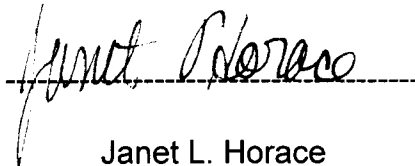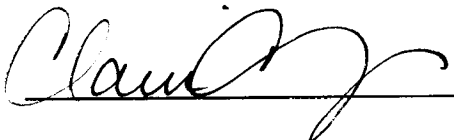# THE EFFECTS OF LIGHT AND DARK SKIN TONES ON HIRING

# PREFERENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CANDIDATES

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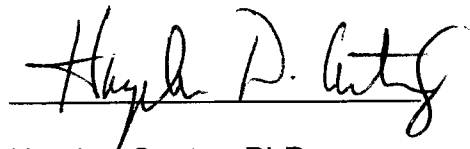
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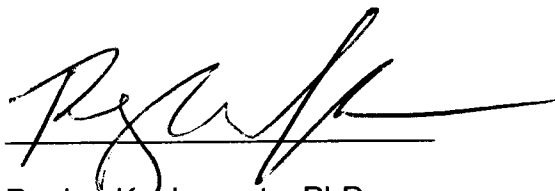
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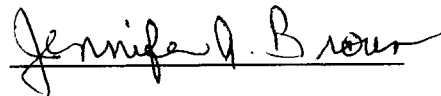
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# THE EFFECTS OF LIGHT AND DARK SKIN TONES ON HIRING

# PREFERENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CANDIDATES

Janet L. Horace

A Thesis

Submitted to

The Graduate Faculty of

Auburn University Montgomery

In Partial Fulfillment of the

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Degree of

Master of Science

Montgomery, Alabama

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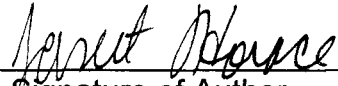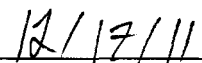
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## Abstract

The perceptions and impressions that we instantly form about others are useful in cognitive processes but can often be unfairly biased or simply incorrect. One specific area research has shown to play an important role within prejudice and stereotyping is that of skin tone. For instance, research has shown that darker skin tones among African American individuals can be perceived as "more" African American than lighter skin tones and are more likely to experience discrimination (Stepanova & Strube, 2009). Previous research has laid the groundwork for measuring different elements of the current study, such as hiring biases, skin tone biases, and even certain combinations of these factors. However, research has failed to study the effect that intragroup racism can have on hiring biases as well as the differences with these biases in terms of skin tones among African American job candidates. In an attempt to further this subject of research, this study investigated the impact that prejudicial attitudes towards African Americans of different shades of skin tone (i.e., light vs. dark) have upon discriminatory hiring practices. Previous research has shown that African Americans and other ethnic groups are discriminated against over other potential candidates, but this study proved that there is also a within-group preference based on skin tone. As predicted it was found that African American candidates with a lighter skin tones were preferred over candidates with darker skin tones.

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I would like to take the time to acknowledge all of my family, friends, and professors for all of their help, prayers, love, and encouragement throughout this journey. I greatly appreciate each and every one of you more than you know. I would like to specifically thank my advisor Dr. Clarissa Arms-Chavez for all of her help, encouragement, and countless e-mails when I was ready to pull my hair out and for nudging me back me on track when I had things upside down and backwards. I finally see that "light at the end of the tunnel" you were always talking bout! To my grad school friends, thanks for all of the great memories, study sessions with late night trips to Walgreens for candy, texts complaining about working on our theses or asking how much each other had gotten done, and for making me feel superior by comparison when/if I got more done than you. To my family, I owe each of you my first check after I get a "real" job. I hope you all are good at sharing and bad at math! Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my boyfriend James Grady Jr. for all of his love and encouragement. Thank you for telling me I could do it when I didn't think I could, listening to me ramble on and complain about things when you had no idea what I was talking about, calming me down when I freaked out about projects, deadlines, and presentations, for rubbing my feet when they hurt after hours of driving back and forth from Birmingham to Montgomery for class, and for making me laugh and take breaks from "thesing". I love you very much and couldn't have done it without you!

# Table of Contents

## Review of Literature

The impact of people's perceptions and impressions of others has been widely studied throughout the years. The perceptions and impressions that we instantly form about others are useful in cognitive processes but can often be unfairly biased or simply incorrect. One specific area research has shown to play an important role within prejudice and stereotyping is that of skin tone. For instance, research has shown that darker skin tones among African American individuals can be perceived as "more" African American than lighter skin tones and are more likely to experience discrimination (Stepanova & Strube, 2009). While past research has looked at this topic of skin tone within social perception as it applies between different races, there has not been much work on the impact that this bias can have within the African American community itself. Previous research has also explored the effect that race, prejudice, and stereotypes have on hiring practices, and has found that much of the discrimination observed revolved around the interviewers own thoughts, beliefs, and practices (Marshall, Stamps, & Moore, 1998). However, research has failed to study the effect that within-group racism can have on hiring biases as well as the differences within these biases in terms of skin tones among African American job candidates. Previous research has laid the groundwork for measuring different elements of the current study, such as hiring biases, skin tone biases, and even certain combinations of these factors. However, previous research also leads one to question whether lighter or darker skin tones have an effect on hiring practices of African Americans? In an attempt to answer this question, the current study investigated the impact that prejudicial attitudes towards African Americans of

different shades of skin tone (i.e., light vs. dark) had upon discriminatory hiring preferences.

