

Interpreting Colorism: Skin Tone and Racial Identity in the Museum

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A thesis

Museology

University of Washington

2026

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Abstract

Race and racism are intertwined with United States history and have been presented within museums since their beginning. Recently, some museums have begun taking an active role in opening the conversation on aspects of race and skin-tone-based discrimination through exhibits. While there has been scholarship addressing the effectiveness of exhibits discussing race and racism, there has been little research on the presence of colorism in these exhibits. The purpose of this research was to examine the role museums play in developing a deeper understanding of racial identity through the curation of colorism in exhibits about race and skin tone. Through three case studies, data were collected in interviews with museum staff at institutions with exhibits relating to racial identity and skin tone.

Keywords: colorism; racial identity; skin tone; race; exhibits

Introduction

Colorism – racial discrimination based on skin tone for members of the same racial group, with preferential treatment towards those of lighter complexion – is an emerging topic in social science discourses, with a push for more public facing forums to shed light on how this type of discrimination continues to shape racial identity (Mills & Miller, 2024; Prado-Robledo, 2025; Monk Jr., 2021; Dixon & Telles, 2017; Hall, 2022).

Museums are built environments designed to be key facilitators for discussions of how we think about the world. Because museums shape how we see the world, they can push visitors to think about how society categorizes race to promote positive racial identity construction. Colorism has been a topic historically excluded from social dialogue due to it being deemed taboo (Hall, 2022); museums can break this barrier, and some museums do so through storytelling in exhibits that directly or indirectly address the topic.

Colorism in Connection with Racism

Racism is “a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race” (Merriam-Webster, 2026). Colorism is a subset of racism since race is a fixed identity, and skin color is a physical trait that provides diversity within a racial group (Dixon & Telles, 2017). Two individuals of the same race with different skin tones can experience different levels of discrimination based on one of the individuals having a lighter complexion, indicating a closer proximity to whiteness than the individual with darker skin (Monk Jr., 2021). Proximity to whiteness and whiteness as an ideology are linked to an individual’s genetic and cultural ties that allows access to certain political, economic, and social privileges (Dixon & Telles, 2017). In this scenario, having a lighter complexion is a visual indicator that they are closer to whiteness, the believed superior race, and therefore have more access to white privileges. However, it’s not just a scenario; it’s reality.

Proximity to whiteness highlights the difference in discrimination between lighter-skinned brown groups and darker-skinned brown groups from outside a racial group

(Prado-Robledo, 2025). Because of this inequity in discrimination from outside the group, it creates intragroup discrimination between the light-skinned groups and the dark-skinned groups (Prado-Robledo, 2025; Goblin & Garner, 2021). As colorism can be both interracial and intraracial, it builds complexity for personal ideas and feelings about racial identity. Racial identity informs our understanding of how to fit within our racial group.

Acknowledging colorism as a major component of inequality is becoming progressively more important in today's society because of racial mixing (Dixon & Telles, 2017). As a result, our world is more racially ambiguous than ever before, increasing the diversity of skin tones (Faden, 2013). This shift affects internal and external perspectives on race that connect to how we see ourselves and how others view racial group membership (Brookfield, 2018).

Identity Construction through Storytelling

Identity is a fluid construct that distinguishes our sense of self through our thoughts, physical features, and perceived narratives built over time through our actions (Seigel, 2005; Rounds, 2010). Constructing identity takes time, energy, and comfort with self-exploration. Museums are built environments that can create space for visitors to safely explore, question, and experience new perspectives that can inform and reflect individual and group identity. Museums can offer visitors a space to experience different identities by comfortably exploring alternative ways of living and thinking while maintaining their own identity (Rounds, 2010; Faden, 2013). They are one of the most trusted educational institutions, after schools (Jackson, 2025), that engage visitors with the world through storytelling.

By discussing topics like racial identity, skin tone, and interracial/intraracial discrimination through storytelling, museums can help visitors construct their racial identities and also contextualize and personalize others' lived experiences (Faden, 2013). Through storytelling, museums can also spark broader public discourse on race and skin tone (Blackwood & Purcell, 2014). These conversations can promote inclusion

by facilitating reflection on contemporary lived experiences of people of color (Faden, 2013).

