

## Blind to the Impacts of Colorism within the Cosmetic Industry

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**Abstract:** *An unavoidable truth of colorism is often ignored because of the way society has pushed it aside. Through an analysis of historical, economic, and social data and research, this piece is written as a way to shed a bright light on the dark shadow of colorism that is cast over the beauty community. This essay argues that colorism remains prevalent in the cosmetic industry as something that has become normalized regardless of the economic and social detriment its occurrence has on society. The normalization and persisting ignorance of colorism in society is a representation of the historical legacy surrounding racial prejudices American society has yet to relinquish. This essay traces the selling of whiteness as a commodity back to the early years of the makeup industry in America to demonstrate that people of color have long been an afterthought in ad campaigns, diversification of products, and in society as whole. Ironically, diversity increases the economic potential of companies in the cosmetic industry, and, more importantly, inclusion boosts a person's sense of confidence and helps instill a feeling of equality within the consumer market and society, which is why it is so important that the cosmetic industry diversifies.*

Gummy Bear, Illuminati, Venice, Castle, Often, Refriend, Adulting, Dove, Easy Peasy, Yikes, Dume, and Typo. These words are the names of complexion products released by Colourpop Cosmetics. Hearing the first nine of these names may bring a wave of positivity to consumers. However, the latter three have a dismissive connotation. The perception of these words is imperative to determine how Colourpop Cosmetics views their consumers. Which of these colors would you assume to be lighter shades, and which would you assume would be darker shades? The first nine names, which have an enthusiastic connotation, are the shades for lighter skin tones while the names that have an undesirable sound to them—Yikes, Dume, and Typo—are the shades for deeper skin tones. Can we infer, then, that the harsh way Colourpop Cosmetics acknowledges their darker skinned customers is negligent in comparison to

their blithe attitudes towards lighter-skinned customers? Is this shade range and the names accompanying it a direct representation of the morality behind Colourpop Cosmetics? The assumption in the time following the release was that Colourpop excluded people of color and did not find it ethically necessary to positively include them. Acknowledging this assumption, Colourpop released an apologetic press statement saying they “are sorry and are extremely grateful for [their] customers’ feedback” (Abelman) resulting in the product being pulled from their line. Regardless of current customer feelings surrounding Colourpop Cosmetics, the evidence of colorism shown by their shade names and range exhibits a reality facing people of color.

Colorism has long been understood as “the process of discrimination that privileges light skin people of color over their dark skin counterparts [and] is concerned with actual skin tone, as opposed to racial and ethnic identity” (Charles 376). Today, the definition of colorism has altered very little; if you are a person of a darker complexion, you are pushed out from mainstream marketing and products. The trend of exclusion is not solely found with Colourpop Cosmetics; many brands release a limited shade range or release darker shades with controversial names. Colorism remains prevalent in the cosmetic industry as something that has become normalized regardless of the economic and social detriment its occurrence has on society. The normalization and persisting ignorance of colorism in society is a representation of the historical legacy surrounding racial prejudices American society has yet to relinquish.

### **It’s Not a Twenty-First Century Thing**

In 10,000 BC in ancient Egypt, only men were allowed to be lavished in lavender oils and a musky cologne that was applied shortly after; this was the beginning of the cosmetic industry. In ancient Chinese culture, nearly 7,000 years later, there is evidence that both men and women stained their fingernails as a means to show social status (Chaudhri). The cosmetic products we think about today came about in the early twentieth century with the release of the first lipstick. Since then, brands that only had bobby pins and hair products began to release different

types of beauty-related goods such as foundation, blush, and mascara (Chaudhri). With cosmetics continuing to expand in such a way to reach a diverse consumer base, it is hard to believe that such an industry has not expanded out of the realm of marginalizing non-white people.

