Not in the eyes of the beholder:

Racialisation, Whiteness and Beauty Standards in Mexico

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the role 'whiteness' takes in Mexico, where colonial, religious and social heritages elevate it as an aesthetic ideal, simultaneously denying its underlying racism. We argue that skin tone is one of many physical and non-physical features that together shape the concept of 'whiteness', as part of the collective aspiration of an ethnically mixed society. Women in particular are pressured to 'whiten' their bodies in adherence to beauty standards, as class and 'racial' classifications are fluid, relational and intertwined categories in Mexico. Based on empirical evidence from two datasets on ethnic-racial discrimination and beauty standards, we outline Mexicans' aesthetic perceptions and explore their attempt to approach these through bodily presentations and adjustments. We then discuss how the local beauty industry acts as a practical tool and a discursive mediator towards racialized appearances, reinforcing the subjective basis of discriminatory practices in Mexico, as the sector possesses its own historical, political and racial background deeply entangled with whiteness.

Keywords: Whiteness; racism; Mexico; cosmetics; beauty; gender.

"Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye"
(William Shakespeare, 1596, *Love's Labour's Lost*)

"To illuminate the complex relationship between appearance and vision; between physiognomy… and the eyes of the beholder"
(Matthew Jacobson, 2003, *Whiteness of a Different Color*)

Introduction

People make social classifications based on physical traits via a process of racialization, i.e. by linking specific external physical attributes with human qualities (Webster 1993; Segato 2010; Wade 2014; Gall 2016). In Mexico, the racialized physical trait of skin tone is of particular importance in everyday interactions (Chávez-Dueñas, Adames, and Organista 2014; Dixon and Telles 2017; Ortiz-Hernández et al. 2011), as a broad range of profoundly normalized popular sayings like 'marry a light-skinned person to improve the race' ('*cásate con un güero para mejorar la raza'*), 'I work like a black person to live like a white person' ('*trabajo como negro para vivir como blanco'*) or 'the baby is brown but nonetheless beautiful' ('*El niño es morenito, pero está bonito*') acknowledge. Connecting racialized appearance with social status, wealth and beauty, these phrases allude to a social consensus in which "'light' is seen as 'right'" (Winders 2015, 72) and simultaneously as an elusive and contentious demarcation. In this paper, we explore the meanings this constellation takes on in a country that often prides itself as 'raceless' (Navarrete 2017), while articulating an idiosyncratic understanding of an - explicitly or implicitly desirable - 'whiteness'. How does 'whiteness' fit in a country whose foundational myth subjects all Mexicans to the 'mixed-race' identity of 'mestizo', based on the narrative of an allegedly complete merge of indigenous peoples and colonists to form the racially superior 'Bronze race' (Vasconcelos 1925) combining the best of two worlds (Indian and Spanish)?

When asked to identify their skin tone, less than 12% of contemporary Mexicans self-identifies as white (Solís, Güemez and Lorenzo 2019). However, in the collective imaginary of a country that has experienced a process of racialization since colonial times, being 'white' matters: through 'mestizaje',

and in denial about its own racism, the 'Bronze race' strives to 'whiten' itself towards an idealized European complexion. Our main argument in this article is that skin tone as a social marker is intrinsically related to other physical and non-physical features that shape the concept of 'whiteness' and its specific underlying aesthetic judgement. Moreover, we show that the way 'whiteness' is enacted, or performed, differs according to socioeconomic position.

In Mexico, the privileged position of whiteness on the class spectrum idealizes it. Those with lighter skin colour have on average higher wages and a higher level of education compared to individuals with darker skin tones, contributing to an unequal distribution of opportunities in Mexico (Monroy-Gómez-Franco, Vélez and Yalonetzky 2018). Additionally, a constant media representation of whiteness as beautiful highlights its desirability. In Navarrete's (2017: 17). words, the "chromatic scale" that Mexicans judge and are judged on continuously associates "whiteness, natural or artificial, with beauty and privilege, power and wealth, and its 'contrary', that is, brown skin, with ugliness, marginalization and poverty." Catering to the associative conflation of wealth and beauty, the cosmetic industry functions as intermediary on the personal journey towards becoming 'whiter'. Moreover, aesthetic appreciation smoothly aligns with racialized models, as part of the *collective* aspiration of an ethnically mixed society towards 'white' bodily appearances.

Today, a vast supplementary industry lives off this aspiration to whiteness. Mexico produces a number of skin whitening creams, some containing dangerous concentrations of mercury, which are widely sold. Many are unlabelled (Peregrino et al. 2011) and do not warn against the serious health consequences of its use, as do most of this sectors' merchandise valued collectively at $31.2 billion by 2024 (WHO 2019).

The mundane practices of discrimination with regards to beautification and bodily 'improvements' remain underexplored in systematic studies of whiteness as aesthetic preferences in Mexico. As the interaction between gender, class, and race in Mexico is complex and not fully understood (Cerón 2019), scrutinizing an industry where racial stereotypes meet specific gender expectations to form class identities can help understand how these concepts are socially constructed and validated around

'whiteness'.

Based on empirical evidence we collected in two datasets on ethnic-racial discrimination and beauty standards, we will first outline Mexicans' aesthetic perceptions, to subsequently describe how these dreams are (supposedly) made reality via intergenerational and/or personal 'whitening', after a brief contextualization and discussion of our methodologies. As the promise of benefitting from whitening has a specific gendered structure, we explore the different routes towards whiteness that women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds experience, and the implications these practices hold for beauty standards and their enactment among these groups.