Exhibits About Race and Identity

In viewing the museum as a built environment for racial identity construction, exhibition staff are the cultural mediators between visitors and an exhibit's story (Blackwood & Purcell, 2014). They guide an exhibit through object selection, display techniques, and the overall story's interpretation (Blackwood & Purcell, 2014). With exhibits that discuss racial discrimination, skin tone is an important aspect of racial identity to be incorporated. The interpretation strategies implemented by exhibition staff affect visitor engagement and comprehension. Through designing an exhibit with multiple frameworks of interpretation, its effectiveness in reflecting social reality is increased (Varutti, 2022; Blackwood & Purcell, 2014).

One of the first major contemporary exhibits focused on race as a social construct was *Race: Are We So Different*, produced by the Science Museum of Minnesota in collaboration with the American Anthropological Association. This exhibit uses current scientific knowledge to disprove the idea of races and biological superiority while raising the questions: Why does the idea of race continue to shape our lives? And can we make a change? The exhibit was the first nationally traveling exhibit to challenge contemporary understandings of race using a biological, historical, and cultural lens. While it was traveling from 2007 to 2018, it impacted 3 million people across 48 locations in the United States (AAA, n.d.). In continuation with these themes, a new exhibit, *Skin: Living Armor, Evolving Identity*, narrates the evolving nature of skin in humans and animals, presented through a biological lens. For humans, it interprets how skin color has been used as a biased metric for the persistence of racism. It uses the social and political meanings humans have given to skin tone as a framework for how the modern world views race. In doing so, it aims to form an understanding of the origins and continuation of racism to spark dialogue about how society can change its notions about skin color for a more equitable future.

Similarly, a temporary exhibit from 2020-2021, *Color of You* at the American Museum of Natural History, used photos of people with all different skin tones taken by photographer Angélica Dass. It underscored the message that, despite our genetic similarity, skin color has a long history of being used as an explicit and implicit categorization tool. The exhibit encouraged discussion and reflection on how we view ourselves and others. Another art exhibit in 2024 at the Museum of the African Diaspora engages with these same themes in *Brown Paper: Value Test*, which narrates the paper bag test that was historically used against dark-skinned African Americans. The artwork connects the past to the contemporary context of colorism in the United States. By reproducing the social reality of colorism, museums are creating space to safely challenge current perceptions about skin tone and its influence on racial identity.

In 2016, the National Museum of African American History and Culture's exhibit *Taking the Stage* opened and tells the story of African American actors in film, TV, and theater. It focuses on the representation of African Americans in early Hollywood. One aspect of the exhibit is the stereotyping of actors and actresses who portrayed harmful perceptions of racial identity within the community. In Hollywood today, colorism can be seen in book-to-film adaptations, with characters' skin complexion authenticity being misrepresented (Mills & Miller, 2024). In changing the characters' and actors' skin tones, it reinforces the ideology of whiteness as being the dominant race to set standards of beauty and culture that other non-white groups should strive to achieve by having that proximity.

Impact

Evaluating how museum staff interpret colorism to engage visitors in exhibits about race helps broaden the narrative to be more inclusive of lived experiences, resulting in a deeper understanding of museums' effects on racial identity (Monk Jr., 2021). Museums are an ideal environment for leading discussions about colorism and building on existing knowledge of race and skin tone (Brookfield, 2018, p. 217). Skin color is the most visible identifier of race-based prejudice and, therefore, should be the most effective measure of racial inequality when discussing discrimination (Hall, 2022).

The exhibits previously discussed demonstrate that museums have the capacity to successfully grapple with conversations that explicitly challenge historical and contemporary narratives about race. Museums are purposeful in their decisions to develop exhibits on race and racism. The approach they take is dependent on the institution's focus, whether that be science, cultural history, natural history, art, or a children's museum. When it comes to colorism, it has been present within broader portrayals of race in exhibits, but its inclusion has largely been unintentional. However, unlike broader narratives about racial identity, which have been challenged in many museum spaces, colorism, as a social construct, lived experience, and contemporary narrative, has very recently been recognized and explored through storytelling. For example, with *Taking the Stage*, the exhibit focuses on African American history in early Hollywood with some content relating to colorism. Or with *Color of You*, " which addresses skin tone without using the vocabulary of colorism. However, there are exhibits, like the *Brown Paper: Value Test*, that are solely dedicated to discussing colorism.