**Intragroup Racism & Skin Tone**

There are a number of things that can be examined as the basis of discrimination, such as social economic class or physical features. Within the African American community however, one major theme that is important is that of skin tone (Atkinson, Brown, Parham, Matthews, et al., 1996; Swami, Furnham, & Joshi, 2008; Keith, Lincoln, Taylor, & Jackson, 2010). African Americans are made up of individuals with skin tones light enough to be mistaken for Caucasian, to very dark and almost black, and every shade in between. In the African American culture, it has been established that those with lighter skin tones and more "Caucasian features" are seen as more favorable than those who are darker (Glenn, 2008). This is an example of a form of intragroup racism, or more simply the racial discrimination within one's own racial group as opposed to intergroup racism which is seen between two or more different racial groups. In this case, African Americans with lighter skin tones are seen as having less of the prominent African American features that are shunned such as wider noses, and more prominent brows, and more of the Caucasian features such as thinner lips and more slender noses, which are preferred. This being said, many African Americans who have darker skin tones are often discriminated against (Glenn, 2008). Because of this discrimination, those with darker skin tones may engage in actions such as avoiding the sun as much as possible to prevent their skin from darkening or even trying to use chemicals to change the color of their skin. This can be seen in Africa and America even today, where there are hundreds of "skin bleaching creams" on the market that are designed to lighten one's skin tone

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(Charles 2003, Hall, 1995 & 2006). These creams are dangerous and even illegal in some cases, but individuals continue to use them despite the serious risk of health problems from product ingredients such as mercury, corticosteroids, or high doses of hydroquinone (Glenn, 2008).

It would seem that individuals who use products meant to lighten skin tone are willing to do anything to get the lighter skin tone that they desire and that has been established as being "good" in African American society. Darker skin toned African Americans in Western societies are often seen as inferior and may be ridiculed and teased by their peers, as well as within their own families (Keith, et al., 2010). This discrimination of darker skin tones is due in part to the assumption of the social status of darker skin toned African Americans as being poor and having to spend more time working outside, which would darken their skin tone. This is in contrast to lighter skin toned African Americans who were seen as wealthier because they could afford to spend more time indoors away from the sun (Glenn, 2008). Therefore, having lighter skin is often seen as an outward indication of wealth and social status, even if this may not actually be the case.

On the other hand, those who openly engage in skin bleaching can often be criticized for doing so, and it can be seen as a form of "self hate" (Charles, 2003). The use of skin bleaching creams has often been thought to originate from low or a lack of self esteem (Glenn, 2008). Just as others may struggle with body issues due to their weight or appearance, those with darker skin tones also suffer from psychological stresses due to the color of their skin. This stress may cause them to want to change their skin tone. By changing their skin tone, however, they may also encounter an identity

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crisis because they are changing the one thing that most identifies them as African

American. In a way, many African Americans are seen as "rejecting their Blackness" by

using skin lighteners (Charles, p.723, 2003). Because of this paradox, it seems only

natural that a person using the skin bleaching creams would not readily reveal this

information because of the shame associated with admitting its use. The use of skin

bleaching creams is not only a problem in the lower classes of society, but throughout the

social ranks. One would think that individuals who are in a higher social status, many of

which are successful and have more educational backgrounds would not feel the same

amount of pressure based on their skin tone that those in lower social status do, but this is

not the case. In fact, in Africa it has also been shown that more modern and socially

conscious African American women, many of which have technical degrees, university

diplomas, and well-paid jobs, are one of the fastest growing populations to use skin

lighteners (Glenn, 2008). This is in part due to the fact that these women are able to

afford to go to doctors to get prescriptions for more effective skin bleaching creams, or

are able to pay for more expensive imported creams instead of using weaker, locally

made ones (Glenn, 2008). However, having a higher education background is not enough

to reduce the psychological stresses and shame associated with using skin bleaching

creams, or stop one from using them in the first place. In addition, since these women are

more able to afford it, they are able to use more powerful bleaching creams that promise

greater results, but may contain more harmful chemicals.

In addition to the psychological stress associated with skin bleaching, research

indicates that African American women are particularly vulnerable to discrimination

based on their skin tone which also threatens their mental health and can, at times, lead to

depressive symptoms (Keith, et al., 2010). One theory explaining why these women are so susceptible to discrimination is the perceived connection between skin tone and attractiveness (Glenn, 2008). Most women aspire to mimic the standard of beauty within their culture, and the beauty standard within Western culture tends to label lighter women as more attractive. Not being able to attain this standard of beauty due to a dark skin tone may cause severe effects on one's mental health, which supports the desperation experienced by darker skin toned individuals who use skin lighteners (Hall, 1995). This skin lightening provides a way to change their perceived status as an "outsider" of the mainstream standard of beauty and gain access to the group that is the accepted norm of beauty (Hall, 2006). Since there is also a stigma associated with having darker skin, others will make negative assumptions based on this and will treat the individual accordingly. As discussed earlier, there is a stereotype associated with lighter skin tones as being signs of wealth and status (Glenn, 2008). Even if one has the wealth and other criteria necessary in order to become a member of a higher status, having a darker skin tone will still cause those unaware of the individual's criteria to treat them as the lower class citizen they believe them to be (Glenn, 2008). In short, having money, wealth, and power does little to overcome the schemas of others if the individual does not fit their preconceived notion of what a high status member should be (e. g. lighter skin toned).

While intragroup racism does exist, between group racism and discrimination is usually more apparent as we tend to shun those who are not a part of our social group, whether that group consists simply of race or our core beliefs and norms. For example, it has been shown that individuals prefer to work and interact with others who share similar qualities, beliefs, and even appearances (García, Posthuma, & Colella, 2008). This may

cause individuals to feel as though they have more in common with someone of their own race because they are seen as "like them". Any inconsistencies with their own beliefs and qualities and those of their perceived "mate" are therefore seen as more pronounced than with others who are different from them. With this in mind, it might follow that African Americans would be harsher and perpetuate more prejudice about people in their own race as opposed to individuals of another race. For instance, research has shown that people often make stereotypical errors for individuals in their same race group versus a different race group when talking about skin tone and perceived beliefs (Maddox & Chase, 2004). In this study, the researchers investigated how skin tones influence first impression formations using simulated discussions and photos of digitally lightened or darkened skin tones of African American as well as Caucasian subjects. Results showed that small differences in skin tone with African Americans were more pronounced when participants chose only between African American subjects with almost identical facial features. This means that the slight lightening or darkening of the skin tone of the same face was seen as more of a drastic change versus faces with different facial features but similar skin tones. This effect was more apparent when the participants were also African American themselves (Maddox & Chase, 2004). That being said, it would stand to reason that in the current study, participants would be more critical of the African American candidates that have a darker skin tone as opposed to those who have a lighter skin tone.

