

ARTICLE

## Not in the Eye of the Beholder: Racialization, Whiteness, and Beauty Standards in Mexico

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### Abstract

This article explores the role “whiteness” takes on in Mexico, where colonial, religious, and social heritages elevate it as an aesthetic ideal, simultaneously denying its underlying racism. It argues that skin tone is one of many physical and nonphysical features that together shape the concept of whiteness in a context of fluid, relational, and intertwined categories of class and racial classifications. Women in particular are pressured to “whiten” their bodies in adherence to beauty standards that reflect the collective aspiration of the country’s ethnically mixed society. Using empirical evidence, the article outlines Mexicans’ aesthetic perceptions and explores their attempts to approach these through bodily presentations and adjustments. It then discusses how the local beauty industry acts as a practical tool and a discursive mediator toward racialized appearances. Possessing its own historical, political, and racial background deeply entangled with whiteness, this sector reinforces the subjective basis of discriminatory practices in Mexico.

**Keywords:** whiteness; racism; Mexico; cosmetics; beauty; gender

### Resumen

Exploramos el papel que asume la “blanquitud” en México, donde las herencias coloniales, religiosas y sociales la elevan como un ideal estético, al mismo tiempo que niegan su racismo subyacente. Argumentamos que el tono de la piel es una de las muchas características físicas y no físicas que en conjunto dan forma al concepto de “blanquitud” en un contexto de categorías fluidas, relacionales y entrelazadas por clasificaciones de clase y “raciales”. En especial, las mujeres son presionadas a “blanquear” sus cuerpos en cumplimiento de los estándares de belleza que reflejan la aspiración colectiva de la sociedad étnicamente mixta del país. Con base en evidencia empírica, delineamos las percepciones estéticas de los mexicanos y exploramos su intento de abordarlas a través de presentaciones y ajustes corporales. Luego, discutimos cómo la industria local de la belleza actúa como una herramienta práctica y un mediador discursivo hacia apariencias racializadas. Poseedor de su propio trasfondo histórico, político y racial profundamente imbricado con la blanquitud, el sector refuerza la base subjetiva de las prácticas discriminatorias en México.

**Palabras clave:** blanquitud; racismo; México; cosméticos; belleza; género

Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye.

—William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*

To illuminate the complex relationship between appearance and vision; between physiognomy . . . and the eyes of the beholder.  
—Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*

In contemporary Mexico, the racialized physical trait of skin tone mediates most everyday interactions (Chávez-Dueñas, Adames, and Organista 2014; Dixon and Telles 2017; Ortiz-Hernández et al. 2011). It is not unusual for people in many countries to make social classifications based on physical traits via a process of racialization, that is, by linking specific external physical attributes with human qualities (Webster 1993; Segato 2010; Wade 2010). However, the Mexican case presents a conundrum as an officially “raceless” nation (Navarrete 2017) that nonetheless articulates an idiosyncratic understanding of an explicitly or implicitly desirable “whiteness.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, a racialized appearance is associated with status, wealth and beauty, leading to a social consensus in which “‘light’ is seen as ‘right’” (Winders, Jones, and Higgins 2005, 72) and simultaneously as an elusive and contentious demarcation. In this article, we explore the meanings this constellation takes on in a context often unaware of the dimension of its own racism (Sue 2009; Appelbaum 2020).

Less than 12 percent of contemporary Mexicans self-identify as white (Solís, Güémez, and Lorenzo 2019). However, in the collective imaginary of a country that has experienced processes of racialization and social stratification since colonial times, being “white” matters. It not only embodies a set of values but a promise of social ascension through *mestizaje*: the “Bronze race” strives to whiten itself toward an idealized European complexion.

Seen through the lens of social outcomes, this aspiration ostensibly makes sense. Individuals with lighter skin color have, on average, higher wages and a higher level of education compared to those with darker skin tones (Flores and Telles 2012; Telles, Flores, and Urrea-Giraldo 2015), contributing to an unequal distribution of opportunities (Monroy-Gómez-Franco, Vélez, and Yalonetzky 2018), occupational status (Villarreal 2010), and wealth (Solís, Güémez, and Lorenzo 2019) in Mexico. This privileged position of whiteness on the class spectrum idealizes it. Additionally, a constant media representation of whiteness as beautiful highlights its desirability. In Navarrete’s (2017, 17) words, this “chromatic scale” 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.”