Research Purpose

While many of the museums are engaging their visitors with issues of race and racism, some museums, as seen in the above examples, have gone further in challenging assumptions surrounding skin color by intentionally talking about colorism, whether it's a standalone exhibit or integrated. Understanding the nuances of how colorism is being interpreted in museum exhibits can help professionals effectively broaden racial narratives to reflect the real-world diversity of skin tone and its impact on racial identity. The research on these exhibits is insufficient, and therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the interpretive strategies museum staff use to interpret colorism in exhibits about race. The research questions were:

1. What motivates museums to interpret colorism through exhibits?
2. How is colorism contextualized within broader cultural and historical narratives?
3. What interpretation strategies do museum staff use to engage visitors?

Methodology

Study Design

The study used case studies to investigate how colorism can be explored and expanded in a museum setting. Qualitative data was collected through interviews with curators and exhibit development team members involved in interpretation at each of the three research sites. Semi-structured interviews ranging from 30 minutes to 90 minutes were conducted via Zoom and recorded for transcription. Consent and anonymity were addressed before recording. The automatically transmitted interview transcripts were edited for mistakes. It was then coded for emerging themes.

A document analysis was conducted to supplement further analysis on how the contextualization of colorism is implemented for visitor engagement. Crucial documents to the development and interpretation of the selected exhibits were provided by participants. The types of documents included in the analysis consist of interpretation plans, labels, design layouts, and floor plans. These documents were compared and contrasted across museum types to consider where approaches intersect.

Subjects and Recruitment

Sites were identified through internet searches for museum exhibits focused on the experience of race with an emphasis on skin tone and curated within the past 20 years. The time frame was to ensure the content was relevant to modern society. To gain more perspective on how colorism is being interpreted, science, children's, art, and cultural museums were considered to capture a wide array of audiences. By examining contemporary exhibits from museums of varying audiences, the study can help establish best practices for addressing colorism across institutions with different educational focuses. The final three sites were the Museum of Us, the Kauffman Museum, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). These sites were selected because they demonstrated a focus on sharing the evolving stories of the human experience through identity construction in relation to the world around us.

Interview participants at each site were identified through museum staff directories and by contacting museum information desks. Participants ranged from curators, designers, directors, and developers.

Site Information

The Kauffman Museum is located in North Newton, Kansas. It is a small cultural history museum focused on promoting positive conversations about challenging topics within its community. The exhibit selected, *Sorting Out Race*, raises the question of how items found in everyday thrift stores can teach us about racial stereotypes. *Sorting Out Race* is an exhibit that debuted in 2015 and was adapted to a traveling exhibit in 2016 following its success, and has made appearances in 26 venues across 10 states. It does not explicitly talk about colorism, but it has a section dedicated to race and racial identity construction that addresses aspects of skin color.

The Museum of Us is a medium-sized cultural history and anthropological museum located in San Diego, California. The museum is dedicated to showcasing the human experience, especially in connection with its community, as a safe place for reflection and connection to the world. The exhibit selected, *Race: Power, Resistance, and Change*, debuted in 2025 and shares the stories of how the construction of race has shaped life, laws, and institutions in the San Diego and Tijuana metropolitan area. It does not specifically speak about colorism, but it addresses how skin color has been used as a tool of oppression and how it has shaped everyday life.

The National Museum of African American History & Culture is a large cultural history museum located in Washington, D.C. It explores the past and present of African American history and culture in the United States. The exhibit selected, *Cultural Expressions*, debuted in 2016 and showcases the ways in which African American culture manifests itself in everyday life. *Cultural Expressions* specifically addresses colorism as an aspect of lived experiences. The exhibit defines colorism as “social, financial, and political preferences based on skin color” for its visitors and displays historical objects and contemporary narratives that portray colorism as a lived experience (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected from February 23, 2026, to February 27, 2026. The interviews consisted of 9 open-ended questions. Answers were automatically transmitted into transcripts. The researcher later edited for mistakes and removed filler words such as *like* or *um* to more clearly represent the participants' responses. Participant responses were then coded for emerging themes. This allowed the researcher to identify common themes and connect documents to said themes.

