

THE DARK SIDE: STUDY OF THE ROLE OF SKIN TONE ON CONSUMER PERCEPTION

by  
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## **Abstract**

The intent of this thesis is to explore the effects and influencers of skin tone on consumer perception. Firstly we conducted a primary study to test the effects of skin tone on service provider quality. The results showed that while skin tone had little effect, gender and ethnicity were more indicative. Therefore our study seeks to re-test the relationship between skin tone and consumer service perception as well as the effects of ethnicity and tipping behavior, and if a consumer's cultural identity strength plays a role in consumer perception. We examined the differences across ethnicities i.e. White, Hispanic, and African American. Specifically we were interested in any potential differences across skin tone (light skinned vs. dark skinned) within African American and Hispanic service providers. Firstly we sought out stock images that portrayed easily identifiable ethnicities. We exposed the respondents to those images in which we asked them to identify the ethnicity of the image as a manipulation check for ethnicity. In the actual study, all respondents were given the same service scenario with the image of one of the ten (White, light or dark skinned Hispanic, light or dark skinned African American, male or female) stock photos. Respondents were asked to rate the service quality, satisfaction, and tip amount. The data was analyzed as a 2 way independent-groups design.

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## **Introduction**

There has been significant research into culturally directed marketing and how it affects different racial groups in advertising. One of the primary focuses has been how different racial groups can be marketed to or how the groups respond to advertisements. Little attention has been paid to depictions of skin color in advertisement. An original study by Yuvay Meyers (2008) found that “the ethnic identity of an African-American consumer plays a significant role in how African American models are received in advertisements based upon their skin color” (p. 77). This article inspired my previous research in which I examined the effect of skin tone on perception of service provider quality. Extensive past research has been done on the imaging and portrayal of different ethnicities in advertising and services marketing research, with little attention paid to variance of skin tone (Bailey, 2006). With the previous research I was able to investigate not only the skin tone of African American subjects, but Hispanic and Caucasian as well, and how consumers perceived their quality of service.

Little research has been conducted on the relationship between service provider quality and ethnicity. One study suggests that consumers prefer members of their own race across commercial contexts (Adams et al. 2008). Though there has been a vast amount of research about the tipping behavior of consumers based on their ethnicity, there has been little research concerning tipping behaviors based on the skin tone or ethnicity of the said service provider. My research seeks to fill this gap in the literature and to investigate 1) if the skin tone of a service provider affects perceived service quality, 2) if the perception of service quality is based on the consumer’s ethnic identity strength in response to skin tone, 3) if the ethnicity of the service provider has any implications on the service a consumer is expected to perceive; and 4) if tipping is influenced by the ethnicity and skin tone of the service provider.

African Americans have a current buying power of \$1 trillion, and are expected to reach \$1.3 trillion by 2017, while Hispanic females have a current buying power of \$1.2 trillion (Nielson 2013). It would be advantageous to marketers and those in service positions to study and understand the implications behind minority service providers and how they are perceived by consumers of same and different ethnic backgrounds.

## **Background**

In 2011, Yuvay Meyers conducted a groundbreaking study that extended skin tone and perception to the area of marketing and advertising. This study demonstrated that those with greater ethnic identity showed only a slight preference for the light skinned model over the dark skinned model. However, those that identified as 'low' in ethnic identity showed a clear difference in skin tone preference with the light skinned model perceived more favorably. Overall, there was a distinct preference for the lighter skinned model, which was attributed to ethnic identity (Meyers, 2011). This research provided a rationale for why marketers should be aware of this trend in the African American community, and how this community can be reached effectively. This article shed light on how or why consumers would show a preference towards service providers of various skin tones, and its relationship to perceived service quality.

### **Racial Bias in Service Settings**

A study conducted by Ayers et al. (2005) showed that explicit racial biases were demonstrated by consumers against white and black cab drivers. In the study, the data showed that White cab drivers were tipped more than Black cab drivers based on 1,000 recorded tips. This explicit racial bias begins to inform my research question of whether or not ethnicity plays a factor in quality of perceived service. Lynn et al (2008) states "This explanation suggests that server race may not affect tipping in restaurants, where service effects are weak, and that any observed server race effects on tipping will disappear after controlling for service quality (p. 4)" Adams et al (2008) explained that the displayed white bias may be caused by aversive racism or implicit racial attitudes. Through my research I plan to do the opposite and employ a controlled scenario in which we are able to explore the effect of ethnicity or skin tone on tipping behavior. These findings would add to the current research on the subject matter and respectfully dispel the idea of ethnicity and "weak service effects".