Owing to this associative conflation of wealth and beauty, it is difficult to draw an exact line between “natural” and “artificial” whiteness. Catering to this ambiguity, a vast supplementary industry with merchandise valued collectively at \$31.2 billion by 2024 (World Health Organization 2019) lives off the aspiration to whiteness: the cosmetics complex.

The cosmetics industry functions as intermediary on the personal journey toward becoming whiter. Its interventions range from superficial and temporary to profoundly health threatening. For instance, Mexico produces numerous skin-whitening creams, some—unlabeled (Peregrino et al. 2011)—containing dangerous concentrations of mercury, which are widely sold. At the same time, aesthetic appreciation smoothly aligns with

<sup>1</sup> The country’s foundational myth subjects all Mexicans to the mixed-race identity of *mestizo*, following the narrative of an allegedly complete merger of Indigenous peoples and colonists to form the racially superior “Bronze race” (Vasconcelos 1925), combining the best of two worlds (Indian and Spanish).

racialized models as part of the collective aspiration of an ethnically mixed society toward white appearances.

These mundane practices of discrimination with regard to beautification and bodily “improvements” remain underexplored in the discussion about whiteness as an aesthetic preference in Mexico. Although some studies explicitly address the racialization of beauty in Mexico (Castillo 2010; Cruz 2014; Gall 2016; Iturriaga 2016; Moreno 2006, 2010, 2016; Rivera 2018; Navarrete 2017; Solís 2012), they tend to focus on the personal or social consequences of this link or its (historical) origins.<sup>2</sup> The cosmetic industry as a versatile enabler of this expression across different societal strata has received less academic attention. 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 us understand how these concepts are socially constructed and validated around whiteness every day.

Our main argument is that socially desirable features are conflated with whiteness, which is composed of a variety of different physical traits. Although these in practice cannot be disentangled, the overall profile can be (cosmetically) altered. Thus, skin tone as a social marker is intrinsically related to other physical and nonphysical 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.

Of the various underlying meanings whiteness possesses and which are expressed corporeally through a diverse set of practices, below we examine those related to the cosmetic industry. After a brief contextualization and discussion of our empirical evidence on ethnic-racial discrimination and beauty standards collected among both the broader public and cosmetics professionals, we outline Mexicans’ aesthetic perceptions and describe how these dreams are (supposedly) realized via intergenerational and/or personal whitening. As the promise of benefiting from whitening has a specific gendered structure, we explore the different routes toward 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

Whiteness is a multifaceted concept that has been associated with bodily traits, racial categorization, and colonial classifications.<sup>3</sup> For instance, following Nutini (2004, 60–63), “good appearance (*buena facha*)” implies “a great preoccupation with race, particularly with the somatic characteristics exhibited by members of the aristocracy,” whom he describes as “blond Teutonic types” of “Visigothic extraction.” Here, whiteness is something foreign and intrinsic that needs to be preserved to maintain superior status.

Nevertheless, Moreno (2010) emphasizes an aspiration toward whiteness among other social groups, too, enabled by the flexibility characterizing race in a mestizo nation. 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 a particular context where “being beautiful is the culmination of a process of cultural incarnation.” In both cases, the exalted beauty practices become those of the mestizo population, in opposition to the Indigenous and Afro-Mexican population; that is, whitening formerly nonwhite bodies becomes explicitly possible and desirable. Its concrete manifestations depend on rank. Cerón

<sup>2</sup> Related studies throughout Latin America include Ramos (2020); Calvo González (2019); Chávez-Dueñas, Adames, and Organista (2014); Jarrín (2010, 2017); and Pedraza (2014).

<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge the contribution of Carlos Arroyo to an earlier version of this section.

(2019) posits that in the lower and middle classes, a richer person can be perceived as whiter by exhibiting certain kinds of social status. Owing to its whiter composition, the elite is less likely to overlook racialized markers associated with lower status (see also Leal 2016). These studies mostly focus on the realm of natural bodies and strategies of intergenerational or behavioral whitening, including resistance and critiques of it. As we will show, whiteness is not limited to biological features, since it can be activated and performed to varying degrees by individuals with widely diverging complexions. 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. The strategic value of bodily modifications, which may or may not denote (racialized) beauty, lies in the understanding of the body as finitely malleable. Our observations converse with what Hunter (2011, 145) calls “racial capital”: “a resource drawn from the body that can be related to skin tone, facial features, body shape, etc.” However, racial capital is not limited to being read as pertaining to a certain racialized profile; it explicitly encompasses features noted to be faked, in contrast to a natural state of the body.