As discussed earlier, research has found that African Americans with lighter skin and more "Caucasian features" are preferred over African Americans with darker skin (Glenn, 2008). Recent research has also found that darker skin tones are rated as being "more" African American than lighter skin tones, especially when shown to the

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participant in color (Stepanova & Strube, 2009). Within this experiment, participants

preformed a rating task, an attractiveness rating task, and a racial categorization task.

Half of the participants completed the experiment with faces in the gray-scale mode

while the other half saw faces in the color model. The results showed that dark skin toned

faces, even those who had "Caucasian features" were perceived as being African

American significantly more times than not, and that this was especially true when the

photos were shown in color (Stepanova & Strube, 2009). This shows that something as

simple as color presentation may play a role in our resulting prejudices and stereotypes

associated with race. This is also the reason that participants in the current study saw

photos of potential candidates in color, because differences in skin tone would be more

apparent.

Racism and biases between the races is well known and documented in research.

It is also important to realize that not only are members of different races subject to

prejudice because of the color of their skin, but the harshest criticisms often come from

members of their own race. This skin tone prejudice can affect many areas of their life

including what social groups they belong to, who they are involved with romantically or

even what kinds of jobs they will be hired for.

**Hiring Discrimination**

In addition to investigating the impact of skin tone on social perception, the

current study also employed a job interview as the model for measuring explicit racism

and discrimination. Specifically, participants were asked to pretend that the resumes that

they see are potential applicants for a job and that they are in charge of choosing who to

hire. That being said, the participants were given information on the candidates to use

while making their decisions. This information included the candidate's name, resume and photo. Since the applicant's resumes contained similar information, participants had to rely on physical characteristics to separate hirable candidates. Recent research has shown that a bias is present towards certain job applicants based on their attractiveness, appearance, and similarity to the job interviewer (García, Posthuma, & Colella, 2008). In this study, participants filled out surveys about their perceived similarity to the job candidate before and after the actual job interview, in which they were the interviewer. Results showed that the interviewers' perceived similarity affected how well the candidates were rated as a fit for the job and also their performance expectations. Thus, interviewers look for applicants that they believe will get along with other employees on a given job and will complete tasks at the expected level of performance. The present bias shows that the interviewer will tend to select applicants that are similar to them or to the employees who are currently working at a particular job. Moreover, this may cause the interviewer to discriminate against applicants who do not fit this standard, even if their credentials show that they would be acceptable (García, et al., 2008).

Moreover, differences can be seen within hiring practices between different races. These differences may be due to biases or prejudices already held by the interviewer or simply the impression given off by the candidate in the interview. In a structured interview, a list of preselected questions are asked by the interviewer to every candidate in the same order each time. On the other hand, with an interview panel questions can be different for each candidate and multiple interviewers will pose these questions to the candidate. It has been found that the strength of the same race effect can be influenced by these different interview styles (Lin, Dobbins, & Farh, 1992). For instance, when using a

structured interview, the results showed that in situations where the interviewer and candidate were similar in race that there was a preference towards these candidates. In contrast, candidates of a different race were discriminated against. Using a mixed race interview panel has been one suggested way to inhibit this kind of discrimination (Lin, et al., 1992). By doing so, the chance of blatant discrimination could be decreased because the employment decision would be influenced by multiple parties instead of just one.

While interviewers do not always hire their candidates based on this racial bias, when minority candidates are selected to continue on in the hiring process their race may play a role in how far they advance. For instance, recent research found that there were differences between minority candidate's actual and remembered performance (Frazer, & Wiersma, 2001). In this study candidates were screened and hired equally but when interviewers were later asked to remember minority candidate's answers and performance in the interview that they were reported as operating more poorly than they actually preformed. They were also rated as performing significantly worse than Caucasian candidates (Frazer, & Wiersma, 2001). In this study participants participated in a scripted interview process where positive or negative responses were given for each interview question. At the end of the study, participants were asked to return after a week for a second part of the study where they were asked to recall and record the applicants' responses to each of the 34 questions that had been asked previously. The results showed that participants made more errors recalling the correct responses of minority candidates than those of Caucasian candidates. In particular, it was found that while African American candidates were chosen as hireable candidates in the first part of the interview, they were consistently reported as responding more negatively than actually reported, and

also were rated significantly worse than Caucasian candidates in the second part of the interview. This shows that the participants may have had some negative biases against the African American candidates that they did not show during the first part of the interview, but which were apparent later in the second part of the interview. One reason for the difference between candidates reported performances may be that African Americans often carry the stereotype of performing poorer than Caucasian individuals, and participants relied on this faulty schema to guide how they recalled the African American candidate's performance in the interview. Since African American candidates were judged as poor performers, it would stand to reason that darker skin toned African Americans may also be judged more harshly than lighter candidates because darker skin toned African Americans are seen as possessing more of these negative attributes.

Research also indicates that preinterview impressions are formed by evaluators based on their own beliefs, attitudes, and opinions and that these results varied by the evaluator's own race (Marshall, Stamps, & Moore, 1998). In this study, participants read a scenario in which they were asked to provide their preinterview judgments about two finalist candidates for a particular job, using the applicant's photo as well as background information about them. The information about each candidate was similar with the photo being the main difference between the two. The results showed that the participant's own race was a major deciding factor in the race of the candidate that they selected for the job. Race is not the only factor when deciding between similar candidates. There are also preferential biases within races for factors such as skin tone. Research has found that there is a difference among African American candidates based on their skin color with lighter skin tones being preferred (Harrison & Thomas, 2009), and that this plays a major

role in the chances of an applicant getting hired for a particular position. In this study, participants were shown pictures of potential job applicants as well as resumes with and without pictures on them and were asked to rate the applicant's competency, and perceived skill based on the content of the resumes or simply to rate the applicants skin tone using the photo. The results show that there was a skin tone preference for lighter skin toned African Americans as opposed to darker skin toned African Americans. This shows that not only is race relevant to a candidate's chance of getting selected for a particular job, but skin tone plays as role as well. In some cases, it was seen to be more important than an applicant's educational background and prior work experience (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). For example, it was found that darker skin toned African American candidates with more education, and prior work experience on their resume along with a higher perceived competence were still not recommended as highly as lighter skin toned African American candidates with less education, work experience and lower perceived competence. A reason for this may be that lighter skin toned African Americans are seen as having more in common with Caucasians than darker skin toned African Americans and therefore are chosen more often because Caucasians are often more comfortable working around them (Harrison & Thomas, 2009).