Results

RQ1. Museum Motivations

The motivations identified to connect museum exhibits to colorism are organized into three themes: mission and value-driven, timeless in its relevance, and community identity and relevance.

Mission and Value-Driven

All participants saw their exhibit aligning with their institution's mission and/or values. For two of the sites, the content is part of the museum's identity. For the third site, the content aligns with the museum's identity as a place of learning.

For *Race: Power, Resistance, and Change*, it directly relates to the museum's mission as “a place for the diverse stories that define us—especially those that have long been overlooked or silenced by dominant cultural narratives...” as it highlights the multiracial history of the San Diego/Tijuana metropolitan area (Museum of Us, n.d.). The exhibit also speaks to the museum's values of “equity, inclusion, anti-racism, and decolonization” by discussing its past as an anthropological museum in a way that is beneficial for the community it represents rather than as an agent of harm (Museum of Us, n.d.). One of the museum's first exhibits was about “skin tone and everything else, it really worked to categorize and racialize people according to their features” (K. Clyde, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026). To address the harm committed in the past, *Race: Power, Resistance, and Change* is giving the museum space to be a place for diverse stories, decolonization, and anti-racism.

Sorting Out Race's exhibit goal was to “generate a healthy community conversation about racial stereotypes, past and present, to heighten awareness of our continuing struggles with race,” and this speaks directly to the Kauffman Museum’s core value of authentic learning and service (Kauffman Museum, n.d.). Through its qualities of “learning experiences, rich in artifacts, critical thinking, [and] reflection,” the exhibit embodies the museum's goal to provide one-of-a-kind exhibits and learning opportunities (R. Pannabecker, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026).

As one of the museum's inaugural exhibits at NMAAHC, *Cultural Expressions* exemplifies the museum's mission to

capture and share the unvarnished truth of African American history and culture. We connect stories, scholarship, art, and artifacts from the past and present to illuminate the contributions, struggles, and triumphs that have shaped our nation. We forge new and compelling avenues for audiences to experience the arc of living history (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.).

The museum's mission is also about "helping people connect to those who want to celebrate people who want to see and celebrate African American culture," and through *Cultural Expression*, the mission is achieved by highlighting historical roots and examples of Black culture alongside its manifestation in contemporary Black culture (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026).

Timeless in its Relevance

All sites described their desire for an exhibit that was timeless in its relevance to culture. They identified racial identity construction as an important part of United States history and its continued impact on people’s lived experiences, making it important for museums to engage with it through authentic community connections.

For *Race: Power, Resistance, and Change*, the reflection was mainly on the exhibit development process and hopes for the exhibit's future. Because the exhibit is “authentic to different communities,” it is poised to persist through the years to come as it is a space where the “complex history around identity and history to show up in the

same space in a way that people connected” (K. Clyde & M. Barnadas, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026).

At the Kauffman Museum, there was a need for “really high-quality projects in the pipeline” that were concept-driven (R. Pannabecker, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026). Out of this need was *Sorting Out Race*. It provided the museum with an opportunity to connect with its community and beyond as a traveling exhibit. In 2024, the Kauffman Museum was chosen by Humanities Kansas to use special NEH funding for a tour 10 years after the exhibit opened. In receiving this funding, Humanities Kansas solidified *Sorting Out Race*’s “continued relevancy and importance to the discussion of racial identity across the country” (R. Pannabecker, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026).

For the NMAAHC, the themes found in *Cultural Expressions* have a “timelessness to it” because it was designed to be relevant to modern African American racial identity construction while reflecting historical narratives (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026). Since the exhibit opened, the themes have remained relevant and adaptable, representing contemporary cultural expressions by highlighting the ongoing impact of colorism on communities’ lived experiences.

Community Identity and Relevance

All participants identified the motivating factor as a desire to create a contemporary exhibit that resonated with community identity. Participants viewed their exhibits connecting to colorism in an educational way through the representation of how racial identity is constructed over time. However, the exhibit development process looked different for each institution and was based on the nature of the communities it sought to represent. At the Museum of Us, the construction of racial identity over time was localized to the Tijuana and San Diego metropolitan area and was born out of a “call for that exhibit [*Race: Are We So Different?*] to be realized for this region and redeveloped and to create a new version” (K. Clyde, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026). With community identity and relevance in mind, *Race: Power, Resistance, and Change*

created a space for the museum to connect with its local communities on a topic relevant to their racial identity construction through storytelling for a broader audience.