Whiteness—and by extension, race—is thus a fluid condition, constantly enacted by both observer and observed (see also Martínez-Casas et al. 2014). Moreover, through the conscious manipulation of certain traits, it can be distorted further. It is context dependent, situational, and embedded in specific historical moments (see also Godreau 2008). Thus race becomes a highly relational concept. Despite lacking a fixed definition, whiteness appears as an inextricable component and a “site of privilege” (Moreno 2010) in the Mexican racial hierarchy. To preserve the subtle nuances and everyday implications the term contains, our understanding here relies on the definitions advanced by our interviewees.

Participants perceive whiteness as a desirable multidimensional attribute and, by extension, an aesthetic asset, which they adjust according to the context in which it is expressed and the structural conditions that affect them. For them, whiteness entails race but also class, gender, and more; its moldability and situationality vindicates our use of contextual ethnographic research to better comprehend it.

Although social stratification by skin color is an empirical reality in Mexico, the denial of racism explicitly purported by national elites of the postrevolutionary regime (Knight 1990) prevails as a cultural project today (Cerón 2019). It serves to legitimize the privileges brought about by personifying whiteness, historically held by a racialized minority. Institutionalized or informal practices of discrimination in the labor market (Arceo and Campos 2014) and many other public and private spheres (Solís et al. 2019; Trejo and Altamirano 2016) are variously explained away by a “culturization” of race, suggesting people are culturally and not physically different (de la Cadena 2000), or a racialization of class, by which racialized notions and class-related assumptions amalgamate to express allegedly merely socioeconomic differences (Cerón 2019). Despite their frequency, few studies in Mexico have analyzed these discrimination practices systematically, focusing on disenfranchised groups (Solís et al. 2019; CONAPRED 2012; Oehmichen 2007; Moreno 2016; Barabas 1979). However, perception of advantaged groups is equally marked by stereotypes and prejudice, which serve to locate power and point toward a hypothetical pathway to approach it.

In the data collected, not all informants desire to erase their nonwhite origins, and instead approach aesthetically approved representations as strategic devices to obtain access to material, social, and symbolic capital. In this way, we dialogue with contributions by authors like Castillo (2010), Cruz (2014), and Rivera (2018), whose ethnographic data on the subject in Mexico expose convoluted paths of negotiation, denial, and incarnation of whiteness. This is because beauty is not one-dimensional, nor are its racialized ideals imposed without question. While whiteness is extolled through consumption and cosmetic practices, our findings also reveal that the benefits expected by getting closer to its bodily

aspects may be gained through other ways of social recognition and access to material resources. Our focus on a public setting of interaction with professionals who 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

As we are interested in exploring the nexus between class, racialization, and gender with regard to Mexicans' aesthetic preferences, as well as the practical enactment of these preferences, we follow a mixed methodology. Our analysis relies on information collected from nineteen focus groups and thirty-five in-depth interviews exploring perceptions of racialized profiles, socioeconomic characteristics, and aesthetic preferences and their connections, alongside an ethnography 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.

The focus groups and interviews were conducted as part of El Colegio de México's Proyecto sobre Discriminación Étnico-Racial en México (PRODER) during the first semester of 2019 in Mexico City, Mérida, Monterrey, and Oaxaca City (to represent regional variety), as well as in the towns of Oxtutzcab, Teabo, and Valladolid in Yucatán State (to account for rural perspectives).<sup>4</sup> Each group included three women and three men. They were drawn from low, medium, and high socioeconomic sectors (SES), respectively.<sup>5</sup> In addition, a fourth group was composed of individuals vulnerable to ethnoracial 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 spoke an Indigenous language.<sup>6</sup>

To follow up on issues arising during focus groups, thirty-five interviewees were selected following their participation in the group: 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. Focus group discussions and interview protocols approached people's cognitive frameworks, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices related to ethnoracial characteristics. For this article, we coded the resulting testimonies using three main categories: attributes of whiteness; "whitening," that is, moldability of racialized characteristics; and aesthetic perceptions. This left us with over eight hundred excerpts to analyze in further detail.