Another study done by Paul Koku (2005), showed that the reason people tip inside restaurants is different from the reasons people tip in other service encounters, largely due to the norm driven aspect of tipping inside restaurants. His data further concluded that there is no difference between the tipping behavior of whites and non whites in service encounters outside of the restaurant. The article continued to describe the largely interesting lack of literature on the tipping manners of Hispanic consumers. The article describes that this could be due to the fact that when minority tipping behavior is discussed, it usually groups together African Americans, Hispanics and Asian-Americans (Koku, 2005).

### **Hispanic Consumer Behavior**

Although there is a lack of literature on the consumer behavior of the Hispanic minority group compared to others, there have been some studies that reveal their common actions. Hispanics have been shown to have stronger attitudes toward family and toward service interactions with fellow Hispanics; they are more dependent on personal social interaction than non-Hispanics (Parker 1999). Research has also shown that Hispanic consumers respond differently to various marketing efforts than non-Hispanic consumers, and that the Hispanic market as a whole are more likely to desire interpersonal contact in service transactions (Miyazaki, Lassar, & Taylor, 2007). This lack of research on the Hispanic race has several implications as their buying power is at a current rate of \$1.2 trillion (Nielsen, 2013), and will grow faster than that of African American buying power (54%) (AHAA, 2013).



### **Stereotypes and Tipping**

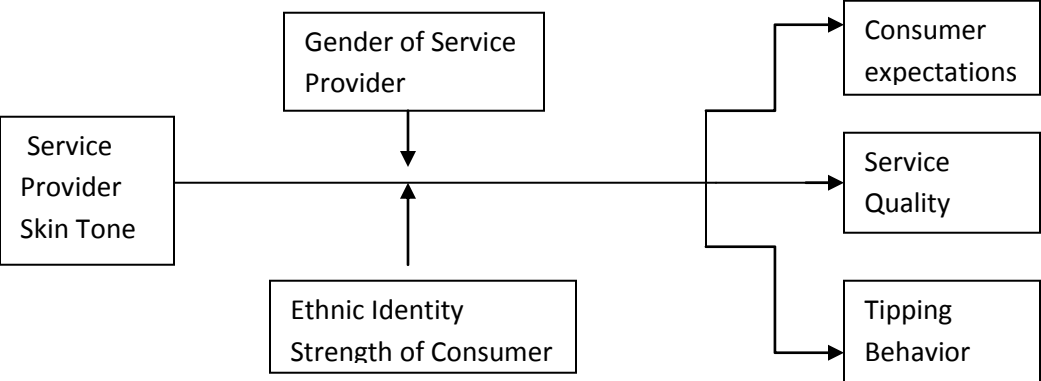
My previous research showed that skin tone was, in fact, not an identifier for perceived service provider quality. What was shown to be the largest identifier was the race and gender of the service provider. This outcome could have been based on many reasons, possibly related to stereotyping. As previously mentioned, a vast amount of stereotypes exist for those on the consumer side of market exchanges, but does the same exist for those in the service role? A classic study examined the difference between people who know what a stereotype is as opposed to those who let the stereotype affect their behavior. The study went on to say that those who identify as 'non racist' individuals engage in more inhibitions of stereotypes (Devine, 1989). This study has relevance to my research, as it is most useful in explaining how conscious/unconscious stereotypes can manifest themselves in everyday life. My research would seek to uncover any instances of racial stereotyping which would be evident in the explanation of perceived service quality. Although discrimination cannot be the sole reason for the studied actions, it is certainly a major factor.

## **Problem**

Through my previous study, I was able to show that skin tone was not the acting variable to service provider quality. The study showed that skin tone did not affect the perceived service quality from the participants. What seemed to be the largest indicators were the race and gender of the service providers, as the data showed that the females (African American, White and Hispanic) were rated higher than the males, with the Hispanic female rated the highest of all. Even more interesting, the males (African-American, White and Hispanic) were rated drastically lower than the females, but the Hispanic males were rated the lowest of all. With such a lack of research on Hispanic service providers, this phenomenon is difficult to pinpoint but is most likely related to some discriminatory issues. The previous findings present a large issue with real world implications due to the rapid growth of the Hispanic race in the United States. As it is expected for them to grow to the majority race by 2050, surely more of them will assume more roles in the service industry (Census.gov). My previous findings present the possibility of future issues as the data showed the outsized disparity between the perceptions of Hispanic males and females in the service sector.

For my current research I hope to test the following: if the skin tone of a service provider affects perceived service quality, if the perception of service quality is based on the consumer's ethnic identity strength in response to skin tone, if the ethnicity of the service provider has any implications on the service a consumer is expected to perceive, and if tipping is influenced by the ethnicity and skin tone of the service provider. Figure 1 shows the intended variables and research measures. If there is indeed a disparity between ethnicity, gender and perceived service quality, my research will be of great benefit to those in the service industry. Studying consumer tipping behavior would also lend to the service industry due to its vital yet norm driven nature. Tipping is widely practiced when receiving a service from

someone, but my research would explore any underlying factors based on ethnicity or gender. Also, by studying the effects of ethnicity and skin tone, marketers as well as service managers can utilize this information to create future service encounters that are efficient and beneficial to both the consumer and the provider.