On a national scale, the opening of the NMAAHC in 2016 offered the museum an opportunity to interpret history through a Black cultural lens. To produce an exhibit that is representative of the African American community across the nation, market research was conducted. Through this market research with visitors at cultural institutions, Black museums, and other Smithsonian museums, they were asked “the type of topics they thought it was important to have represented in the museum” (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026). In conducting this research, the topics relevant to the community's identity are able to shine through in *Cultural Expressions*.

Similarly, *Sorting Out Race* shares a national story of racial identity construction throughout history and its ramifications for contemporary communities. As a traveling exhibit, museum staff saw an “educational opportunity” to develop an exhibit that featured objects with negative racial imagery (R. Pannabecker, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026). Capitalizing on the idea of exhibiting objects donated to thrift stores for education rather than for profit gives those objects a new purpose: to highlight skin color's influence on the racial stereotyping of marginalized communities. In repurposing these objects, *Sorting Out Race* is correcting negative racial stereotypes by addressing their historical falsehoods and portraying contemporary community identities.

RQ2. Contextualization within Broader Historical and Cultural Narratives

Three themes emerged around how the museums contextualized colorism within the broader historical and cultural narratives: history of racialized treatment in the U.S, situating race and multiculturalism in the contemporary conversation, and creating space for truth-telling.

History of Racialized Treatment in the U.S.

The clearest theme between sites was the history of racialized treatment in the United States as the main contributing factor to racial identity construction. As skin tone is

contextualized through a historical lens, it sets the stage for visitors to have a universal working knowledge of where the topic is rooted, where it is currently, and the implications for its future.

As a history and anthropology museum, the Kauffman Museum contextualized the history of skin tone through the displayed objects. Quotes, examples, definitions, and globally recognized systems of categorizing skin tone to “honor that historical context and tell that story,” as well as addressing the contemporary context through showcasing issues of “cultural appropriation” and “racial profiling” (R. Pannabecker, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026). As another cultural anthropology museum, the Museum of Us contextualized the historical treatment of skin tone through a local lens and how it has changed over time through resistance. It was contextualized as “something that gains meaning through historical, social, and institutional processes, rather than as an individual or biological attribute,” by emphasizing “how skin tone has been read in different contexts” (M. Barnadas, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026).

For the NMAAHC, as the national history and cultural museum for the African American diaspora, the racialized treatment of skin tone throughout history is contextualized through a panel with the definition of colorism.

“We talked about the fact that there are many different skin tones among the black community and that the fact that lightness, the lighter you are, has been considered typical within the community of privilege and associated with value and status. And that has come from the history of this country” (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026).

In providing visitors with a word and definition to contextualize the exhibit, the historical beginnings and contemporary consequences of colorism are directly addressed. As it is “still a struggle today,” with “light-skinned people often feeling discriminated against, dark-skinned people feel discriminated against,” it is an oppression that can be seen throughout our history and felt in contemporary communities of color (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026).

Situating Race and Multiculturalism in the Contemporary Conversation

The consensus with each participant was that topics centered around race, like colorism, are contemporary lived experiences, and as a reflection of popular culture, these exhibits are spaces for visitors to form deeper understandings of modern society.

In *Sorting Out Race*, the objects are representations of popular culture and “things that are found in every U.S. state, thrift stores, garage sales, or online” (R. Pannabecker, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026). By showcasing these objects first in their historical and contemporary contexts, the exhibit gives visitors the space to broaden their understanding of skin tone and the influence society has on the conceptualization of racial identities. *Cultural Expressions* also uses everyday objects to reflect the diversity of Black culture and lived experiences in parts of the exhibit. In “reflecting on aspects of society that people are familiar with,” visitors are able to connect their lived experiences and society at large to the multiculturalism of race (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026).