People of color, including and not limited to African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, have not been treated fairly in the history of the United States. Many were enslaved and segregated from white communities for a majority of our history, and cosmetics are a reflection of this socio-economic and political legacy. Part of the history of this dominant culture surrounding dissociation involves cultural stereotypes that, in the late nineteenth century, reveal a comical imitation of African Americans. These imitations create stereotypes that are to be mocked and not taken seriously. Kathy Peiss, professor of American History and author of *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, points out that cosmetic brands "promised relief from such stereotypes" (205) by offering light shades of makeup that people of color could use to lighten their skin. Essentially, makeup was offered as a tool to appear whiter; for example, skin bleaching cosmetics were sold to women of color as a way to improve their status in society. Expert psychologist Christopher A.D Charles characterizes "the practice of skin bleaching" as a form of "self-hate" (380). He suggests there is an internal crisis between loving your skin and desiring a lighter complexion. This crisis, he argues, originates from the conventional colorized beauty of our history based on traditional white standards (Charles 380). The marketing strategy of selling skin bleaching products, as Peiss illuminates, "in fact reinforced racial bigotry" (205). Cosmetics in the present day have evolved into a revolutionary concept including new ideas and techniques, but somehow even these developments continue to reinscribe racist stereotypes by asserting whiteness as the beauty ideal. Granted, cosmetics are not just a twenty-first century thing; we need to advance in a twenty-first century way.

### **Whiteness for Sale**

Beauty is perceived, interpreted, and influenced by society.

The selling of what is called “whiteness” is seen as selling what we know as privilege. People associate the color of their skin with their rank on the social hierarchical scale. According to Kyla Schuller, Assistant Professor of Women and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, how we view and define what beauty is gave rise to the idea that whiteness is a commodity that can be bought and sold. In her article “Facial Uplift: Plastic Surgery, Cosmetics, and the Retailing of Whiteness in the work of Maria Cristina Mena,” Schuller suggests that “the beauty industry both lends structure to and is structured by the idea of race itself” (84). She continues to say that beauty is “determined by the political and economic context the products appear within” (84). Whiteness is something that the beauty industry as a whole has normalized. This could be the leading reason why people are blind to colorism or simply fail to acknowledge its existence in the beauty community. The conversation that Kyla Schuller is forcing to happen is that whiteness in this industry is considered a luxury. Expensive brands, such as La Mer or La Prairie, whose products start at around \$80 for very little product, only sell ten shades of a light beige giving no options at all for darker skin complexions (“Designer Beauty Products”). In contrast, you have brands such as L’Oreal or Maybelline, whose products begin at around six dollars, release a foundation range with over 40 shades ranging from pure white to a very rich, deep brown (“Ultra Beauty”). Luxury cosmetic brands are promoting an ideology that white is right by only representing a select group of individuals whom they assume can afford their products.

The disposition that white is right has become an ideology that many consumers are ignorant of because of the history surrounding racial hierarchy. Having a beauty product that catered to a person’s skin complexion has, ever since colonization, been based on racial status (Schuller 85). If a person had a foundation or concealer shade, they had a higher presence on the racial hierarchical scale. On the contrary, if a person did not have a foundation shade, or if they were not represented in the cosmetic industry, that person was considered insignificant to society or less important than their white “superiors.” This instills the

idea of whiteness in a society that we have become accustomed to. To make it, to look beautiful, to have representation, an individual must be of light complexion. This was the beauty standard long before the twentieth century, but it continues to be upheld today. Brands continuously release products that have twelve shades of light to tan (natural colors of Caucasian individuals) and only include three shades of barely dark to barely deep enough as a way to simulate representation of people of color.

Although very few scholars openly discuss the idea of selling of whiteness in the beauty industry, Margaret Hunter, a professor of sociology at Mills University, adds to the conversation by suggesting that white beauty sells not only products but a lifestyle. She explains that the images of white beauty do not solely rely on white women with light features to sell products, but the images of white beauty rely more on the selling of a cultural status (Hunter 144). The lifestyle of a white individual, based on historical evidence, is someone with wealth, power, and sophistication. This has been the standard since colonization in the United States. It is implied that beauty is promoting this colonial ideology that white or lighter skin individuals hold more importance or value over other skin complexions. Both Hunter and Schuller are hinting that beauty is not just a spectrum of the global market, but it holds a deep-rooted meaning to how we view and perceive consumers in the market.