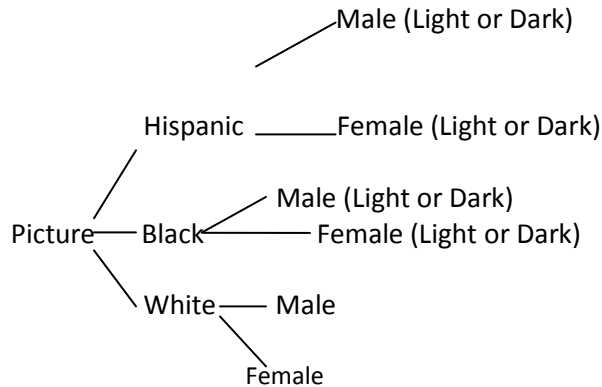


**Figure 1**

## **Methodology**

The execution of the study will be in the form of an online survey style questionnaire. Each participant in the study will see the same scenario about their experience in a restaurant style service. Participants will read a description of their service encounter as well as have a picture of what their service provider looks like. Figure 2 shows the possible combinations that participants may see in the study. Those that see a picture of Hispanic and African American service providers will view a version of a digitally altered stock photo that was created with a light and dark version of itself to represent difference in skin tone. The participants will then be able to decide and rate the service they received based on the scenario description, as well as leave a tip if they choose. To incorporate the measure of consumer ethnic identity strength, I plan to incorporate a MEIM ( Multigroup Ethnicity Identity Measure) scale that addresses the general aspects of ethnic identity such as self identification, belongingness, and pride. This will allow the testing of possible relationships between ethnic identity strength of the consumer and skin tone of the service provider, and whether or not it influences perceived service.

## Research Design



**Figure 2**

Through research, I hope to fill the gap on studies relating to ethnicity on service providers and consumer tipping behavior. I hope to also add new literature to the field, as little research has been done on Hispanics and their behavior as a service provider and how their ethnicity is perceived by consumers. This is increasingly important because Hispanics are the largest minority in the United States, and will make up almost one-third of the population by 2050 (Census.gov, 2012).

Based on previous research and completed studies, I hypothesize that skin tone will be shown to not have an effect on service provider quality because race may be a more indicative variable for participants. I do foresee a data trend between consumer ethnic identity strength and their perceived service quality, especially in scenarios with providers that are most similar to themselves. Also based on outside research, I believe my study will show a relationship between the tipping behaviors of consumers and the ethnicity of the service provider. Lastly, based on the previous study, I believe that

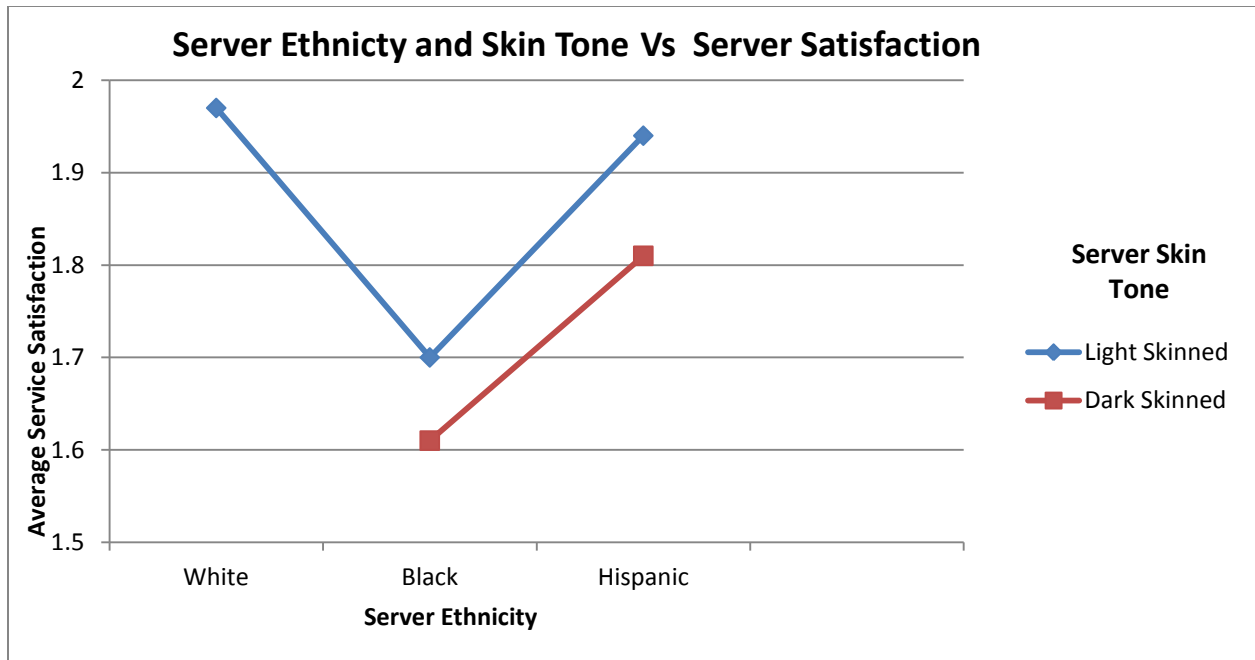
the data will show a clear relationship between the ethnicity and the perception of service provider quality, which will best be explained by stereotypes that we all form and unknowingly carry.