The above research has relied mainly on self-reported measures of explicit racism and discrimination, this however, poses a problem as participants will often change their answers and opinions in order to reflect a more positive attitude than they actually believe or to support the information that they believe the researcher is looking for. This is an example of the social desirability bias. This is important to the current study because information gathered from the participants that has been effected by the social desirability

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bias could lead to inaccurate results that are not as generalizable to the greater population as originally intended. In order to avoid this, in the current study explicit measures along with implicit measures were taken in order to measure the participant's outward or self reported biases as well as the underlying or unconscious biases of the participant. By combining an explicit as well as an implicit measure, it was expected that the results of the self reported measures would be able to correlate with the results of the implicit data to determine if there is any significant differences between the two. This may be important in determining if the participant's explicit responses were in fact altered because of a social desirability bias.

**Explicit Vs. Implicit Measures**

In the current study, an implicit measure was also used in order to measure participant's unconscious racism and discrimination in addition to explicit racism. As previously stated, this is important as participant's explicit or self reported measures can be skewed by their desire to have their responses reflect more positively upon them (i.e. social desirability bias). In order to examine this, adding an implicit measure allowed more control over the participant's responses by limiting the time that they have to respond to the tasks and therefore causing them to rely mostly on their own schemas to answer quickly (Kunda, Davis, Adams, & Spenncer, 2002). Since these schemas are often based on their previous encounters with similar subjects, this type of data will provide a more accurate portrayal of prejudices that they may have and also may not even be aware of (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). For instance, previous research has found that using explicit and implicit tests along with hiring discrimination factors can be useful when looking at prejudices and stereotypes of a specific racial group (Derous, Nguyen, &

Ryan, 2009). This study looked at the effect that skin tone has on hiring practices and discrimination against Arab candidates by using job suitability, social desirability, explicit prejudice, and implicit prejudice as measures. In the first part of the study, participants were asked to sort resumes of potential candidates in order of hireability and fill out a personality inventory. In the second part of the study, participants were asked to complete an implicit association task (IAT) that measured their implicit attitudes towards Arabs and then respond to a questionnaire seven days later that measured explicit prejudice and social desirability (Derous, et al., 2009). The results of the explicit test showed that job suitability ratings for resumes of Arab applicants were significantly lower than those of Caucasian applicants. This shows that candidates who were thought to be Arab from the content of their resumes were discriminated against and rated more negatively than Caucasian applicants. The IAT found that implicit racism only had an effect of improving Arab candidate's job suitability when implicit racism was low. This is important as it shows that explicit and implicit responses tend to correlate between the measures. This means that responses given on the measures from participants are more likely to be accurate to the beliefs, biases and stereotypes that they already hold. Also, the research shows that an effect that improved the Arab candidate's job suitability was only found when implicit or unconscious racism was low. Given the information in the previous study, it was predicted that there would not be a significant positive effect in regards to the African American candidates and that any participants who did show this effect may have had low racist attitudes to begin with. Contrary to the findings in this previous study however, it was predicted that participants would have slightly higher prejudice and racist biases on the implicit test than the explicit test. This was in part due

to the effect that the social desirability bias had on the participant's responses on the explicit measure.

The current study seeks to expand on this idea of biases pertaining to hiring practices of minority candidates, but instead will look at African American candidates and skin tone differences as opposed to the skin tone differences with Arab candidates. To accurately measure the reactions of the participants in the current study to the different stimuli presented, both an explicit and implicit measure was employed. It is important to have both an explicit and implicit measure because each test measures different reactions. Having an explicit test measured a participant's self reported or directly racist attitudes, while the implicit test measured spontaneous or unconscious responses with primed words (Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997). The explicit measures in the current study measured the participant's outwardly racist attitudes and prejudices by using the hiring questionnaire and candidate resumes to measure how participants rank each candidate in terms of hireability and job suitability. It has been shown that individuals who score higher in racist attitudes on implicit tests such as the IAT will also report more racist attitudes on self-reported explicit measures (McConnell, & Leibold, 2001). This may be because the IAT often relies on schemas and stereotypes in order to make fast judgments and having faster reactions on this type of test indicates strong associations to the stimuli. If there is a strong association found for African Americans and negative words, for example, it would stand to reason that an explicit test would yield similar findings because this association has been enforced as being an automatic one. Having both an implicit and explicit measure in the current study allowed us to measure participants who explicitly rated themselves as having prejudices,

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as well as those who had these prejudices implicitly but did not admit it (Greenwald, & Banaji, 1995). In short, each test was able to measure different cues that show the existence of prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination within the participant, within variable amounts of awareness of these factors from the participant.

Within the current study however, the Lexical Decision Task (LDT) acted as the implicit measure, and also ensured that the participant answers are not subjected to any social desirability bias that the participants may have encountered since the reactions happened too quickly for the responses to be effected by this bias. During the LDT, participants rely more on automatic reactions and schemas to guide them as opposed to the explicit questionnaire which gives them tangible information to process and rank, such as the content of the applicant's resume. This will invoke their use of controlled processing, which is consciously thought about and processed as opposed to automatic processing which is quick and based mostly on stereotypes and schemas (Dovidio, et al., 1997).

It has been found that the photo stimuli and following word used within the LDT caused participants to have a faster reaction time if the photo and word share an association or a slower reaction time if they do not (Kunda, et al., 2002). In the current study, an LDT was employed which showed participants photos of candidates followed by word stimuli. Participants will then be asked to respond as to whether the stimulus following the picture was a word or nonword and after the participant's response a trial would begin. Given the research done by Kunda, et al. (2002), it was assumed that within the current study, participants reacted faster to stimuli that has a stronger association, such as outgroup members paired with negative words or ingroup members paired with

positive words. For example, a participant would be more likely to react faster to a photo they consider attractive that is paired with a positive word as opposed to a photo they consider unattractive.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, there are many factors that make up the biases that are often seen in job interview situations. The current study planned to show that not only do these differences exist across races, but also within races. It was believed that not only were African Americans discriminated against over other potential candidates, but certain skin tones of African Americans were preferred over others. This further proved that when it comes to job interviews, many of the deciding factors of whether a candidate will be hired are not listed on their resume, but are given off in physical cues that they may not be aware of and can not change.