Hunter coins the theory of selling of whiteness as being racial capital. She says "racial capital is a drawn from the body that can be related to skin tone, facial features, body shape, etc." (Hunter 145). Capital can be understood as valuable assets that aid in increasing efficiencies or well-being, which is directly parallel to racial capital. Having specific facial features, skin tones, and body shapes make someone better off. This is a trend seen in larger social contexts, not just in the beauty industry. Racial capital gives an individual an advantage in society much like if they had a million dollars to start a business. The trend that racial capital is an advantage is seen on a national scale and affirmed by the beauty industry. Hunter suggests that there is a possibility that brands do not fully know that they are promot-

ing racial capital. This unknowing behavior could be happening because this mentality has been embedded into our society for hundreds of years and has become the norm. Hunter argues that the standard of beauty that consumers have overlooked is colorism, also known as whiteness for sale.

### **Diversity Matters**

Even though selling whiteness is a primary example of colorism, it actually pushes against a large segment of the consumer market. According to Caroline V. Clarke, journalist and editorial director of Black Enterprise Women of Power Summit, black women are contributing significantly to the sales of hair care, skin care, and cosmetic products. She says that the retail of these items “grew 6% in 1992, pushing the market to \$547 million, according to a study by Packaged Facts Inc., a New York-based research firm” (Clarke). It is important to note that these statistics were set 26 years ago, and there is still a push for representation of diversity within the beauty community. During this time, Clarke claims that Covergirl set this act in motion. With sales having “double digit growth of 15%, reaching sales of \$82 million” (Clarke), she suggests that this dramatic increase was the beginning push for other brands to participate in inclusion. Including a diverse market spectrum, it seems, would help businesses bring in profits.

Although doing business should not be solely based on a need for profit, it surely doesn't hurt to have some rolling in. Given that the cosmetic industry is booming, it is very hard to not bring in some form of profitability, and inclusion will secure both long-run and short-run revenues. Eyes Lips Face (E.L.F) Cosmetics is a drugstore brand that has maintained significantly low prices on all of their products. Very few products in their line are over ten dollars, and these prices have remained low since they founded their brand in 2004. However, there has been a jump in their net sales and gross profit in the past two years. Looking at this brand's public tax statement released on the United States Securities and Exchange Commission website reveals a significant increase in gross profits. Profits in 2016 reached nearly \$87,000, compared to their gross profits in 2017,

which reached \$117,000. It is evident they are selling more items but not nearly so much to account for the dramatic increase in their profits (United States). One key point to take note of is that the prices, as previously stated, have not increased dramatically in a way that would increase their profits and net sales to this extent. The one major project release that E.L.F Cosmetics initiated in this time frame was the release of a more inclusive shade range of all three of their facial products (i.e., concealers, foundations, and powders). The act of introducing nearly ten more shades to every line of products is likely the cause of such a dramatic increase in the company's profits.

Milena Jirincova, Economics professor at the University of West Bohemia, conducted a study that directly supports the findings of E.L.F's tax statements. In this study, she measures the impact diversity and inclusion have not only on the company as a whole but also on their market share. Jirincova showcases the meaningful significance levels that diversity holds on a company. In simplest terms, a significant level shows just how closely related your data is. One conclusion resulting from Jirincova's findings is that there is a 65% correspondence between diversity and company profits. It can be assumed, based on this data, that the increase in a company's profits as a result of diversity can be linked to their client satisfaction and loyalty. Jirincova's study also suggests that the greater a company's diversity is, the greater amount of returning customers they will have. To specify, there is a 75% significance level that diversity has on client loyalty. Diversity is a key factor to prospering economically in a business, regardless of whether a company is diversifying their employees or products released for the public. By reaching into a multiethnic market, more consumers will be willing and able to invest into a company the more that company invests in them. If companies are not mindful to the power diversity has on a business, they will not succeed to their optimal economic potential. To make any form of profit and attract and retain customers, diversity matters.

### **Social Impact of Colorism**

Not only does diversity increase economic prosperity, but inclusion boosts confidence in an individual's self and in society. Marketing specialist Claudia Townsend suggests that people buy products from brands that have their same core values. She says, "From consumer research we know that product choice is often related to consumers' perception of themselves" (Townsend 23). Consumers will support brands that share their own personal representation and boycott brands that do not. This is especially true today with social media playing a bigger role in campaigns. Many people do not buy from brands because they do not see people of color or people like them representing a specific product. Townsend indicates that "people use brands -- and the personality or lifestyle they represent -- to express who they are and who they are not" (23).

