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Research in Global Justice: An MLK Scholars' Analysis

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Presentation Title: Perceptions of Colorism in Different Geographic Regions

Abstract:

Skin color has been used as a mean to racially categorize people as well as a means to differentiate individuals within the same racial category. Although research has been done on racism, not enough research has been done on colorism. Colorism is described as an extension of racism in which whiteness is preserved through establishing a hierarchy of shades of complexion. This research presentation seeks to further understand how colorism manifest within different societies around the world and how it affects people of color.

In this study I investigate the history of slavery to better understand the context of our current society, while also using local narratives and past qualitative research to get well rounded depiction of colorism.

Research shows that a hierarchy of shades of complexion was used as an oppressive strategy to maintain social, financial, and political control during times of slavery. This social control was executed by allotting special privileges to people with lighter-skin complexion while withholding those privileges from people with darker-skin complexions. By allotting special privileges to people with lighter skin, slave owners were able to create differences in treatment while still maintaining dominance. This skin dynamic is still present in our society and has created devastating effects.

Narratives of black women interviewed in qualitative studies demonstrate how colorism is a social problem that affects the way in which women of color interact with people within their own communities. Women of darker-skin complexion explained how they faced discrimination from members of their own community – and even their own families. However, colorism may not appear the same in different geographic regions.

In Vietnam, the role of skin color is more subtle. Instead, national origin, physiognomy such as nose and eye shapes, and language become dominate markers. This change of focus makes Vietnam slightly different than America, in regards to colorism. Although skin color may not be the primary influential marker, skin color has been an indicator of class and beauty in many Asian countries. While conducting informal interviews in Vietnam, I was able to learn how Euro-centric beauty standards continue to influence the perceptions of beauty. White skin symbolizes power, nobility, and beauty. This attribution to white skin was created after the occupation of the French in Vietnam. The connection between skin color, socioeconomic status,

and beauty is something that remains a common theme when looking at how colorism appears in different geographic regions.

Generally speaking, people of color are too often studied in comparison to their white counterparts. This study is an attempt to disrupt the black and white binary by removing whiteness as the compression group; therefore, providing more culturally sound research. Furthermore, this research aims to get a better understanding of an inside community issue that is constantly talked about. This research is needed in order to bring cohesion between communities of color and shed light on a neglected topic.