**Overview & Hypotheses**

The first part of the current study consisted of participants viewing 8 resumes of potential candidates along with the candidate's photo. The participants were told that this was a candidate ranking task and that they were to pretend that they are in charge of hiring a new employee. First, participants were asked to rate each candidate in terms of hireability. The participants also used the resumes to rank all 8 candidates from "most likely to hire" to "least likely to hire". The second part of the study consisted of an implicit measure, the Lexical Decision Task (LDT). Within the LDT, 12 never before seen photos of novel African American candidates with either dark or light skin tone were used, followed by a positive (e.g., love), negative (e.g., hate), or nonword (e.g.,

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trary). Participants were asked to accurately identify whether the letter strings following the pictures are a words or nonwords.

Within the current study, the hypotheses for the explicit tasks were as follows:

- Within the candidate rating task, participants will rate candidates with a lighter skin tone higher in terms of hireability than candidates with a darker skin tone.

- Within the candidate ranking task, participants will prefer to hire candidates with a lighter skin tone as opposed to candidates with a darker skin tone for the proposed job.

- Within both the candidate rating and ranking tasks African American participants will rate darker skin toned candidates lower in terms of hireability and job suitability versus lighter skin toned candidates overall when compared to the Caucasian participants.

- Within both the candidate rating and ranking tasks African American participants that rate themselves as being darker skin toned will rate lighter skin toned candidates higher in terms of hireability and job suitability versus darker skin toned candidates overall when compared to African American participants that rate themselves as being lighter skin toned.

The hypotheses for the implicit task are as follows:

- Response times on the LDT from African American participants who rate themselves as darker skin toned will respond faster to a negative word

when associated with a darker skin toned candidate when compared to African American participants who rate themselves as lighter skin toned.

- Response times on the LDT from African American participants who rate themselves as darker skin toned will respond faster to a positive word when associated with a lighter skin toned candidate when compared to African American participants who rate themselves as lighter skin toned.

- Response times on the LDT from Caucasian participants and other races will be slower overall than those from African American participants.

- Participants will respond faster to darker skin toned candidates when associated with negative words when compared to darker skin toned candidates associated with positive words.

- Participants will respond faster to lighter skin toned candidates when associated with positive words when compared to lighter skin toned candidates associated with negative words.

- Participants will respond faster to darker skin toned candidates when associated with negative words when compared to lighter skin toned candidates associated with positive words.

- Correlations between the explicit and implicit tasks of the study are also predicted:

  o A negative correlation between reaction times to darker skin toned candidates associated with negative words and lower scores on the candidate rating scale which translates to an unwillingness of

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hiring darker skin toned candidates over lighter skin toned candidates.

- A positive correlation between reaction times to lighter skin toned candidates associated with negative words and higher scores on the candidate rating scale which translates to a preference of hiring lighter skin toned candidates over darker skin toned candidates.

o A negative correlation between reaction times to darker skin toned candidates associated with negative words and lower scores on the candidate ranking scale which translates to an unwillingness of hiring darker skin toned candidates for the proposed job over lighter skin toned candidates.

- A positive correlation between reaction times to lighter skin toned candidates associated with negative words and higher scores on the candidate ranking scale which translates to a preference of lighter skin toned candidates for the proposed job over darker skin toned candidates.

## METHOD

**Participants**

Participant data was considered viable only if the participants had no previous personal interaction with the candidates portrayed within the experimental sessions and had correctly completed all experimental measures. Ninety-two ($N$= 92) undergraduate

introductory psychology students (61 females and 31 males) completed the experiment in return for partial course credit. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 46 ($M = 22.26$, $Mdn = 20$, $Mode = 18$, $SD = 5.09$). The majority of the sample consisted of African American ($n = 39$) and European American ($n = 49$) participants with the rest of the sample consisting of Asian American ($n = 3$) and other ($n = 1$) participants. A portion of participants rated themselves as having a dark skin tone ($n = 32$), while the other rated themselves as having a light skin tone ($n = 60$). A majority of the participants reported never previously having a paying job in the past ($n = 78$) and lacking any experience hiring others for jobs ($n = 73$). A number of the participants reported being currently employed ($n = 57$) while others reported being unemployed ($n = 34$). Only 1 participant failed to answer the previous 3 questions. Finally, total time in the work force ranged from less than 1 year ($n = 20$), to more than 16 years ($n = 5$).

**Materials**

**Photo Stimuli.** Materials included 10 African American male and 10 African American female frontal head and neck stimulus color photos with 75 dpi. These also included 10 lighter skin toned African Americans and 10 darker skin toned African Americans evenly distributed across gender. The photos were pilot-tested to ensure that they are perceived by a general public as either light or darker skin toned and are of average attractiveness. Each stimulus photo was approximately 7cm high (subtending 6.47 degrees of visual angel) and 6cm wide (subtending 5.55 degrees of visual angel). All of the individuals in the stimulus photos were be from the same approximate age group (18-25) and did not have any major distinguishing features (e.g. glasses, facial hair). Only photos of African Americans were used within the current study in order to better control

for ethnicity effects. By using only African American photos in the current study, it was predicted to ensure that all of the candidates would be comparable and were not chosen by the participants because of extraneous factors.

**Word Stimuli.** Materials also included 12 positive (e.g., happy, fun), 12 negative (e.g., angry, sad), and 24 nonwords (e.g., folut, losri).

**Questionnaires.** Two questionnaires were administered in the current study: a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A), and a target familiarity questionnaire (see Appendix B). The demographic questionnaire consisted of the participant's age, gender, hair color, eye color, skin tone, hair length and race. The target familiarity questionnaire given at the end of the experiment asked if the participant knew any of the candidates prior to the experiment. If the participant selects "yes" on this section, they were required to respond with which portion of the study the known candidate was seen (resumes or memory task). Their data was then removed from the study before analyzing the results.