Townsend's claims are relevant in the beauty community on YouTube. Alissa Ashley, who has over 1.6 million subscribers, uploaded a fourteen-minute video on her beauty channel talking about how disappointed she is in Tarte Cosmetics releasing a poor shade range. Alissa starts her video by stating, "there's no point in [her] sitting here and doing a full on foundation review and wear test when in all actuality if [she] ends up liking the foundation, it's going to be disappointing because of the fact that the shade range is literally so limited" ("New"). She continues to say, "while this foundation looks nice and feels great, [she] cannot recommend it because [she] simply refuse[s] to recommend a product that is not made for everybody" ("New"). Since the video has been published, Alissa has not used or mentioned Tarte Cosmetics on her channel.

With the consumer purchasing trends, Claudia Townsend claims that cosmetics initiate a feel-good feeling within people who buy the products. She says, "The mere choice of a pretty product over another seems to affect security in one's self" (Townsend 26). Relating to the theory of selling of whiteness, being able to purchase items because they have a shade available for an individual of color gives a person confidence in themselves and in society, meanwhile lessening the burden of racial hierarchy. As Peiss notes, "the culture of beauty asserted desires for

dignity, respect, and social participation in a world in which these basic human imperatives were all too often denied" (235). Such a desire for "cultural legitimacy" (Peiss 213) by American women of color in the early 1900s continues to drive consumers in America's beauty industry. The consumer purchasing trends today indicate a desire for inclusion in response to limited shade ranges as well as exclusive advertisements.

How individuals are viewed in advertisements and marketing campaigns plays an important role in self-confidence. According to Yonca Aybay and Kara Nurten, Faculty of Communication Studies at Eastern Mediterranean University, the media plays an important role in self-confidence. Their study surveyed 82 girls aged 14 through 17 in order to demonstrate how beauty is perceived in young girls who view magazines. Aybay and Nurten concluded that, "The media and advertising industry frequently uses idealized images of femininity to further increase the desire to attain ideal beauty. The promotion of this standard makes adolescents less happy with their looks and results in body dissatisfaction" (50). Many people, specifically people of color, don't have representation; the current trend of racial capital that social media, ad campaigns, and product releases follow initiates a feeling of distaste toward the way people of color see themselves. In their study, Aybay and Nurten asked their participants to describe, based on several magazines, what the typical idea of beauty is. A great portion of the girls, all ages included, "responded that it is defined as being tall and thin, having pure white and shiny skin, blue or green eyes, small feet and a small nose" (Aybay and Nurten 53).

Aybay and Nurten's findings are evident in the beauty community as well. Thomas Halbert, a beauty influencer who has 545,000 subscribers, released a 25-minute video discussing recent products released by Huda Beauty. He begins the video by solely describing the quality of the products and keeping his views about Huda Beauty aside. However, towards the end of the video, Thomas brings his opinions forward and says that, "the products were really nice to work with however [he] will be returning them" ("Giving"). The reason he will be returning them, he says, is because he simply cannot support a brand

that does not support people like him (male beauty influencers and makeup artists) or like his friends (people of color and diversity). Thomas says the problem is that, “Huda Beauty is not posting gay men and not posting black women or men [in her advertisements] . . . out of 1,251 advertisements, only 31 of them contained a woman of color right before her foundation released. [Founder Huda Kattan] only cared about women of color . . . because there is a market and money to be made in [inclusion]” (“Giving”). Thomas is under the assumption, because of Huda Beauty’s ad campaigns, that the brand does not care about women of color or male beauty influencers. Thomas has not used or advertised Huda Beauty products on his channel in a positive light since this video has posted.

The beauty industry is remarkably big, allowing room for many individuals to profit on both consumer and manufacturing ends. However, without inclusion of different people across multiple races, ethnicities, and even sexual orientation, the amount of support the brand has will decrease as influencers are done supporting brands that do not support them. In the words of cosmetic specialist Agnes Ehlinger-Martin et al., “The quest for beauty is a major form of group cohesion and identity building. It helps build the culture to which people belong, enabling them to affirm themselves as a member of the group by expressing their gender, age, hierarchical status, and role in society” (89). Inclusion and representation, overall, have a social impact on a person’s sense of confidence and help instill a feeling of equality within the consumer market and society.