Locating Whiteness in Mexico[1]

The denial of racism as an explicit effort purported by national elites of the post-revolutionary regime (Knight 2010) prevails as a cultural project today (Cerón 2019). Nonetheless, social stratification by skin color is an empirical reality in Mexico. People with darker skin tones consistently display lower levels of educational attainment, occupational status (Villarreal 2010) and wealth (Solís, Güémez and Lorenzo 2019). Moreover, social inequalities in Mexico are linked to ongoing 'racial' discrimination (Altamirano and Trejo 2016) both in the labor market (Arceo and Campos 2014) and many other public and private spheres (Solís et al. 2019).

To date, people are identified by their physical traits as members of a particular group, independently of their self-adscription to such group (Lamont et al. 2014; Roth 2016). This identification can extend to cultural realms, particularly for indigenous people, due to the common association between their somatic characteristics and cultural criteria (Saldívar 2014). Practices of discrimination[2] include both individual and collective behavior that reproduces asymmetric social relations in a diverse range of social spaces (Solís et al. 2019). Despite their frequency, few studies in Mexico have analyzed them

[1] We acknowledge the contribution of Carlos Arroyo to an earlier version of this section.
[2] Following Solís et al. 2019, we understand discrimination as institutionalised or informal practices leading to unequal treatment or results for certain social groups, reproducing inequalities.

systematically (Solís et al. 2019; CONAPRED 2012; Oehmichen 2007; Moreno 2016; Barabas 1979). While these mostly focus on disenfranchised groups, perception of advantaged groups is equally marked by stereotypes and prejudice, which serve to locate power and point towards a hypothetical pathway to approach it.

Dovetailing a trend observable also in Brazil, Guatemala and Colombia (Wade 2010), Mexico's inclusion of a question on Afro-Mexican identity in its latest census, as well as a skin color palette in the 2015 Intercensal Survey, suggest a return of the public recognition of 'race' as a, though not biological, social-identitary fact. Critics of Latin American multiculturalism—enshrined by Mexico in its 1990s constitutional reform—have underscored its futility for addressing social inequalities, as well as its role in promoting unrealistic 'pure', 'authentic' Indigenous identities. Recent work increasingly understands 'racial' categories as permeable and even fluid due to its context-dependency. Our work attempts to contribute to these efforts.

The empirical fact that browner people occupy positions towards the bottom of the socioeconomic scale while whiter people are located at the top has at times been attributed to historical chance. Denying such disregard of systemic racism, de la Cadena (2000) understands this 'coincidence' as a "culturization" of 'race', suggesting people are *culturally* and not *physically* different. Likewise, Cerón Anaya (2019) shows that racialized notions and class-related assumptions form an amalgamate in the 'racialization of class', where racism is denied by expressing *socioeconomic* differences. He holds that in the lower and middle classes a richer person can be perceived as whiter for exhibiting certain kinds of social status. Due to its 'whiter' composition, the elite is less likely to overlook undervalued 'racial' markers (see also Leal 2016). In sum, an increasing number of studies highlights the fact that racialized profiles hold fixed socioeconomic positions in Mexico, with those perceived as whiter occupying the upper rungs.

Here, we look at the degree to which *approximating* the objective of whiteness 'artificially' to overcome this experience of 'unfittedness' brings individuals closer to their aspired ideal. Not all informants desire to erase their non-white origins, instead approaching aesthetically approved representations as strategic devices to obtain access to material, social and symbolic capital. While

Moreno (2018) focuses on how beauty and whiteness are understood as dependent on ancestry and family relations, our study examines the whitening process in a more immediate fashion. These complementary dynamics should be analysed in conjunction, since, compared to the longer-term effects of assortative matching, the beauty industry is an ideologically charged field that provides practical resources in everyday life to individuals constrained, wishing or reluctant to recreate 'whiter' bodies.

Our focus on a public setting of interaction with professionals that 'help' subjects 'overcome' features considered undesirable (or emphasize desirable ones) shows that very private aspirations are taken to the open, thereby transforming into a collective experience, while simultaneously, reinforcing underlying hierarchies. Thus, we show how in the cosmetic industry certain discriminatory logics based on differences in skin tone and other racialized traits prevail, and indeed prosper.

Methodology

We rely on two main sets of empirical data. The first set comprises the information we collected from 19 focus groups and 35 in-depth interviews conducted as part of El Colegio de México's anti-discrimination project PRODER[3] during the first semester of 2019 in Mexico City, Mérida, Monterrey, and Oaxaca City, as well as in the towns of Oxkutzcab, Teabo, and Valladolid in Yucatán State.[4]

The focus groups included three women and three men each. They were drawn from low, medium and high socioeconomic sectors (SES),[5] respectively. In addition, a fourth group was composed of individuals vulnerable to ethnic/racial discrimination. For Mexico City and Monterrey these encompassed individuals from upper-middle SES who self-identified as "dark-skinned" in the recruitment process, whereas in Oaxaca and Mérida this group comprised participants from upper-middle SES whose parents

[3] The following description relies on Solís et al. (2019).
[4] These towns in Yucatán State were chosen to account for rural perspectives.
[5] Socioeconomic sectors are defined according to the criteria used by the Mexican Association of Marketing Research Agencies (AMAI). The low SES group comprised people classified as C- and D; SES medium was made up of people classified as C, and the high SES group of people classified as A/B and C+ (AMAI n.d.).

spoke an indigenous language.[6]

We then selected 35 interviewees based on their participation in the focus groups: seven interviewees in each of the four large cities (at least one from each focus group) and seven interviewees from the three Yucatán towns (at least one from each town), aiming for a balanced gender composition. We designed the focus group and interview protocols to approach people's cognitive frameworks, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices related to ethnic/racial characteristics. The interviews allowed us to follow-up on issues arising during focus groups. We coded the testimonies in interviews and focus groups based on three main categories: attributes of whiteness; 'whitening', i.e. moldeability of 'racialized' characteristics; and aesthetic perceptions. This left us with over 800 excerpts to analyze in further detail.