The ethnographic data of the cosmetic sector, collected by Gómez in 2017–2018, include seven semi-structured interviews with six workers employed by formal cosmetic companies (these interviews were coordinated directly with their employers) and one independent makeup artist. The interviews lasted from forty minutes to an hour, corresponding to the duration of a complete makeup service demonstration held simultaneously (in some cases the service was paid for). Furthermore, nine participant observations were conducted, which included various events such as workshops, demonstrations, anniversaries,

<sup>4</sup> See also Solís et al. (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Socioeconomic sectors are defined according to the criteria used by the Mexican Association of Marketing Research Agencies (AMAI); see <https://www.amai.org/NSE/index.php?queVeo=niveles>. 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+.

<sup>6</sup> We conducted one focus group in each of the three Yucatecan towns because of the recruitment difficulties due to the towns' small population.

and reopening of stores. All except one were open to the public. The researcher participated as a customer, acquiring products and being part of the audience of the interventions.

The fact that the events promoted by the companies were held exclusively in middle- and upper-class municipalities in Mexico City (although the majority had branches in multiple urban areas) allowed us to further explore the relationship between aesthetics, wealth, and status. The purchasing power of the business segment targeted exceeds that of most Mexicans. Meetings with employers were held in the same areas, at their suggestion. The visited establishments had a similar audience profile: young adult women, dressed in Western clothes. Their bodies were not necessarily uniform, nor did all buyers possess a specific bodily trait. However, there were very few or no Afro-Mexicans present among either employees or public, and in some demonstrations the makeup artists signaled the ethnographer (of Indigenous and Asian origins) as an example of a darker skin tone and elongated eye shape, absent within the rest of the attendees. The exceptions were one store's anniversary, which attracted a more socioeconomically diverse and younger public because of the presence of a known influencer; a pop-up shop organized by a company selling Japanese and Korean cosmetics, which many teenagers attended; a company branch located in an LGBTQ+-friendly neighborhood whose consumers were predominantly men; and a paid-admission, international congress where the audience was divided equally into cosmetics users, workers, and makeup artists.

For the interviews and observations, audiovisual recordings, printed material (including merchandise and samples), and virtual information related to each event, brand, and company were compiled.

### The multiple dimensions of whiteness

How do different socioeconomic and class-identified groups understand and enact beauty and whiteness? Our interview and focus group data, comprising responses of informants from various geographic locations and class backgrounds, give insights into participants' shared perceptions, which are strongly linked with their respective social positions. The ethnographic data provide more detail on related practices and their enactment, specifically among upper-middle class individuals. Perceptions of beauty are highly consistent in all subjects from both datasets. In aggregate, they display the possibilities of physical moldability to create appearances; they capture whiteness embedded in its Mexican context. We find that the corporeal is not necessarily a manifestation but a creation adjusted to variable needs, tastes, expectations, and possibilities. As such, all "white" is not equally "white" in Mexico. Instead, participants share a belief in shades of white: employing relational racial classification, somebody can be perceived as "whiter than you" thanks to "taking care of one's appearance" (Monterrey, low)<sup>7</sup> 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 referring only to Spaniards in the colonial period to later accommodating non-Spanish European and Middle Eastern immigrants.

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).

<sup>7</sup> To anonymize testimonies we cite them by location and SES only.



Nevertheless, similar to Calvo Gonzalez's (2019) study 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 (also present in our data in the term *güeros de rancho*, equivalent to "white trash"). 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 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 (substitutable to varying degrees). However, skin tone not only functions as a blanket term for a set of physical features but is also a lifestyle proxy: "When people say it's about whiteness, it's not necessarily to physically be white, it's about wanting to access things white people have easy access to" (Rao 2019). It further extends to social, cultural, and even moral attributes (the latter often being negative), as participants associate Mexican whiteness with expressions of affluence, education, or arrogance (Mexico City, vulnerable).<sup>8</sup> For example, "güeros" are considered not only as well-educated but as "very smart pals" (Monterrey, low), who "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 immanent character traits ranging from "nasty and mean" or "ostentatious, smug, and wanting to attract attention" (Monterrey, medium) to "very close-minded, very tyrannical [*déspota*], very selfish" (Mexico City, low), and outright morally corrupt. 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 in "the whites, it's in their culture, always want more, are never satisfied" (Mexico City, low), and pretentiousness. "In my experience there are more white people that are super arrogant [*mamonsísimas*], beyond redemption" (Monterrey, low).