**Tasks.** There were two tasks administered within the current study, a hireability scale (see Appendix C) and a candidate ranking task (see Appendix D). The hireability scale consisted of a likert-type scale of 1 to 7 with 1 being "not at all likely to hire" and 7 being "very likely to hire" for each candidate. The hireability scale and candidate ranking task was completed using the candidate's picture along with their resume (see Appendix E).

For the candidate ranking task, the participant was asked to rank each of the 8 resumes previously seen on the hireability scale in order from 1 to 8 with 1 being the candidate overall that they are "most likely to hire" and 8 being the candidate overall that they are "least likely to hire".

**Implicit testing materials.** The LDT was programmed and administered through SuperLab 4.0 software (Cedrus Corporation, 2007). This LDT was completed by participants twice in a randomized order so that no two participants will see the candidates in the same order.

## Procedure

The experiment took place in room 212-C of Goodwyn hall and room 402 of the Library Tower. Participants were told that the experiment concerns job interviews and hiring practices. They were instructed to pretend that they were in charge of hiring for a bank teller position at a local bank and they were viewing resumes and photos of possible job candidates for the position. After filling out an informed consent form and a basic demographics form online or on a printout of this same information, participants moved to the first part of the current study which consisted of a hireability scale and a candidate ranking task.

**Hireability scale.** Participants were given printed resumes of 8 different candidates. Each resume consisted of a candidate's name, a photo of the candidate, an address, an e-mail address, job experience, and educational background. The addresses consisted of a random 3 digit number (from random.org) and one of the following street names: Mountain Blvd., Canal Blvd, 16<sup>th</sup> St., West St., Hampton Ave., 9th Ave., Magnolia Lane, and Overton Lane. All cities were Montgomery, AL with a random Montgomery area zip code. The email consisted of the first initial of the candidate's name, a period and the last name @gmail.com, @hotmail.com, @yahoo.com, @aol.com, and @gmx.com (Ex. John Doe = J.Doe@gmail.com). The job experience consisted of two previous jobs, with one being bank related (Ex. Regions, Wachovia, Wells Fargo)

and the other non-bank related (Ex. Walmart, McDonalds, and Best Buy). The candidate

had 1-4 years of experience at each previous job. The educational background consisted

of a bachelor's degree in business, finance, economics or business administration from a

preselected list of schools from across the U.S. The candidates within the resumes

consisted of 4 lighter skin toned African American candidates as well as 4 darker skin

toned African American candidates. Two of each of these sets of candidates were male

and the other two were female. The participants were asked to rate each of the candidates

based on their hireability on a 7 point likert-type scale, with 1 being "not at all likely to

hire" and 7 being "very likely to hire". The participants were also asked to provide a

short statement explaining why they gave the candidate a particular score. The

participant's responses were entered into the computer on the "Candidate Hireability

Scale" form (see Appendix C) or a printout of this same information. The picture of the

candidate and the candidate's resume was the only information given to the participants

in order to accomplish this task.

      **Candidate ranking task.** After finishing the hireability scale, participants were

asked to rank the candidates via the resumes they previously saw on a scale from 1 to 8

with 1 being "most likely to hire" and 8 being "least likely to hire". Participant's answers

were entered on the computer on the "Candidate Ranking" form (see Appendix D) or a

printout of this same information.

      **Lexical decision task (LDT).** In the second part of the current study an LDT was

employed. Before the experimental trials, participants completed 10-12 practice trials in

order for them to become accustomed to the controls of the test. The practice trials

consisted of pictures of neutral stimuli (i.e., a banana and an apple) along with neutral

words (i.e., banana, apple, grape, and pear) or nonwords. They were then asked to accurately indicate whether the letter string is a word or nonword, in the same manner that the experimental trials will follow.

The photos used within the experimental trials consisted of 12 African Americans that had not been previously seen by the participants. The photos consisted of 6 lighter skin toned and 6 darker skin toned African American candidates, each with 3 males and 3 females. The participants were shown a fixation screen for 500ms, a photo was then shown for 400ms, followed by a blank screen for 50ms and finally a positive, negative, or nonword written in black on the center of the computer screen on a white background for 1500ms. Participants were asked to respond to whether the letter string following the picture was a word or nonword by pressing the correct button on the keypad connected to the computer. The letter string remained on the screen until the participant responded or the 1500ms time limit has passed. The participant began the process again with different photos and word stimuli after being shown a fixation screen for another 500ms. After completing this task once, the LDT ran again in a randomized order. Once the LDT is completed twice, the participants completed the target familiarity questionnaire. After completing this questionnaire and submitting their responses, the participants were debriefed before leaving.

## RESULTS

### Explicit Measures

**Hireability Rating Task.** The data was first analyzed within a 2 (Target Skin Tone: light vs. dark) X 2 (Participant Ethnicity: African American vs. Caucasian) X 2

(Participant Skin Tone: light vs. dark) mixed model ANOVA with the hireability rating serving as the dependent variable. The hireability ratings refers to the score given to each target based on how likely the participant feels they would be to hire that particular candidate on a scale of 1 (Very likely to hire) to 8 (Not at all likely to hire). As predicted, this analysis produced a significant main effect for target skin tone where participants rated candidates with lighter skin tones ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.4$) significantly higher than candidates with darker skin tones ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.3$; $F(1, 93) = 6.11$, $p = .015$). Thus participants were reported as being more willing to hire candidates with lighter skin tones verses candidates with darker skin tones. Further analysis did not produce any significant Participant Ethnicity X Participant Skin Tone interactions.

**Hireability Ranking Task.** The data was then analyzed within a 2 (Target Skin Tone: light vs. dark) X 2 (Participant Ethnicity: African American vs. Caucasian) X 2 (Participant Skin Tone: light vs. dark) mixed model ANOVA with job suitability as the dependent variable. As predicted, this analysis also produced a significant main effect for target skin tone where participants that ranked candidates with lighter skin tones ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.02$) significantly higher than candidates with darker skin tones ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.04$; $F(1, 93) = 6.37$, $p = .013$). Thus, participants were reported as selecting candidates with lighter skin tones as being preferred for the proposed job overall versus candidates with darker skin tones. Further analysis did not produce any significant interactions with Participant Ethnicity or Participant Skin Tone.