The second dataset is based on Urrutia Gómez's doctoral research exploring the different versions of the concept of beauty in Mexico City, and its impact on the work of employees in sales and application of makeup. During fieldwork in 2017-2018, seven semi-open interviews were carried out with workers in this area, of which one was an independent makeup artist and six were employed by formal cosmetic companies (these interviews were coordinated directly with their employers). Each interview generally lasted from 40 minutes to an hour. This corresponded to the duration of a complete makeup service demonstration held simultaneously (in some cases the service was paid for).

In addition, nine participant observations[7] were conducted which included various events such as workshops, demonstrations, anniversary and reopening of stores. All except one were freely available. These focused on companies that had already been contacted for interviews, and with whom links were being established. The researcher intervened as a customer, acquiring products and being part of the audience of the interventions.

[6] We conducted one focus group in each of the three Yucatecan towns, due to the recruitment difficulties in small towns' population.

[7] The anthropological technique of participant observation refers to an ethnographic experience, with the researcher's intentional and unintentional intervention in it, based on the explicit acknowledgement of situated knowledge, i.e. the impossibility of complete non-intervention in social dynamics (Amit 2000).

The main sites in which the ethnography took place were middle and upper class municipalities in Mexico City, as the events promoted by the companies were exclusively held there (although the majority had branches in multiple urban areas). The business segment covered aims at a population with higher purchasing power than the majority of the Mexican population. Meetings with employers were held in the same areas, at their suggestion.

For the interviews and observations, audio-visual recordings, printed material (including merchandise and samples), and virtual information related to each event, brand and company were compiled. Transcribed recordings and videos, including reports of auto-ethnographic remarks from the observations, were digitally encoded.

The multiple dimensions of whiteness

Whiteness becomes a desirable attribute, and by extension an aesthetic asset. "Proper appearance (*buena facha*)" implies "a great preoccupation with race, particularly with the somatic characteristics exhibited by members of the aristocracy", described by Nutini (2004) as being "of Visigothic extraction" and "blond Teutonic types". As we will show in continuation, it is not limited to such primordial biological features though, since it can be activated and performed to varying degrees by those of an originally different complexion willing to enact 'whiteness'.

White is not equal to white in Mexico. Instead, participants share the understanding that there are *shades of white*: somebody can be perceived as "whiter than you" thanks to "taking care of one's appearance" (Monterrey, low)[8] or they can be "güero-güero" or "blanco-blanco" – unambiguously white. More than "especially white", the expression denotes a relative aspect of 'whiteness'. Although neither 'white' nor 'whiteness' have been commonly used terms in Mexico until very recently, their meaning broadened from comprising merely Spaniards in the colonial period, to later accommodate non-Spanish European and Middle Eastern immigrants.

[8] To anonymize testimonies we cite them by location and SES only.

By tracing the transformation of colonial caste categories into postcolonial "cultural categories", Nutini's (1997, 2004) exploration of the 'racial' underpinnings of what he defines as the Mexican aristocracy coincides with the group he identifies as white. The link to the upper class is established through the alleged historical 'racial' composition within a social structure that has remained unaltered (see also Iturriaga 2016). Nevertheless, in this case, just like in Calvo's (2019) case of Galicians in Brazil, associated with poverty and manual labor, the existence of 'second-class whiteness' does not dent the privilege of normative, 'elite whiteness' though (as also present in our data about the 'White Trash'-equivalent of 'güeros de rancho'). Once the social markers of poverty and coarseness could be erased, social mobility ensued swiftly. Likewise, a frequently told story is that of a "not-even-that-white" person shielding herself from the sun to avoid altering her "natural" skin tone (Oaxaca, low).

'Whiteness', and by extension, 'race' is thus a fluid condition, constantly enacted by both observer and observed. Moreover, through the conscious manipulation of certain traits, it can be distorted further. It is context dependent, situational and embedded in specific historical moments (Godreau [2008] describes a similar context-dependency for Puerto Rico). As such, 'race' becomes a highly relational concept. Lacking a fixed definition, 'whiteness' appears as an inextricable component to these groups and a "site of privilege" (Moreno 2010) in the Mexican 'racial hierarchy'. Despite the flexibility characterizing 'race' under *mestizaje*, Moreno underscores an aspiration towards 'whiteness'. Analogously, Cruz (2014, 13) finds physical characteristics attributed to the 'indigenous body' in present-day Mexico to reinforce its subordinate position in the national imagined community, in which personal grooming helps navigate this particular context where "being beautiful is the culmination of a process of cultural incarnation." Eventually, the exalted beauty practices become those of the mestizo population, in opposition to the indigenous population.

'Whiteness' is usually evaluated according to a corporeal manifestation that is not limited to skin color, but includes it as one of its main components (alongside facial features, hair, height, posture, clothing, and others): "When people say it's about whiteness, it's not necessarilly to physically be white, it's about wanting to access things white people have easy access to." (Rao 2019). However, it also

extends to social, cultural and even moral attributes (the latter often being negative), as participants associate whiteness with expressions of affluence, education, or arrogance (Mexico City, vulnerable). As such, "güeros" are considered not only as well-educated, but as "very smart pals" (Monterrey, low) that "tend to express themselves more correctly [in Spanish]" (Oaxaca, low) and generally are "posh [*fresitas*], with their particular way of speaking" (Monterrey, medium).

This is not necessarily meant in a flattering way. Our inquiries about how their 'poshness' is expressed are answered by allusion to allegedly imminent character traits ranging from "nasty and mean, so to speak" over "ostentatious, smug, and wanting to attract attention" (Monterrey, medium) to "very close-minded, very tyrannical [déspota], very selfish" (Mexico City, low) and outright morally corrupted: repeatedly especially whiter migrants are associated with "dishonest work related to Narco business" (Merida, medium) – although with the qualifier that "the white [person] narco is the one in a suit not getting his hands dirty, whereas the brown [person] narco is the one with the gun doing the bad stuff" (Mexico City, low). Moreover, whiteness is associated with avariciousness and self-interest, as "the whites, it's in their culture, always want more, are never satisfied" (Mexico City, low), as well as being more arrogant: "In my experience there are more white people that are super arrogant [*mamonsísimas*], beyond redemption" (Monterrey, low).