## Conclusion

### Results

My experimental hypothesis was to test if the skin tone of a service provider affects perceived service quality, if the perception of service quality is based on the consumer's ethnic identity strength in response to skin tone, if the ethnicity of the service provider has any implications on the service a consumer is expected to perceive, and if tipping is influenced by the ethnicity and skin tone of the service provider. Based on previous research, I predicted that skin tone would affect perceived service provider quality because of research results in previous studies. I also predicted that the perception of service quality would be influenced by the consumer's ethnic identity strength as well as the service provider skin tone. Lastly, I predicted that tipping would be influenced by the ethnicity and skin tone of the service provider.

A 2 x 2 factorial analysis of variance tested the effects of server ethnicity and skin tone on the satisfaction of service and yielded no significant main effect for server ethnicity  $F(2,132)= 1.12, p >.05$  and no significant main effect for the server skin tone  $F(1, 132)=1.98, p >.05, \eta^2 =.037$ . However, **Figure 3** shows an interesting pattern to be noted within the data. Although no significance was yielded there is a clearly defined pattern of satisfaction between the light-skinned and dark-skinned service providers. The dark skinned servers were rated lower than the light skinned servers, with the black males being rated with the lowest satisfaction of all ( $M= 1.66, SD=.63$ ). In analyzing the light skinned servers, once again the black servers were rated lowest in the group ( $M=1.7, SD=.69$ ) as opposed to the highest rated white servers ( $M=1.97, SD=.87$ )



**Figure 3: Graph showing the average satisfaction rating per ethnicity and skin tone**

A 2 x 2 factorial analysis of variance tested the effects of the consumer’s ethnic identity strength on service quality perception and yielded no significant main effect for ethnic identity level  $F(1,131)=1.40, p >.05$ ; and no significant main effect for the server ethnicity  $F(2,131)=1.09, p >.05, \eta^2 =.037$ . **Figure 4** shows the relationship between the average service ratings based on the respondent’s ethnic identity strength.

The graph shows that those with lower ethnic identity strength rated all service, except that of the Hispanic servers, lower on average ( $M=1.71, SD=.64$ ) than those with higher ethnicity strength ( $M=1.83, SD=.73$ ). It is also interesting to note that once again the Black servers were rated on average lowest in service satisfaction in both levels of ethnic identity ( $M=1.66$ ) as opposed to that of the white servers who on average were rated the highest ( $M=1.97$ )



