion lore live, inspiring both shame and pride, fueling frightful rifts and subverting any claims to achieve equality.” Colorism is relevant to design and always has been. To achieve said equality in both design and on a universal level, we must acknowledge it and make efforts to redesign it.
**RESEARCH SOURCES**


Atkins, Elizabeth. “‘Other People’s Skin’ Highlights Colorism in Black Community.” NPR. NPR. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.


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