Given that much research has linked antisocial behaviour to wealthier people (Piff et al. 2016, Harrington 2016, Piff 2014), we might anticipate a popular association between socioeconomic status and personality traits. However, this participant explicitly de-linked these features from a potential wealth-induced superiority complex, as "there are wealthy brown people, too. This has nothing to do with having money" (Monterrey, low). Considering the empirical fact that in Mexico whiteness and wealth largely coincide, it is unclear however to what degree the much-stressed belief in "white mexicans'…character" (Mexico City, low) remaining even when discoursively stripped of any accompanying wealth, is not instead a product of precisely this entanglement; the uneasy ambivalence of idolized disdain or scornful admiration underscores both an implicit social ranking of these traits and the impossibility of separating (desirable) physical appearance and socioeconomic status. As a participant apologetically clarifies upon

dwelling on her limited positive experience of social interaction with "a white person [*persona güerita*]": "I don't really mingle with super high-class people [*gente de la muy alta*]" (Mexico City, low).

Despite a rejection of alleged character flaws, whiteness is overwhelmingly recognized as a desirable trait in Mexico due to its association with socially desirable personal characteristics like wealth, beauty or preemptive trust. For instance, a frequent concern among interviewees is the perceived "threat" presumably emanating from non-white persons leading to a sense of discomfort, whereas white individuals in practice are gifted with the benefit of the doubt (Oaxaca, vulnerable).

'Whitening' can be part of a conscious effort to secure benefits related to real or perceived white privilege, as well as a side-effect of social mobility. As Fanon describes in Black Skin, White Masks (1952), the sense of inferiority imposed on the non-white population (to keep them oppressed) will entice them to compensate by attempting to imitate the culture of the dominant (colonizer) so as to improve self-worth, but also to allow for social mobility—hence the white mask. Nonetheless, for some, this can never be achieved completely.

Intergenerational whitening

The process of 'becoming white' as not only individual aspiration but family planning project comes forward in a participant's assertion that "thank God my daughters turned out *whiteish*; actually the eyes of one of them are *already quite light"* (Mexico City, vulnerable; our emphasis). The importance attached to 'improving the race[9]' via 'racially assortative' marriage is so prevalent and normalized that it is only sidelined when the even stronger naturalized hierarchy of gender comes into direct conflict with it. Looking for a wife, "if you meet a brown girl (*morenita*) that is diligent, prepares you your hot tortillas, you'd say: 'this one will attend well to me.' She might be brown, but you will get to know her, instead of just going by her looks" (Oaxaca, low). Where both women and brownness on their own are associated

[9] The phrase 'mejorar la raza' is universally acknowledged in Mexico. A related concept, 'grandparenting' ('*abuelar*'), describes genes jumping over one generation so that children inherit features from their presumably whiter grandparents rather than their darker-skinned parents.

with inferior, that is, servicing positions, their combination promises compensation for the foregone aesthetic expectations. Likewise, the overlooking of brownness for the sake of serviceability not only reaffirms an aesthetic preference based on whiteness: among the upper class in Monterrey, whiter appearance is deemed more important than personal characteristics of likability.

A 'light' version of the desire to 'improve the race' over generations by 'upmarrying' into whiter families persists to date. Prior generations' traditional interpretation of a genetic improvement is not considered palatable anymore ("My grandmother and her sisters are kind of racist: 'What do blacks exist for? We need to improve the race. So find a White'" (Monterrey, high). Instead, the modernized version claims personal aesthetic preference to be at play, as opposed to structural factors: "I mean, I like them [women] white, so I'll look for a white girl" (Monterrey, high).

The entanglement of whiteness and aesthetics passes through gendered filters. Due to colonial, religious and social backgrounds, women are assigned the responsibility of being beautiful for the purpose of their assuring subordination to patriarchal powers. Hegemonic ideals enforce a constant demonstration (and validation) of sexual identifications and gender roles. In the materiality of the body, necessary processes of repetition occur in order to maintain its definition within the heteronormative binary pole (Yébenes 2015). Beauty is one of these processes that is still considered a feminine work on themselves, which functions as one of the anchors of their relationship with the outside world (Pedraza 2014). The gendered division of reproductive responsibility for 'whitening' shows in a participant who considers himself "fortunate" to be married to a "pleasant" woman that "has a Northern [Mexican] character and is blond, white-skinned – so calls a lot of attention" (Mexico City, vulnerable).[10]

Particularly women are understood as responsible for the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and body modifications, as it is the maternal responsibility to provide children with appearances that represent the family lineage – and the incarnation of miscegenation. The category "woman" has undergone a long process of symbolic inscription resulting in the essentialized role of motherhood. According to

[10] Although the pressures tend to be stronger for women, participants confirm that men are encompassed by the beauty ideals, too.

Lugones (2008: 97), gender polarities and hegemonic heterosexuality are at the centre of a modern and colonial system in previously occupied territories. By this arrangement, bourgeois and white (or whiter) women reproduce class and social positions of the men affiliated to them to their children, while non-White women are situated in the vacuum of social and racial status, “appearing as the epitome of aberration and sexual excess.” Furthermore, Catholic doctrine has also influenced its definition, founding Marianism which equates femininity to moral superiority, greater religiosity and the onus of instilling them in their progeny (Fuller 1995). Women are recognized as responsible for embodying their family and their nation, symbolizing symbolizing (immaculate) beauty as an ethical value. Their bodies are symbolic carriers of inferiority, thus being "not enjoyable if not by violence or deceit" (Oliart 1991, 10).

