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Iranian migrant women's beauty practices and (un) veiling in Belgium

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Abstract

The hijab has been considered a notable factor in increasing women's tendency to practise beauty in Iran. Experiences of beauty practices by Iranian women in diaspora can shed light on the extent of the influence that the practice of (un)veiling might have on beauty regimes. This study uses semi-structured interviews amongst a group of Iranian women in Belgium to investigate the development of beauty practices after migration. The study draws on feminist studies on beauty practices and ethnic/racial identities to explore whether beauty practices create a sense of normalcy or are forms of self-governance in compliance with the dominant discourses of female embodiment. The findings point to the complex intertwinement of racialisation with gendered embodiment and illustrate the strategies that women develop either to embrace their difference or to eliminate the perceived embodied differences and counter racialised othering. The analysis draws on feminist theory to examine participants' perceptions of the social construction of women's imagery as migrants and their self-perceptions as racialised minorities in the Belgian society.

Keyword: beauty, Belgium, embodiment, gender, Iran, race, veiling

Beauty practices are important parts of the everyday life of Iranian women, and as the literature on beauty practices in Iran has shown, some beauty practices are considered to have ethnic and racially corrective connotations (Davis, 2003; Lenehan, 2011; Rahbari, Dierickx, Longman, & Coene, 2018). The global literature on beauty practices widely suggests that their

prevalence is partly due to the desire to achieve a more Western look (Glapka & Majali, 2017; Leem, 2017).¹ While the global impact of Western media and idealisation of Eurocentric beauty ideals have led to changing perceptions of beauty and bodily perfection, local and regional perceptions of bodily perfection and beauty are still prevalent in many societies (Jha, 2016). Additionally, resistance to homogenised beauty ideals is globally rising (Fukada & Bedford, 2019; Haas, 2018; LeBesco, 2013).

The public and political discourses around women's bodies and beauty practices in Iran are entangled with the discussions on Islam and sharia law; since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran is an Islamic state that encodes specific interpretations of Shi'ite Islam (Rahbari, Longman, & Coene, 2019; Sedghi, 2007). Since then, the country has applied a gender segregation model that separates men and women in many public spheres to minimise their interactions in physical, verbal, and symbolic forms (Azarmina, 2002). Additionally, to extend the notion of Islamic modesty, shortly after the Revolution, wearing Islamic veiling was coded into law and became compulsory for all women in the country who are over nine years old, regardless of their religious, ethnic, or national background (Sedghi, 2007). While the female dress code is widely perceived as more strictly limiting, dress codes extended to men as they were discouraged from wearing clothes that are considered imperialist signifiers, such as the tie (Jafari & Maclaran, 2014), and clothes that reveal too much skin, such as shorts and short-sleeved tops.

Iranian men and women have shown an ever-increasing attention to beauty practices and plastic surgeries despite the limitations stated above. Make-up, beauty, fashion, and plastic surgery have been booming industries (Financial Tribune, 2017) and women, especially in Iran's larger cities, follow global beauty trends. Consequently, plastic surgery and cosmetic professions have gained tremendous popularity in the women's beauty scene (Arouzi, 2016). Regular visits to beauty salons for styling eyebrows and hair, depilating the body, and dieting are common practices performed by Iranian women from all ages and social classes. Everyday beauty practices, such as the daily usage of make-up items, are also highly popular amongst Iranian women.

The existing feminist literature on female beauty practices in Iran has attempted to explain the high interest in beauty practices, especially since they are presumed to be contradicting the contemporary cultural and religious discourses. In these studies, partly due to considering feminine beauty practices and Islam as opposite poles, women's bodily practices are interpreted as acts of resistance (Shirazi, 2009). Inside Iran, the

mainstream political and cultural institutions associate female beauty practices with immorality (Rahbari, 2019b) but beauty is sanctioned if it is associated with pious femininity. Thus, even for women with higher levels of religiosity, achieving beauty ideals is important. Additionally, beauty is seen as an important asset for women regardless of their social achievements (Rahbari, 2019a). The hijab has been considered a notable factor in increasing women's tendency to practise beauty in Iran (Lenehan, 2011; Rahbari et al., 2018). Different studies on Iranian women's beauty practices have mentioned the hijab as a motivating factor for practising beauty, because, by covering their hair, women feel less attractive and thus turn to facial beauty practices to compensate (Kaivanara, 2017). The question for Iranians in diasporic contexts, where the hijab is not compulsory, remains whether beauty practices still prevail. Experiences of beauty practices by Iranian women in diaspora can shed light on the possible influence that the practice of (un)veiling has on women's beauty regimes.