Given that much research has linked antisocial behavior to wealthier people (Harrington 2016; Piff 2014), we might anticipate a popular association between socioeconomic status and personality traits. Nonetheless, this participant explicitly unlinked these features from a potentially wealth-induced superiority complex: "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 to what degree the much-stressed belief in "white Mexicans' . . . character" (Mexico City, low), which remains even when discursively 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 because of its association with characteristics like wealth, beauty, or preemptive trust. A frequent concern among interviewees is the perceived "threat" presumably emanating from nonwhite persons, which leads to a sense of

<sup>8</sup> Participants tended to differentiate between (white) foreigners and white Mexicans; here, we focus on their perceptions of the latter.

discomfort, whereas white individuals in practice are given the benefit of the doubt, for instance, by not being followed for suspicion of theft in a mall (Oaxaca, vulnerable) or receiving unjustified job promotions (Monterrey, vulnerable).

Interestingly, during participant observations in cosmetic stores catering to higher-class consumers, clients frequently wished to buy skin makeup that does not alter their skin color. In one company, a recurrent complaint was that certain products “look too light.” While there certainly exists a large demand for whitening cosmetics and lighter makeup, the brand’s middle- and upper-class clientele were either 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” [excessive makeup application] ends up revealing a 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 premodified 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 confer on 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 corporeality to the standard of whiteness defines the degree to which they are cosmetically modified.

In short, 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 (1952) describes, the sense of inferiority imposed on the nonwhite population will entice them to compensate by attempting to imitate the culture of the dominant to improve their self-worth and to allow for social mobility—hence the “white mask.” Glenn (2009) adds that whitening reflects the legacies of colonialism and the internalization of the belief that whiteness is the dominant standard that must be embodied. Nonetheless, for some, this can never be achieved completely.

### ***Intergenerational and artificial whitening***

The process of becoming white and acquiring this racial capital as not only an individual aspiration but a 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 [*mejorar la raza*]” 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.<sup>9</sup> 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 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 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 marrying “up” into whiter families persists to date. Prior generations’ traditional interpretation of a

<sup>9</sup> The phrase *mejorar la raza* is universally acknowledged in Mexico. It refers to mating with a whiter (sometimes, prettier) partner.



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 sees personal aesthetic preference 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. Owing 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 maintain the definition of gender roles within the heteronormative binary pole (Yébenes 2015). Beauty is one of these processes that is still considered feminine work, as women are obliged to be beautiful in order to exhibit femininity, 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).<sup>10</sup>

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. Gender polarities and hegemonic heterosexuality are at the center of a modern and colonial system in former colonies. In this arrangement, bourgeois and white (or whiter) women reproduce the class and social positions of the men affiliated to them in their children, while nonwhite women are situated in the vacuum of social and racial status, “the epitome of aberration and sexual excess” (Lugones 2008, 97). Furthermore, Catholic doctrine has also influenced the definition of “woman” through Marianism, which equates femininity to moral superiority, greater religiosity, and the onus of instilling both of these precepts in women’s progeny (Fuller 1995). Women are recognized as responsible for embodying their family and their nation, symbolizing (immaculate) beauty as an ethical value. Their bodies are symbolic carriers of inferiority, 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 bodily enjoyment, such as makeup. The sensory enjoyment of feeling different textures, densities, and materialities of cosmetics, which are perceived by and interact with the body’s own sensoriality and carnality, is sought after by clients, and companies strategically encourage that enjoyment. All cosmetic industry workers interviewed agreed that consumers experience genuine pleasure through the application and trial of makeup, which the providers capitalize on. Besides racially defined beauty ideals, makeup can provide a space for sensorial delight and, as argued below, cosmetic experimentation.

Remarkably, we found that four out of six cosmetic workers interviewed were men, and among nine participant observations, four had more male workers present. Likewise, most 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).” Homosexual men 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

<sup>10</sup> Although the pressures tend to be stronger for women, participants confirm that men are influenced by the beauty ideals, too.

profited from (supposedly) incarnating aesthetic authority. The dexterity of (assumed to be homosexual) male employees was enacted 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). Cosmetic workers largely portrayed customers as individuals close to femininity, excluding heterosexual men as potential clients.