Instead, the possibility of contradicting these mandates is opened through practices and objects that serve for bodily enjoyment such as makeup. The sensory enjoyment of feeling different textures, densities, and materialities of cosmetics, which are perceived by the body and intereact with the body’s own sensoriality and carnality, are sought after by clients; and companies strategically encourage in test-driven environments. All cosmetic industry workers interviewed agreed that consumers experience genuine sensible pleasure through the application and trial of makeup, which is then capitalized upon by the providers: Angelo[11] declared he continuously asks his clients to trust him while doing their makeup, with a touch soft enough that some of them fall asleep. Besides racially-defined beauty ideals, makeup can thus provide a space for sensorial delight and, as argued below, cosmetic experimentation.

This quote also illustrates a constant in the ethnography of the cosmetic industry: 4 out of 6 cosmetic workers interviewed in Mexico were men, and among 9 observations, in 4 of them there were more male workers present. Likewise, the majority of people in positions of power in local branches were men; just as there were more male makeup artists and more female sellers. The most prevalent explanation was related to their sexual orientation: "It is a stereotype that gays are much better (than women and heterosexual men) at (cosmetics)." The referred “stereotype” responds to the fact that homosexual men

[11] We use pseudonyms for all makeup industry workers.

are seen as prone to permeate - or at least temporarily transit - gender polarities, and through their occupation contain traditionally feminine knowledge, using it for their own economic and symbolic benefit. Even if not all male workers were comfortable with this assumption, they still profited from incarnating aesthetic authority as they are given a feminine quality that would "innately" bring them closer to beauty practices and subsequent knowledge. The dexterity of (assumed to be homosexual) male employees was acted on feminine and feminized bodies, on whom, in turn, fall greater negative consequences if they choose not to participate in prevailing beauty practices (Connelly 2013). The cosmetic workers largely portray customers as individuals close to femininity; therefore heterosexual men are not thought to be potential clients. Camila commented on her male clients: "Of 100%, 99.9% [sic] of them are working in the makeup industry and only 1% enters (the store) because it caught their attention, (…) they want a gift for their wives or they sent them to buy something (laughs). Our market is not made for men because in the end it *is* makeup" (our emphasis).

Beyond the personal sphere, a selection bias perpetuates the aspiration to whiteness in other realms of daily life. Participants from all cities and SES included second Arceo-Gomez and Campos-Vazquez (2014) finding that, with identical qualifications, lighter-skinned, more European looking women were more likely to get job interviews than darker-skinned, more indigenous looking women. This preference was less clear for male mock applications. Additionally, applications with manipulated pictures showed clear biases for thinness, pointing to aesthetic preferences at play even in sectors that do not primarily depend on appearance. Our data confirm these findings: participants repeatedly comment on recruitment practices issuing explicit demands for "neat appearance" (*buena presencia*), understood to mean 'light-skinned' (Oaxaca, vulnerable; Mexico City, vulnerable) (see also Solís et al. 2019).

These preferences are particularly prevalent in the media and advertising sectors, for instance in the scouting for actors classified explicitly as "*tipo Polanco*" (resembling someone hailing from the northern Mexico City upper class neighbourhood *Polanco*), a marketing agency speak for a neither-brown-nor-blond-and-blue-eyed person for Mexico's national airline Aeroméxico (Radioformula 2013). They apologized grudgingly without addressing the racialized classism conveyed through the very label

the typification was based on.

Besides, there is the 'magical whitening' effect of publicity, where drinking a certain alcohol brand, or driving a certain car will automatically make its owner appear lighter (Navarrete 2017). Whiteness becomes glamourized and upended as the ultimate standard of valid humanity. Turning to the role the cosmetic sector plays in this process, in continuation we show that, with few exceptions, the industry has not significantly increased their representation of ethnic diversity in Mexico since the proclamation of colonizers' expressions of beauty as superior five centuries ago.

The beauty complex

Cosmetics is the discursive and symbolic field under which the presentation of the subject is altered to make him or her embody beauty. The expanding Mexican cosmetic market boasts earnings of $1.98 billion in 2018, equivalent to each person spending $15.07 annually on its merchandise. Of this amount, $274 million correspond to makeup sales (Statista, 2018a and 2018b). Worldwide, it generates $500 billion in sales a year (Gerstell et. al 2021). Even if national earnings decreased by 2.4% due to the current pandemic, it is expected to recover in 2021 (Espinosa 2020). According to the classical Greek view, grooming represented order as opposed to the physical and social chaos of the world, linking beauty to morality (Power 2010). This definition influenced the interpretation of beauty as a symbol of status and sexual selection during the Renaissance. The emerging classification system of beauty arranged individuals according to their possessions, and ugliness became stigmatized and associated with racialized traits (Synnott 1989). Goods and empirical know-how related to the body circulated from Western Europe to the rest of the continent and then to the colonized American lands. Later, it would contribute to the formation of an incipient cosmetic industry in the 19th century. Centuries of perpetuating this particular understanding of beauty culminate in the 'intuitive' (if imagined) assignation of physical, social *and* moral attributes to whiteness in contemporary Mexico.

