



# COLORISM

*Skin Color Bias in the Tech Industry Hinders Diverse Participation in Computing*

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## **SINCE 2004, NCWIT HAS BEEN DEDICATED TO INCREASING THE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN COMPUTING.**

Achieving equity in the tech industry must be *intersectional*: race, class, gender, sexuality, and other key factors of identity shape experiences differently; and understanding those differences is critical to promoting diversity, inclusion, and change for women, girls, and other underrepresented groups in IT.

Over the past decade, many institutions and organizations are becoming more aware of how unconscious and overt bias leads to uneven access, recruitment, and retention of individuals in computing along race and gender lines. Building on this awareness, it is important to call attention to a lesser known, but equally challenging, form of bias that can be an added barrier for women and girls of color to achieving equity in computing: color bias or “colorism.”

# WHAT IS COLORISM?

- » Colorism is the unequal treatment and discrimination of individuals belonging to the **same** racial or ethnic minority group based upon differences in physical features.
  - » Colorism extends privilege and advantage to lighter-skinned individuals, while also working to disadvantage individuals with darker skin tones.
  - » In some cases, color bias also includes a preference for individuals of color who have more Eurocentric facial or other features (e.g., straight and wavy hair textures vs. kinky and coily natural hair).
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## **HOW IS COLOR BIAS DIFFERENT FROM RACIAL BIAS?**

While related – colorism originated as a byproduct of racism – race and color are two separate forms of bias:

- » Racism is about treating individuals differently based upon their assigned or perceived racial category. Colorism is about skin tone or complexion.
- » Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. Legally, race and color are both considered protected classes.
- » Each year, thousands of color discrimination cases are filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

## **WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH ON COLORISM SAY?**

Researchers have been investigating color bias for decades, and they have found that colorism is present in black, Latinx, Asian, and Native American communities. Overall, research supports that in many ways, being light-skinned can equate to a better quality of life compared to being dark-skinned:<sup>1</sup>

- » Skin tone influences disparities in educational attainment, socioeconomic status, income, mortality, and certain health indicators.
- » Women and girls are more impacted by their skin tone as color bias appears via standards of beauty, perceptions of intelligence, and social acceptance.
- » Members of the dominant (out)group and underrepresented (in)groups participate in color bias in both conscious and unconscious ways.

## DOES COLOR BIAS APPEAR IN COMPUTING?

There is little research on the presence of color bias in tech fields, but that doesn't mean it isn't there. Bias around gender, race, (dis)ability, and sexuality occurs in computing, as in other work, academic, and industry contexts. For this reason, it is important to expand the conversation on equity and inclusion in computing to include color bias. The appearance of color bias can manifest in many ways, including hiring, promotion, encouragement, recruitment, and retention. Any preference or favor for light skin over dark skin is color bias.

## HOW CAN THE TECH WORLD BE BETTER EQUIPPED TO UNDERSTAND AND INTERRUPT COLOR BIAS?

- » Recognize that color bias can be a factor (in addition to race, gender, and other biases) in the advancement of women and girls of color in computing – *even if you or others are unfamiliar with the idea of colorism.*
- » Educate organizations on how individuals perpetuate unconscious color bias, and provide a variety of tools and resources for employees to learn how to interrupt color bias in K-12, higher education, non-profit, and industry settings.
- » Stay committed to fostering equity and promoting organizational change.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the history of colorism among communities of color in the United States, please refer to Wilder, JeffriAnne. (2017). "Colorism and Favoritism: An Examination of Skin Tone Bias and Discrimination in the United States." *Race in America: How a Pseudo-Scientific Concept Shaped Human Interaction*, p. 397-419 Patricia Reid-Merritt, Editor, Praeger Publishers.



## **ABOUT NCWIT**

The National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT) is a non-profit community of more than 1,100 universities, companies, non-profits, and government organizations nationwide working to increase girls' and women's meaningful participation in computing. NCWIT equips change leaders with resources for taking action in recruiting, retaining, and advancing women from K-12 and higher education through industry and entrepreneurial careers. Find out more at [www.ncwit.org](http://www.ncwit.org).

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