Palpable benefits in other realms of daily life perpetuate the aspiration to whiteness. Participants from all cities and socioeconomic sectors included allude to Arceo and Campos's (2014) finding that, with identical qualifications, lighter-skinned, more European-looking women were more likely to get job interviews. 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 participants confirm these findings, too, in repeated comments about 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 for Mexico's national airline Aeroméxico, classified explicitly as "*tipo Polanco*" (resembling someone hailing from the northern Mexico City upper-class neighborhood Polanco), marketing-agency-speak for a neither brown nor blond and blue-eyed person.<sup>11</sup> 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 glamorized and uplifted as the ultimate standard of valid humanity. Turning to the role of the cosmetic sector, we show below that the industry has not significantly broadened its representation of ethnic diversity in Mexico.

### Raciality in the cosmetics industry

Cosmetics is the discursive and symbolic field under which the presentation of the subject is altered to make him or her embody beauty.<sup>12</sup> Worldwide, the cosmetics industry generates \$500 billion in sales a year (Gerstell et al. 2020). The expanding Mexican cosmetic market boasted earnings of \$1.98 billion in 2018, including \$274 million in makeup sales.<sup>13</sup>

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. Although the predominance of whitened profiles of women in cosmetics advertising might now be discussed,

<sup>11</sup> "Aeroméxico se disculpa por casting racista y culpa a productora," Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, August 13, 2013, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=4273&id\\_opcion=&op=447](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=4273&id_opcion=&op=447).

<sup>12</sup> 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). 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). After the Spanish conquest, Europeans were deemed beautiful, and their Creole descendants aimed to keep their corporeality as far removed as possible from nonwhite appearances. By the nineteenth century, consumption of imported cosmetics came to signal their users' luxury of leisure and hence distance from poverty (Veblen 1899). The shared aesthetic standards of cosmetics producers and users coincided with the eugenic currents of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Jarrín 2010). In the early twentieth century 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 (Solís 2012).

<sup>13</sup> "Beauty & Personal Care Mexico," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/outlook/70000000/116/cosmetics-personal-care/mexico> (accessed November 18, 2018); and "Cosmetics Mexico," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/outlook/70010000/116/cosmetics/mexico> (accessed November 18, 2018).

with few exceptions, the industry has not moved toward a significantly more ethnically diverse representation. In Mexico City, where “the social identity assigned to women depends on their image” (Castillo 2010, 149), women from Indigenous communities recount modifying their bodies in response to threats of job loss because of racist discrimination.

When Mexicans are asked 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 linked to whiteness and beauty alike.<sup>14</sup> The categorization of white bodies as beautiful extends beyond physical description to socioeconomic position. Describing clothing style, mannerisms, and posture typically associated with wealthy people, participants use these filters in either direction. This tautological definition precludes nonwhite 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—enters all spheres of contemporary life (Frankenberger 2008). It establishes a stratified system that acts to maintain preestablished 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 (using highlighters to give the impression that the skin is hydrated and nourished), and without signs of disease (acne, rosacea) or age (fine lines). Here, general perceptions meet their cosmetic enablers. Consumers respond to aesthetic norms where nondisclosure 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.<sup>15</sup> The makeup artist accompanying her 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.” 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 (Gómez 2021).

It is worth noting that youthfulness is one of the corporeal signs to be acquired that allow self-identification with an idealization of youth (Rivera 2018). Rather than youth, what is cosmetically recreated is a “youthful” face (rosy cheeks, plump lips, smooth skin without sunspots or wrinkles, according to the interviewees). Signs of ageing and tiredness are hidden; Ricardo put eyeliner on the inner corner of his model’s eye, explaining “[you should use] one that is the color of your skin. Sometimes the water line is reddened and the eyes look bloodshot.” In other words, he removes all traces of bodily signs that appear as consequences of the daily lives of those whose income does not allow them to hold on to their temporary proximity to aesthetic models.

Workers in the makeup sector unanimously perceived the body as highly malleable and thus categorizable, making themselves interpreters of bodily presentations. Those individuals approaching the proclaimed aesthetic standards are preferred as customers over those clients whose perceived ugliness is a source of social exclusion (Jarrín 2017) and

<sup>14</sup> Mears (2020) reports similar associations for the international beauty circuit.

<sup>15</sup> We use pseudonyms for all makeup industry workers.