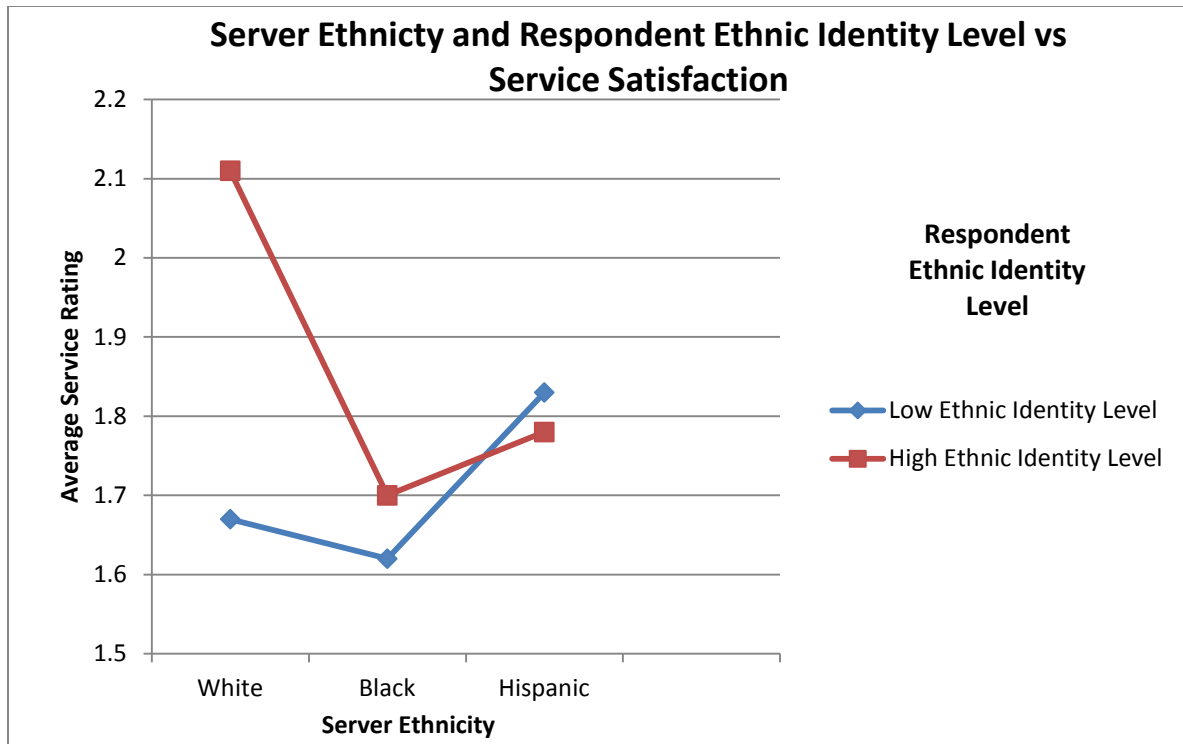


Figure 4

A 2x 2 between subjects analysis of variance tested the affects of ethnicity on consumer service perception and yielded no significant main effect for server ethnicity  $F(2,132)=1.12, p >.05$ ; and no main effect for the server skin tone  $F(1,132)=1.99, p >.05, \eta^2=.047$ . As shown in **figure 5**, there is a distinction once again between ethnicities and their rated service satisfaction. These findings are also strikingly similar to the results in figure 3 that display the average server satisfaction. The Black servers were perceived to have the worst service across the board ( $M=1.66$ ) and the White servers were perceived to have the best service ( $M=1.97$ ).