Similar to how *Cultural Expressions* reflect contemporary aspects of society, *Race: Power, Resistance, and Change* is a space that represents its surrounding community and invites non-locals into the dialogue of racial identity construction in the San Diego/Tijuana region from the past to the present. To connect with the audience, contextualizing lived experiences “to educate people in a welcoming way that might be very new to the conversation, whether those people are tourists or locals,” was crucial in building “spaces where community has more presence in the museum” (K. Clyde personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026).

Creating Space for Truth-Telling

All sites described their exhibits as an opportunity to use their exhibit space as a built environment for truth-telling. In these spaces, harsh truths about underrepresented narratives are presented.

The Kauffman Museum saw the exhibit “meeting a need of engaging topics, and it was something that museums want... There isn't necessarily a lot out there” (R. Pannabecker, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026). As *Sorting Out Race* is a traveling exhibit, museum staff saw this as a unique opportunity to develop an exhibit

that was able to travel to other communities. In its ability to travel nationally, *Sorting Out Race* carves out its own space for truth-telling within communities.

At the Museum of Us, *Race: Power, Resistance, and Change* is a space developed for truth-telling as a healing opportunity for the communities the museum primarily serves. Based on the museum's history as an anthropological museum, the exhibit provided an opportunity to "at the very least tell the truth about history" (K. Clyde personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026). Similarly, the NMAAHC created a space for visitors to explore the "values, traditions, practices" that influence Black culture from an African American point of view (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026). In getting "people to see examples of that and understand it, and understand it as represented within the Black American community," *Cultural Expressions* establishes a basis of understanding with visitors that can be built upon previous knowledge or create new perspectives (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026).

RQ3. Interpretation Strategies

The interpretive strategies museum staff used to engage visitors are organized into three themes: community partnerships, lived experiences, and multiple frameworks of understanding.

Community Partnerships

Each participant stressed the importance of community partnership during the interpretation stage of development. Community participation varied from museum to museum, but consistently, advisory committees and community members were involved in interpretation.

Sorting Out Race was born out of a community partnership with a local thrift store. Throughout the whole process, a humanities consultant and reference council were brought in to participate in research and present at public programs. In working closely with the thrift store and consultants, the Kauffman utilized a "variety of people... trying to find a multiracial component that would be authentic and connect with the story that we were trying to tell" (R. Pannabecker, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026). Similarly,

at the Museum of Us, the Race Advisory Council “established the exhibit's core values and goals” (M. Barnadas, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026). The Council played a critical role in creating exhibit texts to reflect community identity and values.

For *Cultural Expression*, community partners participated in interpretation by donating objects that reflected the core themes established by the museum and the Scholarly Advisory Committee. The donated items helped bring the “variety and diversity” in line with what the community considers important to interpreting their story (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026).

Lived Experiences

Skin tone was connected to race and identity through the interpretive framework of lived experiences. Within this framework, lived experiences were integrated with voices from the community as complementary content to historical narratives. It’s important to note that the NMAACH and the Kauffman went further by using interactives as tools for visitors to reflect on their experience with skin color.

At the Museum of Us, skin tone was connected to race and identity by drawing on “the everyday experiences shared by community members, artists, and everyone that's involved” (M. Barnadas, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026). Using “present-day examples” that allow the exhibit to be “accessible, relational, and intended to be grounded in real life” (M. Barnadas, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026). Here, lived experiences are integrated through community voice as subtext to the exhibit content.

The NMAAHC uses media as an interpretation method. Through videos of interviews with “people who have experienced them [the exhibit themes] or are experts on these topics,” visitors hear first-hand accounts of various lived experiences (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026). In addition to the media, the exhibit invites visitors to interact with a brown paper bag. This interactive replicates the brown paper bag test that was historically used against darker-skinned African Americans to keep them out of social spaces. As a point of connection, visitors can place themselves in the

shoes of those who have faced this oppression to help contextualize the origins of colorism and the privilege of proximity to whiteness.