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. Chiming with participants’ mockery of “powder lines” appearing on some women’s necks, the professionals 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 (nuances of colors underlying skin tone) that were not yellow, according to them prevalent among Latin American customers. Supporting our findings about shades of white 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. For 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). The second one stems from the relationship of cosmetics with anatomy and medicine. The beauty industry borrows its 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). Conversely, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the still-budding industry claimed that makeup could help overcome deterministic prejudices. Max Factor made specific products for the skin tones of Latina actresses from the golden age of Hollywood cinema such as Rita Hayworth, Dolores del Río, and María Montez (who would be considered light-skinned in the Mexican context) (Basten 2008). The actresses’ mouths and eyes were enlarged and the cheekbones were more angled to reinforce the specificity of their features using a technique known as *contouring*.<sup>16</sup>

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 that every makeup artist demonstrated as a quasi-universal pattern, and almost all customers accepted for it to be painted on their faces without questioning. Akin to Fanon’s (1952) epidermal schema, for our participants “white” contains 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 potentially lasting stigma of a devalued human condition (Le Breton 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: “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”

<sup>16</sup> Makeup technique originating in theatre was adopted in the United States’ drag community, and later in the makeup industry at large, to emulate faces of cisgender women; through a combination of colors the bone structure of the face is changed (Aucoin 2000).

(Oaxaca, low). The association between whiteness and beauty creates a hierarchy 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: “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 family ties: “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 . . . 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 toward 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 addressed (affectionately) 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 cell phones], 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!” (Merida, vulnerable). Double consciousness means to see oneself as divided. Du Bois ([1903] 1996) 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’s (2010) claim of beauty as a distinct realm of modern experience beside 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, which stood out for its variety of available foundation shades. The fact that many of the darker shades are not typically featured in mainstream makeup brands now generated criticism toward them. Their staff appeared aware of this fact and tried to avoid any reference to the definition of beauty. This seems to be a continuation of what Hunter (2011) noted about the commercial use of multiculturalism by cosmetic companies, adding women of color who were, however, light-skinned and possessed “Anglo looking” features. During fieldwork, those employed to receive makeup applications were almost always slim, young, and light-skinned women. The complexion of the models demonstrated the makeup offered but also embodied the aesthetic expectations.

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; nevertheless, several clients proclaimed that using makeup makes them “feel good.” Well-being was the most frequent answer to the question about what beauty means to industry employees. Nevertheless, 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, while handing over to the workers who face the public the negotiation of the subjective demands of consumers



and the discourses of their sector. 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 workers' professional viewpoints, as 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 that 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 defining beauty in Mexico, while factors like local preferences demonstrate that skin color is not enough to comprehend aesthetic ideals and their 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 women in particular are pressured to adhere to female beauty standards that require physical transformation to "whiten" their bodies, such behavior is also criticized where it is considered unnatural and hence imparts a notion of class imposter. This judgment follows strict racialized and class markers which can overrule the aspirational modification toward whiteness.

Centuries of perpetuating a particular understanding of beauty culminate in the "intuitive" (if imagined) assignment of physical, social, and moral attributes to whiteness in contemporary Mexico. The resulting pressures toward whitening, especially for women, are met by a cosmetics industry able and willing to translate these aspirations into material practice. 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 presentations that, if accepted uncritically, would keep gaps between 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 beauty. Clients are also 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 cosmetic presentations concur that question each other and are alternatives to ingrained modes of embodying beauty, demonstrating resistance.

The range of responses uttered by our informants might seem contradictory at times, but we believe it underscores the wide spectrum of reactions, strategies, and affinities



toward whiteness. We have incorporated the points of view of people with different degrees of access to symbolic and material resources to validate whiteness's ubiquitous weight. As mentioned in the introduction, our data show that whiteness does not have a strict definition. Therefore, the apparent discrepancies do not nullify the relevance of referring to white or whiteness but rather enrich the terms. The testimonies show that both white and whiteness are significant in heterogeneous realities; disregarding the different contexts, they stand as measures of otherness, aspiration, and accessibility, demonstrating their relevance and malleability. Participants' multiple starting points alter the meaning of these collective parameters, which are not only interpreted but physically represented in various ways depending on what is economically possible and socially permitted. Being and looking "white" is a widely shared aspiration and an aesthetic value in itself, while the disposition, negotiation, or reluctance toward 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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