

Digitizing Colorism

Addressing How Skin Tone Representation Impacts Learning
Environment

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Background on Colorism

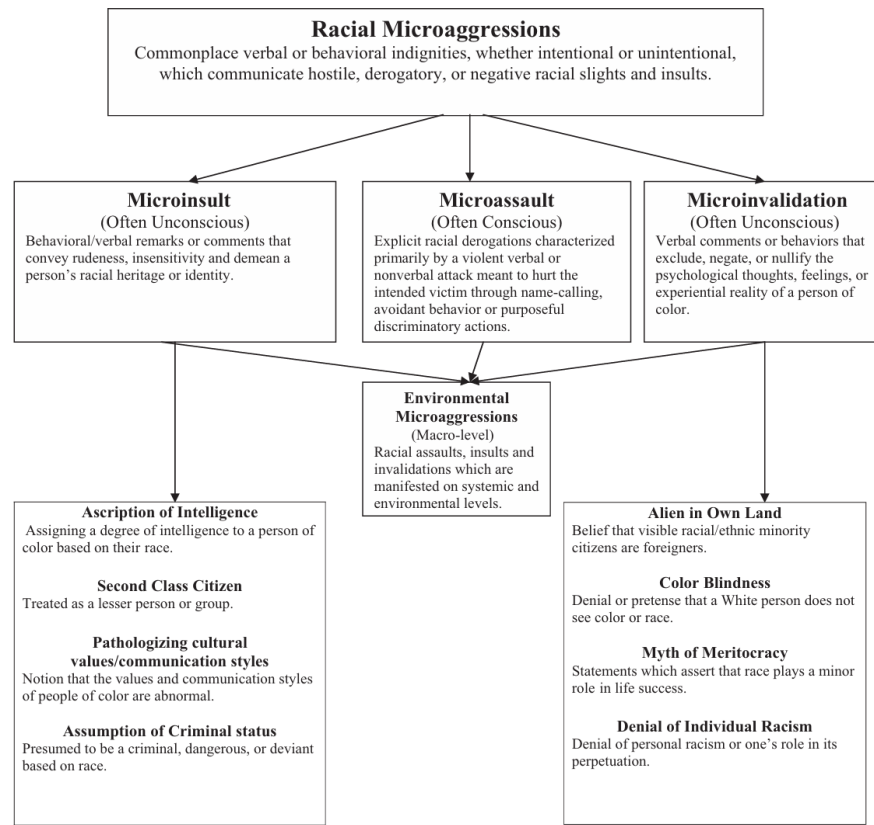
- Skin color refers to the overall hue or pigmentation of the skin, while skin tone describes the shade or depth of that color
- Skin tone bias that typically favors light skin and Eurocentric features (e.g., thin lips, small nose (Hunter, 2007; Walker, 1983))
- Colorism has historical origins in earliest agrarian societies across PoC and White populations (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Hunter, 2007)
 - Light skin = wealth and class, dark skin = working and poverty
- Colorism linked with social, economic, and health outcomes (Abrams et al., 2020; Eshan et al., 2025; Hunter, 2002; Landor & McNeil-Smith, 2019; Maddox et al., 2002; Pusey-Reid et al., 2023; Rosenstock Gonzalez et al., 2022; Sissoko et al., 2023)
 - Light skin remains in the spotlight while dark skin remains in the background
 - Overrepresented in media, beauty advertisements, and professional health textbooks
 - Perceived as warm, attractive, and intelligent
 - Higher pay and job quality

Microaggressions are pernicious!

- Microaggressions refer to subtle slights that denigrate and devalue target identity (Pierce, 1970; Sue et al., 2007)
- Racial microaggressions compromise health and well-being
 - Diminished well-being and psychological distress (Hernández & Villodas, 2020; Mercier et al., in press)
 - Depression, stress, and anxiety (Lee et al., 2023; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Williams & Lewis, 2019)
 - Invalidation and dislike towards one's racial identity (Abbott et al., 2019; Mercier et al., in press)
 - Feeling isolated and excluded (DeSouza et al., 2019)
- Colorist microaggressions co-occur with racial microaggressions with similar harm (Crutchfield & Webb, 2020; Hall & Crutchfield, 2018; Mercier et al., in press; Mercier et al., 2025)
- Colorist and racist microaggressions disrupt learning environments
 - Linked to mental fatigue (Banks & Landau, 2021)
 - Decreased ability to focus on tasks (Ware et al., 2025)
 - Shapes psychosocial stress (Brown et al., 2023; Decuir-Gunby et al., 2022; Nadal et al., 2014; Sanchez et al., 2018)
 - Higher expectations of racial microaggressions to occur on campus (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2022)
 - Targets of microaggressions consistently remain offended (Rudecindo et al., 2024)

Microaggressions exist in the space...even digital


Figure 1
Categories of and Relationships Among Racial Microaggressions




- Attention to environmental microaggressions remain elusive to the detriment of students of color (Williams et al., 2021)
- Largely focus on physical environments
 - Television shows that features predominantly White characters with little or no people of color
 - A college or university building that are all named after White heterosexual upper class men
- Higher education studies document other ways
 - Mills (2020) - Segregation, lack of representation, campus response to criminality, **cultural bias in courses**, tokenism, and pressure to conform
- Racialized representation in digital graphics
 - Generally, using digital graphics (like emojis) shape how we see the world and relationships (Barach et al, 2021; Racialized cues from photos impact perceptions (Molenberghs, 2013)
 - Yellow emojis assumed as neutral or White, but gets into how skin tone is represented in these spaces

Framing Skin Tone Representation in the Context of Environmental Microaggressions in the Digital Space


Original (Me)




AI-Generated Headshot



Digital Colorism: How AI Headshot Generators Are Failing Dark-Skinned Users



✦ Christelle Mombo-Zigah 

Cloud AI infrastructure @ Cisco | CEO, co-Founder @Fairscan.ai + stealth healthtech platform | Board Member

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- Why does this matter for digital learning
 - Digitally generated imagery may not accommodate for people with dark skin (see picture) Ongoing biases towards light and dark skin inform how peers see each other
 - Eye tracking and implicit bias studies show that skin tone graphics (or even emojis) are important for social inferences
 - Light skin emojis were rated more favorably than dark skin emojis (Gill & Lippmann, 2024)
 - Black senders who used darker emojis received lower ratings in perceived competence but seen as warmer and having better relationships compared to those who used lighter emojis (Pelica et al., 2024)
- If as framed as microaggressions, these perpetuate harm to students of color
 - If explicit enough, it can be linked to distress (Hollingsworth et al., 2017; Torres-Harding and Turner, 2015)
 - Mentally wears on students (Banks & Cicciarelli, 2019)
 - Those who may believe race does not matter are less likely to see them as offensive and address them (Banks & Horton, 2022; Banks et al., 2025)

What can we do?

Raising awareness to the nature of microaggressions, race and skin color

- Reading the works of scholars and content creators who talk about colorism
- Dr. Sarah Webb and Colorism Healing ([Colorism Keynote Speaker and Workshop Facilitator - Dr. Sarah L. Webb](#))
- Dr. Gina Sissoko ([Dr. Gina Sissoko](#))

Having courageous conversations about meaning around skin tone and colorism in your classes!

- Integrating into course content and documentaries
 - Coded Bias

Intentionally and meaningfully incorporating skin tone diversity

- Being mindful of when it is used (e.g., dark skin and stigmatizing topics)
- Encouraging students to use emojis that reflect their skin tone rather than going to default

Want to read about it? Check out my references!



References