### **Understanding Skepticism**

One claim many brands use as reasoning for their lack of inclusion is that darker colors are harder to make. One example of such ideology is with Tarte Cosmetics, commonly known as just Tarte. Tarte has one of the best-selling concealers on the market thus far and created a foundation to mirror its iconic product. The foundation was highly anticipated, as highlighted by TrendMood on Instagram, and was predicted to be one of the best product launches of the year by PopSugar (Stiegman). However, Tarte could not live up to the expectations set by the

beauty community as they released fifteen foundation shades, twelve of which were light colors and the latter three being merely medium tones. The community was outraged; many beauty influencers could not find a shade to try, and many others had no interest in promoting a product that their fans could not utilize. Tarte, as a response to the outrage, released a statement stating, “[they] wanted to get the product out as fast as possible, and [they] made the decision to move forward before all the shades were ready to go” (Bragona). It can be acknowledged that fifteen shades is not enough to capture their entire fan base and even that there was a significant lack of consideration regarding this launch. The problem is not with the lack of shades for everyone; rather, it is the lack of effort that goes into making shades for every person. When a brand like Tarte releases twelve shades attempting to match every light person while releasing only three darker shades as an attempt to match every darker-toned person, it is impossible to ignore the assumptions of where their priorities and efforts lie. If, instead, Tarte had delayed the release of their product until they had produced a sufficient range of shades, that delay would likely hold a greater benefit to the company than releasing a limited product line prematurely. Not only would waiting eliminate the negative assumption about the brand’s priorities, but doing so would also increase the consumer’s desire to buy the product. People anticipate, hope, and look forward to product launches, especially those that are mirroring revolutionary products. Holding out on the release of a specific product increases the sense of anticipation in addition to allowing for the creation of more shades and the inclusion of diversity in their products (Threlfall and Ritz 18). Waiting and ensuring that a product holds up to its standards, instead of impulsively releasing products, will not hinder a business but help it.

Some experts claim that the cosmetic industry has already grown and minimized the problem of colorism. Dr. Evern Algin-Yapar, a pharmaceuticals scholar, suggests that, “During the last twenty years personal care products including [the] cosmetics market has grown approximately 4.5% by year” (419), and as a result of this substantial growth, “[d]iversity of cos-

metics will be increased, especially by means of expectations of different cultures” (420). Indeed, these statistics suggest that the growth in the market will likely encourage the cosmetic industry to diversify eventually. However, eventually is not good enough. By simply pushing away the effects colorism has on an individual as well as society in its entirety under the pretense that change will come eventually, companies are minimizing entire groups of individuals. Minimization is not an effective solution to colorism and should be seen as a starting point not an ending. Starting from fragrances thousands of years ago to what the cosmetic industry is today, the progression consumers are experiencing does not make up for the years of exclusion. With beauty playing an enormous role in how we view ourselves in society, growth is good, but expected growth should start now and not in years to come.

### **Food for Thought**

The persistence of colorism in the cosmetic industry today causes more damage than one might expect from a seemingly harmless makeup product. Moreover, these effects are often minimized or ignored due to the country’s continual normalization of historical ideologies. Decades of normalized racism have led to the current persistence of colorism in the cosmetic industry, which ultimately causes economic damage to companies as well as social damage to numerous American consumers. While erasing colorism would be good for businesses on an economic level, the social importance of representation and inclusion are the most important goals to be prioritized. People of color are not an afterthought and are not a passing trend that will merely get companies publicity; they are people and people who matter. Inclusion counts, and when there is a lack of inclusion, it speaks volumes not only in the beauty community but in society overall. Although Colourpop Cosmetics really fell short with their shade ranges in their sculpting line, since then they have released a concealer and sculpt collection with over twenty shades. There is an equal amount of light, medium, tan, and dark tones that show they have learned from the past and put in effort to include people of color. Not to mention,

the names of the collection are numerals, showing no figurative favoritism from one complexion to the next, unlike that of their first launch. The first step to empowering a change is to ensure you are not blind to the impact of colorism; the first step is you.

*Note: This essay was composed in Dr. Aimee Whiteside's AWR 201 class.*

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