All valuations and practices related to the beauty and bodies of the American populations became branded as inferior with the arrival of Spanish colonizers, and were progressively abandoned. After the

Spanish conquest, Europeans were deemed beautiful in America, and their Creole descendants aimed to keep their corporeality as far removed as possible from non-White appearances. In this context, imported cosmetics arrived in America. In the viceroyalty of New Spain, their public use met with a pejorative gaze by Spanish natives and their descendants, due to the moralistic vision of the Mediterranean system of honor (Del Águila 2003). By the 19th century, cosmetics came to signal their porters' luxury of leisure, and hence a necessity to distance oneself from poverty via its conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899). The hygienic ideal and the obsession to categorize the clarity of skin increased consumption of whitening lotions and lip colorants, irrespective of their mercury or arsenic contents[12]. The shared aesthetic standards of producers and cosmetic users coincided with the eugenic currents of the 19th and 20th centuries, where beauty was associated with a higher eugenic scale (Jarrín 2010) and miscegenation a tool to "perfect" the body. In the early 20th century European and U.S.-American beauty companies turned their attention to Latin America's elites, merging the westernized care of the body with a search for whiteness and purity of European blood. To these consumers, beauty already embodied social differentiation and was an achievable goal (Solís 2012). The 'whitened' profiles of women in cosmetic advertising are discussed since the sixties, yet, with few exceptions, the industry has not moved towards a significantly more ethnically diverse representation.

Raciality in the cosmetics industry

When asking Mexicans what is beautiful, certain attributes constantly reappear. According to participants, "beautiful is always the whitest" (Merida, high). Indeed, *light-skinned* is often used interchangeably with *beautiful* in the description of an attractive person, especially for women (see also Moreno 2010). Likewise, *tall* and *slim* are features immediately associated with whiteness and beauty alike (see also Mears 2020). The categorization of white bodies as beautiful extends beyond physical description, to

[12] Due to its high prevalence among the upper classes in Western Europe, during the 18th and early 19th centuries, cultural ideas about beauty intertwined with the reality of tuberculosis (then known as consumption). The "consumptive chic" (Day, 2017) allowed the ravages of the illness – which include "delicate, transparent skin, as well as fine, silky hair" – to be seen as markers of beauty (Day, 2018). Among those spared by the disease, the fashionable "ivory skin" was to be emulated through the use of makeup.

socioeconomic positions. Describing clothing style, mannerisms, and posture typically associated with wealthy people, participants use these filters in either direction. This tautological definition precludes non-white people from being perceived as beautiful, except by way of 'whitening' themselves.

Aesthetics - the set of values considered appropriate to determine the perception of beauty - enter all spheres of contemporary life, with strong links to individuality and responsibility (Frankenberger 2008). It establishes a stratified system that acts to maintain pre-established relations of dominance and meaning; being considered beautiful is a way of positioning the individual in class, 'racial', and gender hierarchies.

In practice, *perfect skin* was almost universally mentioned as an aesthetic principle: *healthy* (matching the entire face with foundation in a single color), *lush* skin (using highlighters to give the impression that the skin is hydrated and nourished), and without signs of disease (acne, rosacea) or age (fine lines). Consumers respond to aesthetic norms where non-disclosure of makeup ('natural look') is praised while hiding part of the body. During Sara's demonstration, she put pigmented eyebrow gel on the model and did not apply any other pigment on the eyebrow. The makeup artist accompanying her at this event added that this "is a very strong trend, more natural" "Natural" beauty was elevated above any transitory fashion; when asked about what beauty meant Dana answered: "Beauty… beautiful skin. Beautiful as natural (…), be able to take a bath and go out just like that." Benjamín defined beauty as "seize the products and using them to your advantage (...), highlighting what you already have naturally without having to apply too much (makeup)." All of them respond to the idea that inherent beauty exists, but it needs cosmetics (makeup and skin care) to "let it out" (Urrutia Gómez 2013). It is strongly related to the outer appearance of what a healthy body is assumed to look like and youthfulness without requiring the actual personification of physical health or chronological age (Ídem).

About youthfulness, it is worth noting that it is one of the corporeal signs to be acquired that allow self-identification with an idealization of youth (Rivera 2018), which in turn is related to what is not shown through in a "youthful" face (rosy cheeks, plump lips, smooth skin without sun spots or wrinkles according to the interviewees). Not only signs of ageing, but tiredness are hidden: Ricardo put eyeliner

on the inner corner of his model's eye explaining "(you should use) one that is the colour of your skin. Sometimes the water line is reddened and the eyes look bloodshot. This is like putting on a few eye drops." In other words, he removes all traces of bodily signs that are a consequence of the daily lives of those who cannot afford to keep their temporary proximity to aesthetic models, because their income does not allow them to.

Workers in the makeup sector unanimously perceived the body as highly malleable and thus categorizable, making themselves interpreters of bodily presentations. Those individuals approaching proclaimed aesthetic models are preferred as customers over those clients whose perceived ugliness is a source of social exclusion (Jarrín 2017) and a sign of poverty. "Natural" appearances are also associated with a higher quality of life; differentiating consumers who might already embody certain aesthetic standards and those who do not. The skin and its embodiment of beauty becomes the material proof of lifestyle and purchasing power (Mull 2019).

The difference between facial and bodily color also matters. Interviewees indicated that their clients generally had "wrong" ideas about how to choose the color of skin products, with a tendency to choose lighter shades or undertones (meaning nuances of colours underlying skin tone) that were not yellow, according to them prevalent among Latin American customers. Supporting our findings about shades of white perceived among the Mexican population at large outlined above, makeup workers universally recognized there are not simply "light" or "dark" skin colors. The gradations and combinations between skin tones and undertones have long been addressed by the cosmetic industry. They represent embodied knowledge permanently in dialogue with the audience's own bodily perceptions, which is reproduced through companies' training, display of merchandise and beauty tutorials.