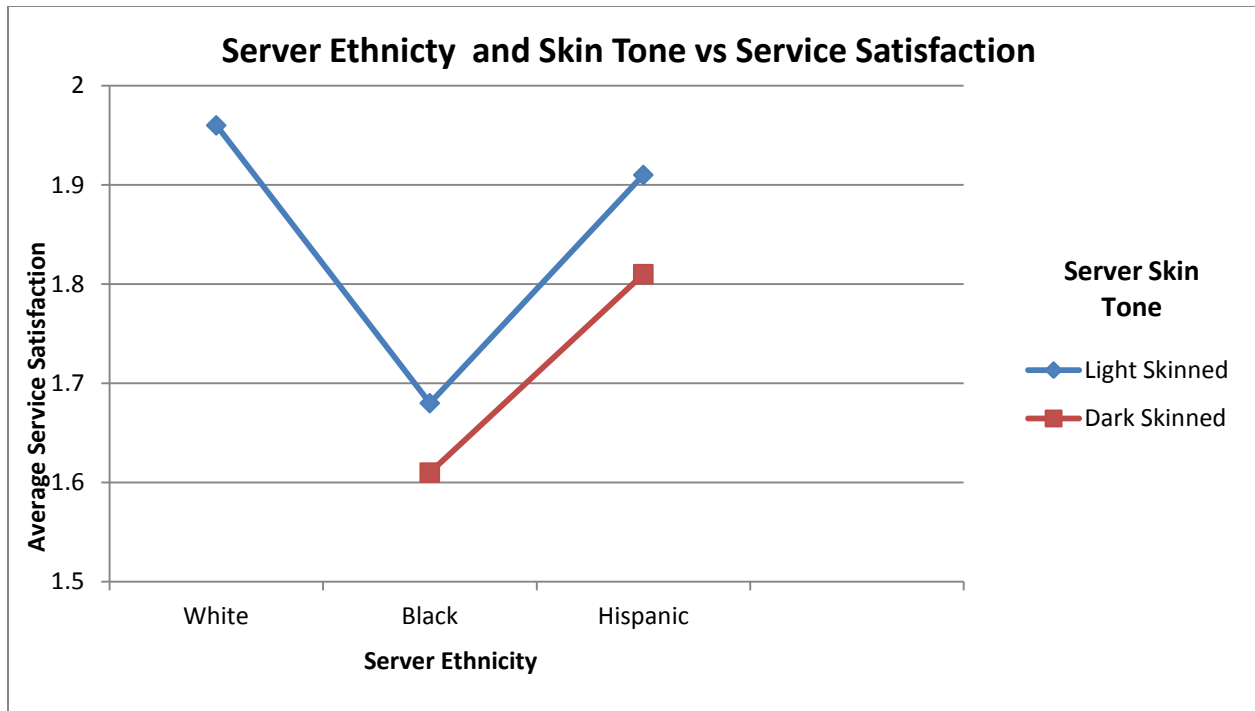


Figure 5

Figure 6 shows the effect of respondent ethnicity and server ethnicities on the average server satisfaction level. The Black servers were perceived to have the worst service across all respondent ethnicity groups except 'other' ( $M=1.64, SD=.60$ ) and even more interestingly the lowest rating for the black servers was given by the black respondents. On average, the White servers were perceived to have the best server satisfaction ( $M=1.96, SD=.90$ ) and were even rated the highest by the Asian Pacific Islander respondent group ( $M=2.61, SD=2.1$ ). Also notable, the white respondent group as a whole rated the three server ethnicities very closely in satisfaction. This is contrary to previous graphs that showed white servers largely outperforming the other ethnicity groups, but may be attributed to socially desirable responding that can be described as "A frequently noted concern with self-reports collected

through surveys [in which] respondents may not respond truthfully but simply provide answers that make them look good.” (AMA.org)

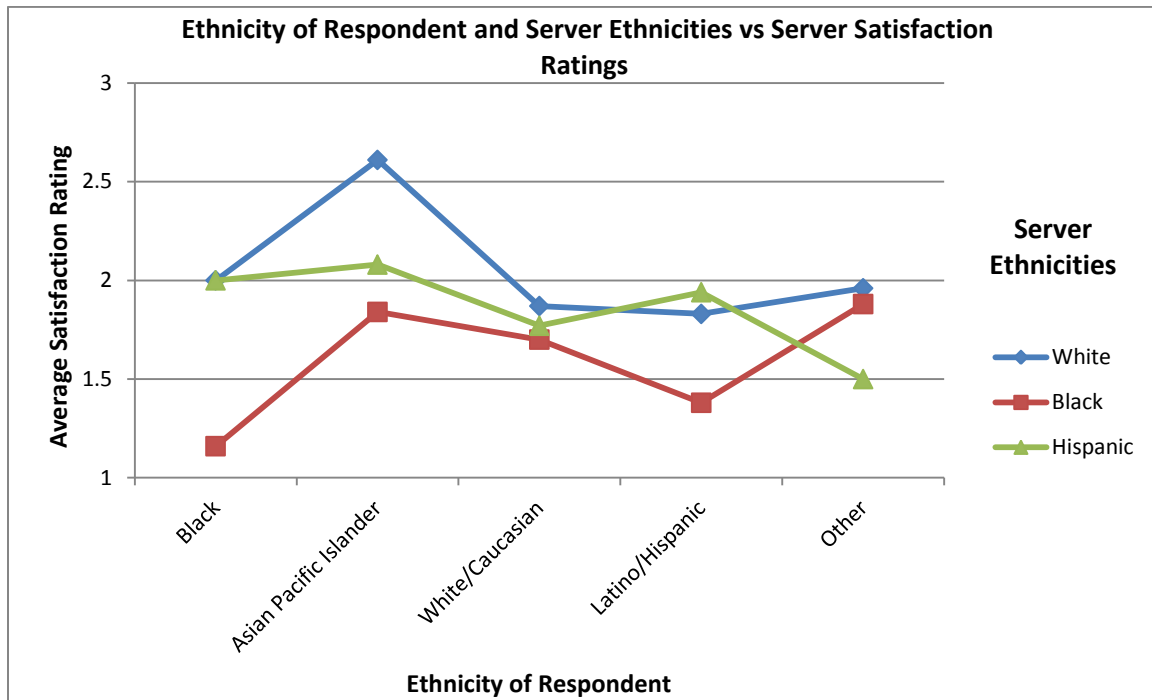
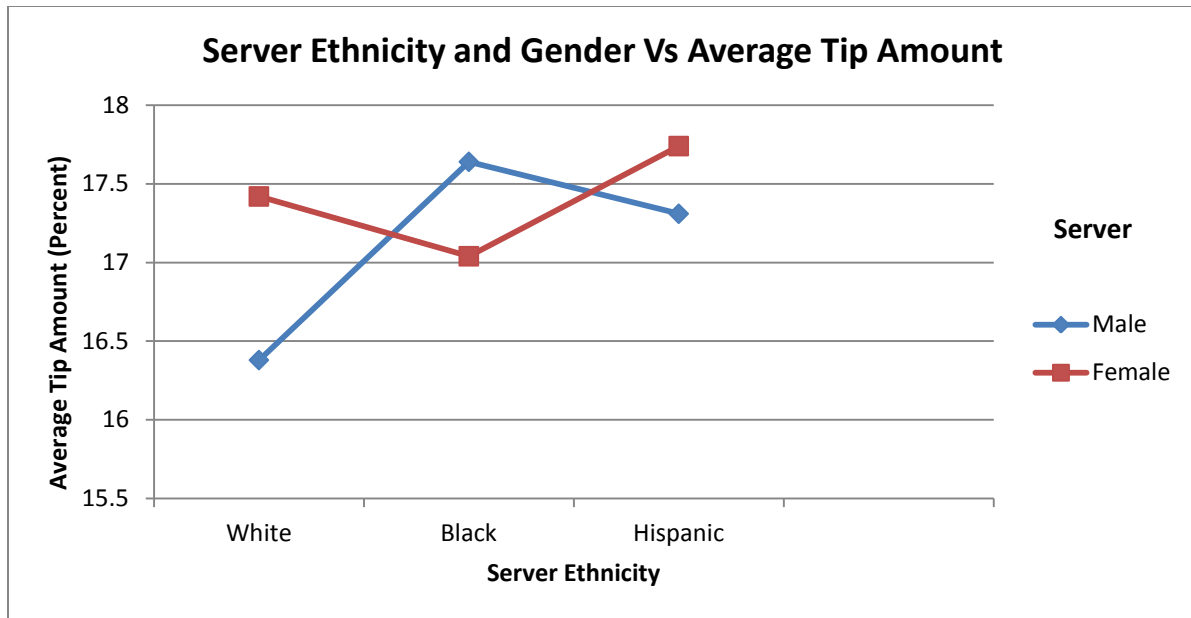