In the Belgian context, while substantial research is carried out on Muslim women's veiling practices (see, e.g., Ichau & D'Haenens, 2016; Rahbari & Longman, 2018; Severs, Celis, & Meier, 2013), relatively less attention is given to beauty practices as a general topic of inquiry (see, e.g., Vandebroeck, 2016), let alone amongst migrants. The case of Iranian women who have migrated to Belgium as adults is specifically unique as they have experiences in both Iran – one of the two Islamic countries in the world that enforces compulsory veiling – and Belgium – a secularised country in which evidence of growing Islamophobia exists (Easat-Daas, 2017; Paleologos, 2019). This study aims to explore the development of beauty practices of Iranian women in Belgium after migration. The study thus investigates Iranian migrant women's experiences of beauty practices and (un)veiling before and after migrating to Belgium.

Racialised beauty and veiling practices

Practices of beauty are not universal, albeit similar and widely gendered across cultures. Beauty practices do not only create and/or reinforce existing gendered identities, but also racial and ethnic identities (Hollows, 2000, p. 137). Physical beauty is a site of inequality and women of different classes, bodies, ages, ethnicities, colours, and so on do not equally reap the same gains. Scholars have argued that the everyday experiences of inequality by women, and the association between women's attractiveness and success in social life, romantic relationships, and career, are some of the main reasons why women tend to perform body and beauty practices

(Malik, Vir Singh, Lee, & Srinivasan, 2017; Taub, 1999). Religious ideas, such as notions of religious piety and modesty, are also considered factors affecting women's attention to their appearance and their beauty practices (Gökarkısel & Secor, 2012).

In feminist studies on women's embodiment, an analogy is often drawn between Muslim veiling and so-called Western fashion and beauty practices (Pedwell, 2011, p. 188). A notable example of such analogy is made by Sheila Jeffreys (2005), who has proposed that Western beauty practices should be considered equivalently harmful to non-Western practices such as veiling. Gökarkısel and Secor (2012) have shown that beauty and fashion have been adopted in the Turkish Islamic culture and transformed into veiling-fashion and that there is a complex relationship between the various elements of the self, the body, and the realm of desires and the moral Islamic code. In the Dutch context, Duits and Van Zoonen (2006) interpret veiling and beauty practices as playful strategies of compliance with the dominant societal normative discourses.

Similarly, Kathy Davis (1995) discusses that beauty practices and opting for body modification and cosmetic surgery does not necessarily indicate a desire to be 'beautiful' but to become 'normal'. Davis's (2003) argument is that, even in the case of opting for removing embodied racial and ethnic characteristics, procedures should not be dubbed 'ethnic/racial' because the aim is mainly to create a sense of 'normalcy'. Such 'normalcy', however, is likely to be achieved via the consumption of popularised beauty ideals that often produce a particular and homogenous look (Finn & Dell, 1999). There is abundant international literature on the effects of globalisation on the homogenisation of Western beauty and body ideals (e.g. Jha, 2016; Jones, 2008, 2011; Miller, 2003). The racially biased homogenous look that prioritises Eurocentric features is internalised and reproduced through everyday acts as a form of self-governance (Bordo, 2004).

The literature on identity and body management in Iran, however, faces criticism by scholars who believe that an identity perspective neglects individual diversities and undermines the playful and agentic aspects of bodily practices (Jafari & Maclaran, 2014). The reason for this critique has primarily been that the existing studies on Iranian women's beauty practices have mainly drawn on religious identity and its political aspects, including the compulsory hijab, to explain women's tendency to perform beauty practices. This study's aim – to investigate the development of beauty practices of Iranian women in Belgium after migration – could shed light on the significance of (un)veiling in the development of women's beauty practices. The study draws on feminist studies on beauty practices and ethnic/racial

identities to explore whether beauty practices create a sense of normalcy (as discussed by Davis, 1995, 2003) or are forms of self-governance in compliance with the dominant discourses on female embodiment (as discussed by Bordo, 2004; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2006; Jeffreys, 2005).

Iranian women in Belgium: A brief overview

Belgium has a large market for perfumes, cosmetics, and toiletries in Europe, with consumption of cosmetics close to the European average (Global Insight, 2007). It also has a large fashion and beauty scene where shopping for self-care products and cosmetics is common (Kosters, 2016). There are high profile Belgian fashion and beauty influencers who affect the consumption, experiences, and preferences of users – mostly young women – in choosing fashion and cosmetic items (Delrue, 2018). Because of the shortage in comparable data on beauty practices, it is not possible to draw qualitative or quantitative comparisons between Iran and Belgium. However, there are global statistical data on plastic surgeries for both countries.² These data indicate that Belgium's ranking in rates of plastic surgeries is in fact higher than Iran's ranking. For this study, statistical data on global numbers and rates of plastic surgery published by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) in 2016 is used. The data shows that, in 2016, 88,607 plastic surgeries were performed in Belgium, which is lower than the 94,034 procedures that were performed in Iran (ISAPS, 2016). But, considering the size of the countries and their populations, the demand for surgical procedures changes the overall ranking substantially (Heidekrueger et al., 2017), with higher rates of procedures in Belgium.