Another factor are facial proportions. According to Kevin, the makeup artist's duty is to detect the "morphology of the face" and adapt his knowledge to the faces he will make up: "We all have different features and different face shapes (…), the facial muscles, the shape of the eyes, the shape of the mouths." The aim to fit corporeality into exact appraisals comes from two sources. The first one is in its origins; in ancient Greece, each part of the body was understood by means of geometric measurements and its

materiality was ideally adjusted to numerical proportions (Eco 2010 [2004]). The second one stems from the relationship of cosmetics with anatomy and medicine. The beauty industry borrows their scientific vocabulary for face and body parts, as well as measurement parameters. The parallel development of the hygiene and cosmetics sectors assimilated beauty with cleanliness and whiteness; its products served to 'civilize' colonized peoples, ignoring the practices of local societies (Jones 2010). However, at the beginning of the 20th century the still budding industry claimed that makeup can help overcome deterministic prejudices: Max Factor made specific products for the skin tones of Latina Hollywood actresses from the "golden age" of Hollywood cinema like Rita Hayworth, Dolores del Río and María Montez (Basten 2008) (who arguably would be considered light-skinned in the Mexican context though); the actresses' mouths and eyes became larger; and the cheekbones were more angled to reinforce the specificity of their features under a technique known as contouring.[13]

'Western' beauty standards adopted in contemporary Mexico were imposed by European, Mediterranean and Catholic dogmas. This background generated politically and socially correct formulas that maintain racism on a daily basis. In Mexico City, where "the social identity assigned to women depends on their image" (Castillo 2010, 149), women from indigenous communities recount actually modifying their bodies in response to experiences of racist discrimination and threats of job loss (Castillo 2010).

Currently, contouring is used to reproduce an ideal 'oval' face, which emulates European and 'White' features. For Angelo, it serves to make the face "slimmer", with a "nose more refined, (…) the forehead smaller, the cheekbones higher and the cheeks thinner; I'm going to hide part of the chin". The shape of each part of the face can be altered and adjusted to a facial format every makeup artist demonstrated as a quasi-universal pattern, and almost all customers accepted for it to be painted on their faces, without questioning why this model would be desired or what it intends to emulate. Akin to Fanon's

[13] Make-up technique originating in theatre, adopted in the United States' drag community to emulate faces of cisgender women: through a combination of colors the bone structure of the face is changed. In the 1990s, makeup artist Kevyn Aucoin popularized it in the fashion industry (Aucoin 2000).

(1952) epidermal schema, for our participants 'White' describes an entire package way beyond skin tone. If facial recognition reaffirms individuation, erasing certain physiognomies implies a negation of that person as such, and the related potentially lasting stigma of a devalued human condition (Le Bréton 2010). This holds particularly for the (modifiable) nose as an indicator of both beauty and racial fixity (Jarrín 2017).

The preference for whiteness is often presented as a kind of primordial physical reaction where "to the human eye, white is more soothing" (Merida, high). These systematic biases, presented as obvious and self-explanatory, matter as "the majority of human beings get persuaded by appearances; they prioritize a white person, who apparently looks better" (Oaxaca, low). The association between whiteness and beauty has the practical consequence of creating a hierarchisation of phenotypes. Its normalization as a 'fact of nature', moreover, precludes even questioning the resulting hierarchy as illegitimate, thus aiding its perpetuation.

The perfidy of this discourse lies in its internalization through recurrence, often since early childhood. Even without dismissive action by a third party, one is impacted by the consequences of beauty standards: "I used to feel that I wasn't pretty because I wasn't as light as they were" (Merida, vulnerable). Embedded in participants' most intimate environments, such feelings are transmitted by the closest family ties: "My sister says, 'you should change your hair color'. Sometimes there is pressure to dye your hair, lighten it that is. My sister right away dyed her older daughter's hair; she says, 'I'm already waiting for the other one's birthday so that I can dye her hair blond[er]… I haven't [asked the girls], but I suppose they are OK with it since they agree to being dyed; it must make them feel better" (Merida, high). Thus, feelings of shame towards one's own appearance are extended to one's children and carry over to the next generation seamlessly. This channel is confirmed by another participant, sharing her niece's reaction when (proclaimedly affectionately) addressed as "negra" by her family: "'I'm not dark-skinned. I'm white, I'm just sunburned'. She is ashamed of her color" (Merida, low).

'Racially' discriminated groups can come to loathe their looks, assuming the perspective of the oppressive ideology: "these [whitening] filters you got now [on your cellphones], I have used them. And

now I'm wondering, why? Why don't I just leave my actual color? We are our own worst enemies! Somehow society made us internalize these expectations" (Merida, vulnerable). Double consciousness means to see oneself as divided. Du Bois (1903) described it as "a peculiar sensation, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity".However, this fractured perspective allows for the recognition of discourses that justify those feelings and practices of rejection (Tate 2014), and allegedly helped participants to acknowledge their own intrinsic beauty eventually. Edmonds' (2010) claim of beauty as a distinct realm of modern experience besides other inequalities (see also Mears 2020) grants an (ambiguous) emancipatory potential to cosmetics usage to challenge traditional hierarchies.

Aesthetic alternatives and 'inclusive' beauty

Some cracks in these standards can be observed. The word *inclusion* arose in the launch of a highly-demanded brand. It stood out at that time for its variety of available base shades. As Barton (2017) argues, other mainstream brands have also attempted to produce makeup for a bigger diversity of complexions, but most of the shades produced stay in the range of lighter colors. Although it is difficult to gauge to what degree this strategy stems from conviction as opposed to (skin-deep) marketing performance, the fact that many of the darker shades do not typically feature in mainstream makeup brands now generated criticism towards them. This brand was also created by a woman of African descent. She joins other non-white producers that are manufacturing medium and high-end cosmetics whose shade range contrasts with more established companies' makeup offer. Their staff appeared aware of this fact, and tried to avoid any reference to the definition of beauty. Asked about what he meant when an "ideal beauty" slipped out, one employee immediately backed off to say that he considered all people beautiful, regardless of their race.

Those employed to receive makeup applications were almost always slim, young, and light-skinned women. The complexion of the models demonstrated the makeup offer, but also embodied the aesthetic expectations. Despite the systematic biases displayed, employees were expected to know how to work on anyone regardless of ethnicity. Makeup artist and beauty institute-owner Tatiana

recommended “presenting finished looks[14] applied on people of all colors and flavors. *You don't know who is watching*. I would never consider hiring you if you only upload photos with *young people, blondes*” (our emphasis).