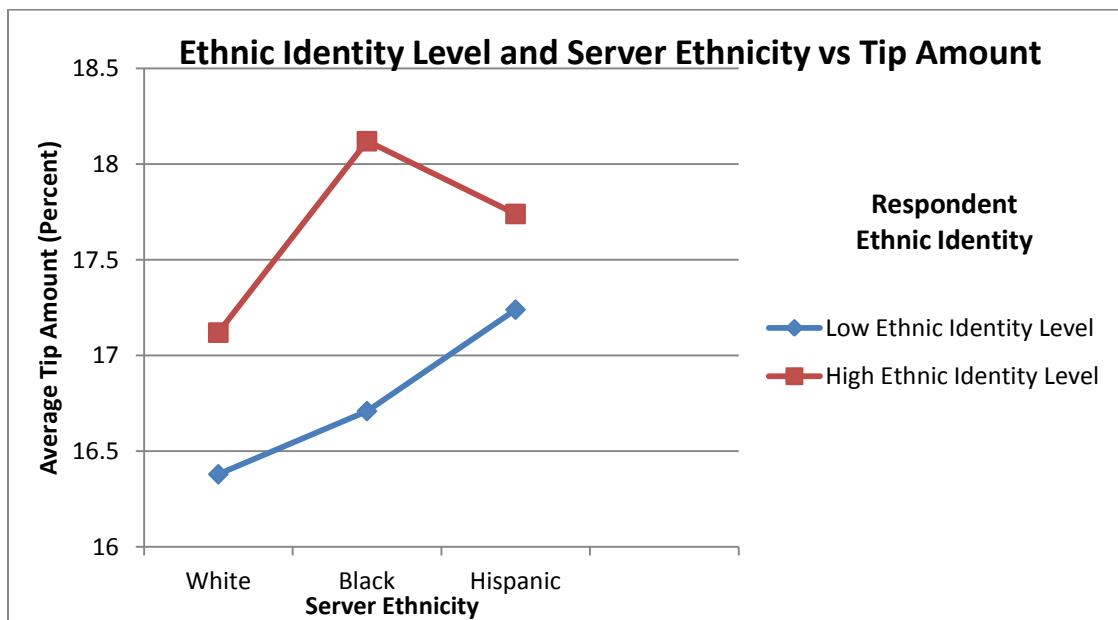
Figure 6

A 2x 2 between subjects analysis of variance tested the effects of ethnicity and skin tone of the service provider on the tips they were given and yielded no significant main effect for server ethnicity  $F(2, 132)=.154, p > .05$ ; and no main effect for skin tone  $F(1, 132)= .27, p > .05, \eta^2=.015$ . **Figure 7** shows that on average the Hispanic servers received the highest amount of tips ( $M=17.52, SD= 2.80$ ) and the White servers received the lowest ( $M= 16.88, SD= 3.67$ ). Also across all ethnicities the female servers ( $M=17.39, SD= 3.49$ ) received better tips than that of the male servers ( $M=17.27, SD=3.08$ ).



**Figure 7**

In Figure 8 the graph shows that on average those with lower ethnic identity levels gave less tips ( $M=16.87, SD= 3.71$ ) than those with higher ethnic identity levels ( $M=17.73, SD= 2.83$ ).