**Implicit Measure**

Consistent with previous research (Zárate, Sanders, & Garza, 2000; Zárate, Stoever, MacLin, & Arms-Chavez, 2008), only correct response times (RTs) between

200 ms and 1500 ms were analyzed. RTs below 200 ms are considered too fast for participants to have correctly completed the task and RTs above 1,500 ms are considered too slow to provide a valid assessment of processing speed. Aggregate means were normally distributed. The implicit data were first analyzed within a 2 (Target Skin Tone: light vs. dark) X 2 (Word Type: positive vs. negative) X 2 (Participant Ethnicity: African American vs. Caucasian) X 2 (Participant Skin Tone: light vs. dark) mixed model ANOVA with RTs serving as the dependent variable. While this analysis produced significant effects for the within subjects variables, it failed to produce any significant results for the between subject variables of Participant Ethnicity or Participant Skin Tone.

Thus, as the main research hypothesis did not revolve around the between-subjects variables of Participant Ethnicity or Participant Skin Tone, the implicit data were further analyzed within a 2 (Target Skin Tone: light vs. dark) X 2 (Word Type: positive vs. negative) repeated measures model ANOVA with RTs serving as the dependent variable. This analysis produced a significant main effect for word type where participants responded to positive words ($M = 569$, $SD = 66$) significantly faster than to negative words ($M = 593$, $SD = 70$; $F(1, 91) = 52.38$, $p < .0001$). This analysis also revealed a significant main effect for target skin tone where participants responded to candidates with lighter skin tones ($M = 576$, $SD = 67$) significantly faster than to candidates with darker skin tones ($M = 586$, $SD = 69$; $F(1, 91) = 6.07$, $p = .02$). Moreover, this analysis revealed a significant Word Type X Target Skin Tone interaction, ($F(1, 91) = 6.07$, $p = .016$). As predicted, participants were faster to respond to candidates with lighter skin tones associated with positive words ($M = 559$, $SD = 65$) than to candidates with darker skin tones associated with positive words ($M = 578$, $SD = 74$; $F$

$(1, 91) = 17.80, p < .0001$). However, responses to negative words did not significantly differ when associated with candidates with lighter skin tones ($M = 592$, $SD = 76$) versus candidates with darker skin tones ($M = 594$, $SD = 73$; $F(1, 91) = .74$, $ns$).

**Correlations**

As predicted, higher hireability ratings (i.e., being more willing to hire that candidate) for lighter skin toned candidates were significantly correlated with faster reaction times to lighter skin toned candidates paired with positive words (See Table 1). Therefore, stronger the associations between lighter candidates and positive words were associated with reports of being more willing to hire lighter candidates. However, higher hireability ratings for darker skin toned candidates were also significantly correlated with faster reaction times to darker skin toned candidates paired with negative words (See Table 1). Therefore, stronger associations between darker candidates and negative words were also associated with reports of being more willing to hire darker candidates. There were no significant correlations between high ratings for lighter skin toned candidates and darker skin toned candidates paired with negative words, or high ratings for darker skin toned candidates and lighter skin toned candidates paired with negative words. Also, on the ranking task there were no significant correlations between higher rankings of light or darker skin toned candidates and reaction times to light or darker skin toned candidates paired with positive or negative words.

Table 1
*Explicit Tasks Correlated with Implicit Tasks*

| Light and Dark Candidates with Positive and Negative Words in Candidate Rating Task | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Light Rating (n= 93) | Dark Rating (n= 93) |
| Light Positive | .22* | .19 |
| Light Negative | .15 | .14 |
| Dark Positive | .13 | .17 |
| Dark Negative | .21 | .25* |

| Light and Dark Candidates with Positive and Negative words in Candidate Ranking Task | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Light Ranking (N= 93) | Dark Ranking (N= 93) |
| Light Positive | -.09 | .17 |
| Light Negative | .02 | .14 |
| Dark Positive | .03 | .09 |
| Dark Negative | -.12 | .12 |

*Note* $*p< .05$

## DISCUSSION

### Explicit and Implicit Measures

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the impact that prejudicial attitudes towards African Americans of different shades of skin tone (i.e., light or dark) have upon discriminatory hiring preferences. Using both explicit and implicit measures, we were able to measure participants' outwardly expressed biases as well as their

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unconscious or internal biases. Many interesting significant findings were revealed within this experiment although the study lacked enough power to adequately test the between subjects variables. For example, a significant main effect for target skin tone was found within the hireability rating task. As predicted, participants rated lighter skin toned candidates higher than darker skin toned candidates overall in terms of hireability. This indicates that participants reported being more likely to hire lighter skin toned candidates over darker skin toned candidates. The same main effect was also found within the hireability ranking task. Once again, participants ranked lighter skin toned candidates higher in terms of hireability and job suitability overall than darker skin toned candidates. Together these findings indicate that participants viewed lighter skin toned candidates as better suited for the proposed job than the darker skin toned candidates. This indicates higher levels of explicit prejudice towards darker skin toned African American candidates and is also associated with an unwillingness to hire those individuals. However, the participant population was not sufficient to compare between race target preferences (African American vs. Caucasian) on the explicit measures while keeping the required amount of power for the study.