This type of criticism was more prevalent among clients, who frequently wished to buy skin makeup color-alteration free. In one company, a recurrent complaint was that certain products *"look too light."* While there certainly exists large demand for whitening cosmetics and lighter makeup, the brand’s middle and upper class clientele either were already perceived as white or light-skinned, or did not gain any benefits from looking ‘whiter’. This contrasts sharply with strategies by women from lower social segments, who presumably have more to gain from whitening – even if their “powdering” ends up revealing noticeable difference between face and neck color, exposing (inferior) ‘fake’ whiteness (Oaxaca, vulnerable). Following the aesthetic ideal of ‘naturally’ lighter skin, ‘whitened’ appearances present “an autobiographical revision of race performed on the surface of one’s own body”. (Dorman 2011, 49) Where the pre-modified body approaches the ideal, alterations will underscore this ‘natural’ closeness, as perceived artificiality can nullify the status expression altogether. At the same time, makeup companies have no problem conferring their products a transformative quality that has been publicized since the origins of the cosmetic industry (Tungate 2011). The resulting appearances are thus mediated by a shared racial ideology and consumerist practices, where the proximity of each corporality to the standard of whiteness defines the degree to which they are cosmetically modified.

Other critiques have come from the press and civil society. For instance, the claim spread through advertising that beauty practices and mental health are linked has been heavily scrutinized; however, during fieldwork several clients proclaimed that using makeup makes them “feel good”. Experimenting with makeup allegedly delighted some workers and customers that wished to get themselves a treat; time devoted for these practices was seen as precious. During a makeup application or a visit to a cosmetics store, the user is the main focus and the time spent is exclusive to him or her. Well-being was the most

[14] Complete makeup applications, covering every part of the face (eyes, mouth, cheeks and nose were mostly mentioned).

frequent answer to the question about what beauty means to industry employees. Notwithstanding, products marketed around these concepts are generally expensive and high-end, and tend to recreate "natural" makeup, while promoting cosmetics as a tool to "unleash" an inherent beauty. The underlying discourse seems to address subjects already conforming to aesthetic expectations: slim, young, physically healthy, and white. Health and beauty are sold as aspirational values that demand not only modifications on the body but also socially recognizable actions (Ahmed 2014).

Brands have integrated local preferences into their portfolios, albeit handing over to the workers who face the public the negotiation of the subjective demands of consumers and the discourses of their sector. Thus, personal presentations vary because social reproduction does not obey an immutable structure and innovative elaborations offer a space of restricted freedom. Adding to this that in Latin America, fragmented symbolic fields are not unambiguously subordinated to dominant classes and cultures, but rather interrelate under unequal conditions (Miceli 1972), it is not possible to speak of a cosmetics industry that simply imposes aesthetic templates to imitate. Instead, clients and practitioners find themselves with a number of information inputs and repertoires of cosmetic practices to select and adapt to their own predilections.

Safeguarding client preferences can sometimes clash with worker's professional viewpoints, like in the case of recognized local consumer appreciations for coverage, in practice implying the obvious use of makeup with color. For Osvaldo, these are idiosyncratic preferences of Mexican clients: "there are products in Asia you don't have here: moisturizers, sunblock; but you bring it to Mexico and it's like 'no, give me makeup, something that covers me, that coats me'." Users want to demonstrate they incorporate beauty patterns through coverage, while workers reject this practice for going against learned aesthetic principles like *"perfect skin"*. Demand seems to obey the prescription of a skin that embodies aesthetically and socially accepted versions, but also the ostentation of applied makeup. Here, whiteness contributes to define beauty in Mexico, while factors like local preferences demonstrate that skin color is not enough to comprehend aesthetic ideals and its subsequent cosmetic practices.

Conclusion

We have shown that whiteness in Mexico implies a package of features beyond skin color, including facial features and bodily attributes, but also socioeconomic and cultural indicators, all intrinsically entangled with assumptions about wealth and loaded with aesthetic values. While particularly women are pressured to adhere to female beauty standards that require physical transformation to 'whiten' their bodies, such behavior is also criticized where considered 'unnatural' and hence acquiring a notion of class imposter. This judgment follows strict racialized and class markers which can overrule the aspirational modification towards whiteness.

The consequences of this discrimination can be severe, especially for young women and girls, leading to distorted self-images, mental health issues, infliction of self-harm in attempts to alter their appearance through highly toxic and/or dangerous substances, and high financial costs for products and services with or without real effects.

Aesthetics serve as the basis for cultural and material productions that, if accepted uncritically, would keep gaps between its participants without questioning the resulting inequality. The agents who exercise discrimination in this realm include employees in the cosmetic industry who keep reproducing racially marked aesthetic models following the instructions of the companies that hire and train them, reinforcing a singular definition of beautiful. Also clients are involved, as they continue to consume products and propagate a specific image in an attempt to approach their ideal self. At the same time, makeup serves as a device to challenge symbolic and commercial barriers. Multiple questioning and alternate cosmetic presentations concur, demonstrating resistance to ingrained modes of embodying beauty.

The range of responses uttered by our informants might seem contradictory at times, but we believe it proves that there is a wide spectrum of reactions, strategies and affinities to whiteness. We have incorporated the points of view of people with different degrees of access to symbolic and material resources, and class assignments to validate whiteness' ubiquitous weight. Being and looking 'White' is a mostly shared aspiration and an aesthetic value by itself; while the disposition, negotiation or reluctance

towards it translates into constructed appearances and multifaceted performances. The cosmetics industry is an enabler of either of these. Herein lies both its curse and the hope for change.

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