**Figure 8**

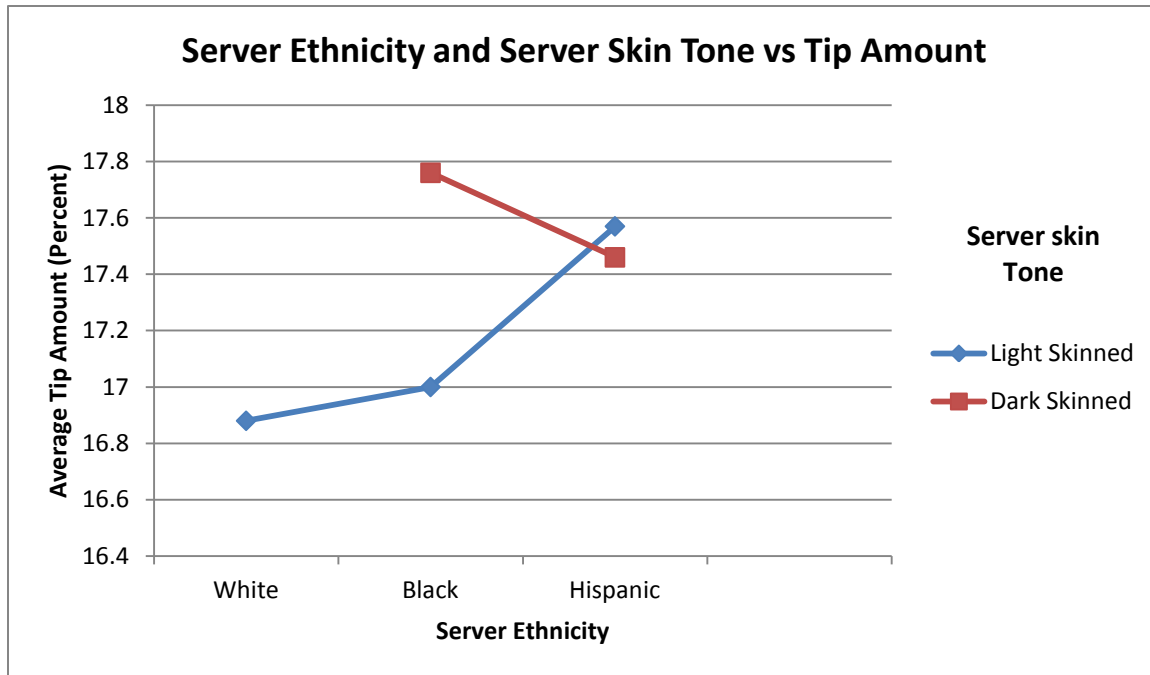


Figure 9

Lastly in examining the effects of ethnicity and skin tone on tipping, Figure 9 shows that dark skinned servers were given better tips ( $M=17.61$ ,  $SD=2.46$ ) than light skinned servers ( $M=17.15$ ,  $SD=3.71$ ). The Hispanic servers were given the highest amount of tips ( $M=17.52$ ,  $SD=2.80$ ) as opposed to the White servers receiving the least amount of tips ( $M=16.88$ ,  $SD= 3.67$ ). This graph contradicts both figure 3 and figure 5 which displayed the black and dark-skinned servers as being rated with the lowest server and service satisfaction. This graph clearly shows the dark skinned black server receiving the highest amount of tips and could also possibly be due to socially desirable responding.

## **Description of Data**

The survey data, although not significant, provided some very insightful clues to different effects of ethnicity in service transactions. In four out of seven of the graphs provided, the white servers were perceived to be the superior service providers, more than any of the other ethnicities combined. In five out of seven of the graphs provided, the black servers were perceived to be the worst service providers out of all ethnicity groups. The data also revealed a distinct pattern with those respondents who scored a high ethnic identity level. These respondents were shown to give better tips than those who scored a low ethnic identity level. The data also revealed several trends that could be attributed to socially desirable responding due to the presence of other data. It was shown that white respondents in the study were the only group who rated all three server ethnicity groups virtually with little difference in satisfaction. It was also shown that dark skinned and black males were rated lowest in service satisfaction but were given the highest amount in tips. These two instances are examples of responses that were possibly recorded out of guilt instead of true feeling of earned satisfaction.

The significance of this study will be useful in many service encounters. As the United States grows into an increasingly diverse country and influx of different ethnicities will be sure to join the service sector. With this in mind, it is important to understand how these front line employees will be perceived by those that they serve. Unfortunately much of the data patterns observed in my study are most likely closely related to stereotypes and prejudice, due to the uniformity of the service encounter and such large differences in the server satisfaction across the ethnicities. This information will also be of use to professionals who engage in targeted marketing in attempts to reach specific ethnic groups to sell products or services. More in depth research should be conducted to definitively state whether or not ethnicity and skin tone effect service perception and tipping, as well as a further investigation on ethnic identity levels and tipping.

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