The Kauffman Museum integrated lived experiences throughout the entire exhibit with quotes from the community and public figures to connect skin color to race and identity. Specifically, in the racial identity section of the exhibit, visitors are challenged to think about race in terms of skin tone by presenting U.S. census data of people who have changed their racial designation. Exploring further why this phenomenon occurs by letting "other people speak with their own words" on how they view their skin tone, the quotes support the narratives displayed in this section (C. Regier, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026). This interpretation evokes visitors to question how they view skin tone and how it plays a role in identity construction (R. Pannabecker, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026). Additionally, visitors are able to further reflect on how they see skin tone influencing identity construction by voting on which method they were taught about race. Through this interactive, visitors engage with Linnaeus' and Blumenbach's 19th-century ideas about race by voting on which method of categorization they learned.

Multiple Frameworks of Understanding for Visitor Engagement

The consistent audience goal for visitor engagement was for there to be multiple frameworks of understanding for visitor engagement. Multiple frameworks allowed for visitors to interact with exhibit content through a variety of interpretation strategies, such as scholarly knowledge, community understanding, and a questioning framework. The variety of frameworks provides visitors with a variety of knowledge points to engage with.

For the Kauffman Museum, an inquisitive tone was used throughout the exhibit to encourage visitor reflection by pushing people to "think about how these little objects that you can find in any thrift store push them, and what are their meanings? How do they perpetuate racism today?" (R. Pannabecker, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2026). For visitors to ponder the intense questions posed, the quotes and historical narratives helped frame skin tone's influence on identity.

During development at the Museum of Us, knowledge from “scholars, artists, community members, and researchers” was consulted so “no single framework” or dominating voice controlled the narrative (M. Barnadas, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026). By utilizing multiple frameworks of understanding, “people could connect large historical systems to things that they recognize in their own lives” rather than as abstract concepts (M. Barnadas, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2026). Additionally, connecting the content back to the audience with these frameworks allows visitors to engage with multiple lenses of understanding different from their own.

The NMAAHC identified that using a multivocal lens to showcase Black people and culture broadens visitor perceptions. The audience goals were achieved through a diverse framework that allows for the representation of multiple perspectives on what it looks and feels like to live in Black culture. In “making sure that there was enough wide regional representation,” the exhibit provides audiences with a multiregional perspective (Dr. J. Hyppolite, personal communication, Feb. 27, 2026). In creating a singular space for regional representation to come together, the exhibit is providing a multivocal lens on the African American diaspora.

Discussion

In identifying the ways in which museum staff are using interpretive strategies to discuss colorism in exhibits about race, a general framework of interpretive strategies for successful exhibit development is possible. Identifying the factors that aided successful exhibit development provides other museums with examples of how to incorporate colorism as an aspect of racial identity, positioning museums as more effective environments for racial identity construction. Based on the results of this study, museums felt motivated by their missions and values to create a space relevant to community identity. Representing group and personal identities through exhibits that resonate with contemporary societies' lived experiences is an unavoidable challenge in the field (Morrissey & Dick, 2020). Through missions and values strongly tied to community representation and support, exhibits that spotlight intragroup aspects of community identity can successfully aid visitors in identity exploration and validation. Given that museums have the potential to heal, empower, challenge, and expand

visitors' perceptions of identity (Lei, 2024), it is clear that exhibits relevant to community identity are important for museums.

Community collaborative exhibits go beyond scholarly research (Lonetree, 2012). They are specific to community identity, and when that specificity comes directly from the community, it deepens the narrative and should be reflected in the exhibition development process. In sharing authority with community partners, these exhibits are reshaping narratives to be by rather than for. Through these partnerships and collaborations, exhibits avoid being overly scholarly and dry; instead, they are authentic to reflect how identity is constantly changing in the real world. However, a caution when collaborating with community partners, museum staff should keep in mind is that tension can arise between partners with projects designed to challenge contemporary narratives. With multiple community partners' narratives, contradictions may arise, and it's up to museum staff to navigate how to address all perspectives to reflect our diverse world.

By discussing skin tone through various cultural and historical narratives, the participants found that contextualizing with the history of racialized treatment in the U.S. allows them to situate race and multiculturalism in contemporary conversations about race and identity. This interpretation arose from the authentic lived experiences provided through community collaboration so that museum staff are able to implement multiple frameworks of understanding. By utilizing lived experiences as contemporary narratives, visitors see that colorism is not an abstract concept but rather that it is a continued influence on identity that affects modern society. Contextualizing through historical and contemporary narratives is crucial to understanding colorism as an oppression that has as long a history as racism, but with less attention (Strmic-Pawl, Goblin, Garner, 2021). In placing skin tone in a historical context, visitors can connect it to an influence on contemporary lived experiences.