Within the LDT, the results revealed many significant differences for how fast participants responded to different stimuli. As discussed earlier, a faster reaction to stimuli in the LDT indicates stronger associations between stimuli. It was found that participants rated positive words significantly faster than negative words overall on the LDT. This indicates that participants had a stronger preference to the positive words versus the negative words that were shown. In addition, reaction times to lighter skin toned candidates was faster than darker skin toned candidates overall which confirmed

the hypothesized result. This means that participants took significantly more time to respond when shown darker candidates versus lighter candidates. Participants also responded faster to lighter skin toned candidates associated with positive words as opposed to darker skin toned candidates associated with positive words. This finding confirms the hypothesis that participants would hold implicit prejudicial attitudes towards African American candidates with darker skin tones versus those with lighter skin tones. The faster response time of the participants proves that they have a stronger link between lighter skin toned candidates and positive words than darker skin toned candidates and positive words

**Correlations**

There were a few significant correlations found between the explicit and implicit portions of the study. Positive attitudes towards lighter skin toned candidates (i.e., faster reaction times for lighter skin toned candidates when paired with positive words) were shown to be associated with higher ratings of hireability. This confirms the hypothesis, as it was thought that stronger associations between lighter candidates and positive words would also be associated with reports of being more willing to hire lighter candidates. It was also found that positive attitudes towards darker skin toned candidates was associated with higher scores on the rating task but faster reaction times on the LDT when darker candidates were paired with negative words. This finding is somewhat unexpected, as it shows that participant's strong negative association of darker skin toned candidates also made them more willing to hire darker skin toned candidates. It was predicted that a strong negative association for darker skin toned candidates would also lead to participants being less likely to hire darker skin toned candidates over lighter skin

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toned candidates. In addition it was thought that individuals who rated a particular skin tone group higher on the explicit portions of the test would also have faster reaction times to that same skin tone group paired with positive words because the participant is thought to have a strong association between the two. As shown in the above findings, the prejudices for skin tone of lighter skin toned candidates on the explicit and implicit portions of the study was consistent with the hypothesis. However, the prejudices for skin tone of darker skin toned candidates expressed on the explicit portion of the experiment were consistently the opposite of what was expressed in the implicit portion of the test. This difference could be attributed to the social desirability bias, where participants may have changed their ratings of the darker skin toned candidates to be more positive than they actually felt. By doing this, the participants may have been trying to portray themselves in a more positive light. These findings further illustrate the advantage of having both an explicit and implicit measure in an experimental study. With both explicit and implicit studies, these differences can be more easily seen and accurately measured.

**Implications**

The implications of this study show that there is indeed a difference between how African Americans with a lighter skin tone and African Americans with a darker skin tone are viewed in job interview situations. While this study was not able to significantly prove all of the hypotheses indicated, it brought to light many within-group biases in the African American community that may not have been previously tested. This study helped to show that not only are African Americans discriminated against for their race, but the color of their skin within that race. With future research it is hoped that more areas within this sub-set of discrimination can be brought to light and better understood.

## Future Research

Given the limited time and scope of this study, there are many areas that could and should be further explored in future research. For example, one limitation of this study was that the study population was made up of undergraduate students at Auburn University Montgomery. Many of the participants were under the age of 21 and therefore had little or no real world experience with hiring. It is believed that if this study were repeated using an older population that was more familiar with the hiring process and workforce, that the results would be very different than those found with the current study's population. Also, with an older population with actual work and hiring experience there may be more of a feeling of investment that was not seen in this study. Given that the majority of the participant population did not have this experience, it was apparent that they were not fully interested in the experiment and were simply completing the experiment for credit in their class, and little interest of the outcome. Future research should also include a larger sample size in regards to race. Given the small sample size obtained for this study, it was difficult to make result comparisons between races because doing so essentially cut the sample size in half and therefore lowered the power of the study. Another avenue for further research could include candidates that are presented to the participants on film. A reason for this is that there are many mannerisms and facial cue that we as humans pick up from interacting with each other that can not be expressed in a still photograph. By presenting "live action" candidates, the participants may be better able to get a "feel" for them as well as base a stronger opinion of one candidate versus the other. Also, lighter skin toned candidates and darker skin toned candidates could be tested in separate studies which may allow for even more control of extraneous

variables between the two groups. In short, there are many possible and probable venues that could be explored in future research that would help to explore the understudied segment of hiring discrimination brought forth in this study.

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**Demographics Questionnaire**

**Age**:

**Sex**:

**Race** *(Please choose only one)*:  African American___     Asian___     Caucasian___

Hispanic/Latino___     Native American___

Other (please explain):_____

**Skin tone:** Dark___ Light___ Other (please

explain):_____

**Hair Color** *(Please choose only one)*: Black___     Brown___     Blonde___

        Red___     Other___

**Eye Color:** Black___ Blue___ Brown___     Green___     Hazel___     Other___

**Hair Length:** Short___     Medium___     Long___

**Appendix B**

**Target Familiarity Questionnaire**

Did you know anyone used in this study before today?

Yes _____ I personally know this person (i.e., I know their name, have had a conversation with this person, and feel I know this person's personality).

No _____

If "YES", please indicate in what task of THIS EXPERIMENT you saw this individual if you can. (I don't need to know where you personally know them from...)

Resumes _____ Memory Task _____

**Appendix C**

**Candidate Hireability Scale**

How likely would you be to hire Trey Hardman?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Very Likely                                    Not at all likely

What caused you to give this candidate the rating that you chose? Please

explain:_____

_____

_____

How likely would you be to hire Alicia Williams?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Very Likely                                    Not at all likely

What caused you to give this candidate the rating that you chose? Please

explain:_____

_____

_____

## Appendix D

**Candidate Ranking Task**

On a scale of 1 (most likely to hire) to 8 (least likely to hire) please rank the candidates

you have just seen.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

**Sample Resumes**

# CANDIDATE #1



# ALICIA WILLIAMS

## CONTACT INFORMATION

792 Mountain Blvd.

Montgomery, AL 36104

A.Williams@gmail.com

## EXPERIENCE

| | |
|---|---|
| 2007-2008<br>*Bank Teller* | Bank of America |
| 2008-Present<br>*Sales Associate* | Best Buy |

## EDUCATION

Long Island University Brooklyn
*Bachelors in Finance*

**Appendix E (continued)**

# CANDIDATE #2



# JACOB BASSETT

## CONTACT INFORMATION

238 16<sup>th</sup> Street

Montgomery, AL 36109

J.Bassett@aol.com

## EXPERIENCE

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2005-2006 | | Old Navy |
| *Sales Associate* | | |
| | | |
| 2006-Present | | Chase Bank |
| *Sales Associate* | | |

## EDUCATION

Bachelors Degree in Finance
*University of Rio Grande*