Implications

Before this study, there had been little research on the interpretation strategies museums have used to engage visitors with colorism and its impact on racial identity.

Literature on the topic focuses mainly on skin color's potential to become more essential in our understanding of racial identity. Now, there is a set of successful interpretation strategies available for museums seeking to engage with colorism through exhibition. In understanding the nuances behind the interpretation of colorism in museum exhibits, museum professionals are better equipped to utilize these strategies to broaden cultural narratives, reflect real-world diversity, and make authentic connections with communities.

There is a limitation in the scope of sites selected, as they are all types of history and/or cultural museums. The study does not include a variety of museum types such as science, art, and children's museums. A suggested area of research is to examine how these interpretation strategies manifest themselves outside of history-based museums. There are many types of museums engaging with colorism, as discussed in the introduction, and it would be beneficial to further explore their interpretation strategies. In comparing and contrasting the findings of this study with future research, museum professionals across the board will benefit from a versatile set of interpretation strategies.

Based on site responses, it is evident that collaborating with community partners to accurately present their lived experiences, contextualizing content to reflect historical narratives while contributing to contemporary conversation, and developing content that is aligned with museum goals is paramount to a successful exhibit. By integrating these key elements, museum staff can develop exhibits that are authentic, long-lasting, and relevant to contemporary community identities. For exhibits that explicitly address colorism, defining, contextualizing, and providing an interactive element best integrates the topic with the rest of an exhibit.

Whether colorism is a subtheme integrated into a larger exhibit or as a standalone exhibit, it is clear that incorporating community voice in the exhibition development process and in the physical exhibit builds an environment in which visitors can feel comfortable exploring its influence on racial identity. Neither approach is better than the other. The pros of a standalone exhibit allow for specificity; however, it cannot provide a broader context. For integrated exhibits, colorism is situated within a larger context for

visitors to better contextualize its place in contemporary society, but it lacks the specificity a standalone provides. It is up to the discretion of the museum staff to decide which approach is best to fit their institution's needs.

Further research is also needed to evaluate the visitor experience post-exhibit. In further surveying the audience's feelings and perceptions, there will be a more holistic dataset to support these interpretation strategies' impacts. Data on visitor impact is also important because it can provide museum staff insight into visitor comprehension, exhibit successes/failures, and what content resonated and had the most impact with visitors. This information could build on this study's findings to add the visitor perspective in a way that is beneficial to museum staff's understanding of the impact of interpretation strategies for exhibits that discuss skin tone. While this research was small in its scope, it is contributing to a growing dialogue with the hopes of inspiring more museums to engage with colorism in their exhibits.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Script

1. Introduction (researcher's name and affiliation).
2. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today!
3. This interview will be used for my master's thesis research which seeks to explore the interpretative strategies museum staff use to interpret race at various types of museums in the United States.
4. Your participation is voluntary, and there are no consequences for choosing not to participate. You may choose to withdraw from the interview at any time.
5. Participation involves one interview, via Zoom, anticipated to take no more than one hour. In this interview, you will be asked to share your professional experience with [Exhibit Name].
6. I will be recording this interview and making a transcript of our conversation, after which the video recording will be destroyed. Only my thesis advisor and I will have access to the transcript.
7. I may use your title and name of your institution in the final paper and may pull direct quotes from this interview. You will have the opportunity to review and comment on any use of your name, title, name of your institution, or direct quotes before publication.
8. If you wish to opt out of being identified by name, title, or institutional affiliation in my thesis publication, please inform me now.
9. Do you have any questions?
10. If you have any questions following this interview, you may contact me through email or by phone at any time.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What was the motivating factor for this exhibit?
2. How does this exhibit align with the museum's mission or prior work?
3. How does the museum see this exhibit connecting to society?
4. What opportunity does the museum feel this exhibit fills?
5. What were the audience goals?
6. How did community partners participate in interpretation?
7. How was skin tone contextualized to fit this type of museum?
8. What interpretive frameworks were used to connect skin color to race and identity?
9. What reflections do you or your organization have on this exhibit?