Iranians' interest in plastic surgery has attracted large scale and global attention, with many news and opinion pieces and articles written on popular nose surgery, make-up, and fashion in relation to gender politics and (un)veiling (Nayeri, 2014; Vahdat, 2018). In contrast, Belgium's high rate of plastic surgery has attracted less attention. Despite relevant lower levels of interest in beauty practices of women in Belgium, there is a lot of academic attention to (un)veiling practices (Brems, Chaib, & Vanhees, 2018; Fadil, 2014; Rahbari & Longman, 2018). For academics in Belgium who have sought to critically scrutinise the politicisation of migration and particularly of Islam, 'the Muslim question' has been a central topic of interest. This has been due to the existing discourses in Belgian politics that might lead to the othering of some religious minorities, especially Muslims (Modood, Triandafyllidou, & Zapata-Barrero, 2006). The existing public interest can be associated with Muslim migrations to Belgium, which have diversified

the religious and ethnic diversity of the country. In 2016, 5 to 6 per cent of the Belgian population identified as Muslim, with this population rising to more than 10 per cent in larger cities and to 20 per cent in the region of Brussels (Franken, 2016, p. 5).

Racial, gendered, and religious bias in Belgium takes place based in regards to visible embodied elements (Van der Bracht, Coenen, & Van de Putte, 2015; Rahbari, 2018). The most prominent debate on Islam in Belgium is on the presence of religious expressions in the public sphere, focusing on Muslim women and girls' veiling practices (Christians & Overbeeke, 2016, p. 109). Flanders – the Dutch speaking region of Belgium – has been big on increasing headscarf regulation in schools and on the labour market. Today, headscarf-wearing girls cannot opt for 'public' schools due to the headscarf ban issued in 2009 (Van den Brandt, 2015, p. 494), and should thus follow the existing alternative paths to education.³ The legal and public attitudes towards the hijab and other religious symbols vary in different cities. The law banning face coverings was confirmed by the Constitutional Court in 2012 and has been in place ever since (Christians & Overbeeke, 2016). The legal, public, and media discussion on the hijab has been taking place for decades (Brems, 2014) and is nowhere near conclusion. In such a context, identity markers could affect people's livelihoods, and women's bodily and beauty practices cannot be assumed to be taking place in a vacuum.

Methods

The research was conducted using the qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews with thirteen participants. Interviews entailed questions on women's routines and experiences of beauty practices – from daily make-up to cosmetic surgeries – and (un)veiling before and after migration to Belgium. The study population was selected amongst first-generation migrant women who moved to Belgium as adults. The participants were interviewed in different cities in Belgium in public spaces or private homes, based on their preference, between May 2016 and December 2019. Follow-up informal conversations were used with five respondents to further clarify the findings.

The initial participants of the study were selected by targeted and random sampling. They were invited through social and digital media for migrants living in Belgium. This process might have affected the sample with a bias towards tech-savvy, younger, middle-class, and more educated individuals. Further selection was carried out through snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted in Farsi – the participants' and researcher's

mother tongue – and then translated. Pseudonyms were used to anonymise participants and were followed by the participants' age in the presented data. The analysis has been informed and possibly affected by the researcher's positionality as a migrant woman from Iran currently residing in Belgium. The similarity between the researcher and the participants in terms of gender, migration background, religious background, and levels of education has played a role in facilitating rapport and building trust with the participants.

The selected population was made up of thirteen respondents who were either working women (nine participants) or university students (four participants). The participants' reasons for migration varied and included forced migration as political refugees and migration for work and study. The age range was between 28 and 46 years old. In terms of socio-economic background, the participants had all grown up in urban areas in Iran and were all from middle or higher-class families in Iran. However, the migration experience had affected the economic status of the participants in Belgium in such a way that they no longer considered themselves higher or middle class, but rather working or lower-middle class. All women were either pursuing higher education or already had a university diploma.

The study gathered both retrospective and current experiences of beauty practices to reveal how perceptions and practices of beauty have been affected and developed by the factors related to migration. A content analysis was then conducted on the interviews and excerpts were selected to enrich the presentation of data in the article. This study does not claim to produce generalisable findings as a result of its methodological choices, the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research, and the limited number of participants from specific backgrounds. The specific characteristics of the participants' population is a notable limitation of the study and the findings should thus be addressed cautiously since they might not be relevant for unsimilar populations.

Findings

Development of beauty practices post migration

All participants discussed that, after moving from Iran to Belgium, their dress code changed. This was partly due to unveiling, since the legal/social pressure to veil was lifted. Most participants quit veiling from the first day of leaving Iran. Some participants explained that their experiences of changing outfits and unveiling just after their planes to Belgium took off

from Iranian airports was both exhilarating and nerve-wrecking. It had been the first experience of leaving Iran for two participants. They explained the experience of unveiling odd and embarrassing; they felt judged by other passengers, but also empowered and relieved. Besides the changes in veiling and fashion choices – unveiling and wearing tighter/shorter clothing – some participants changed the ways they performed facial and hair management after migration. The changes in beauty practices were not uniform and while it had been sudden for some of them, it had been more gradual for others.

When asked about their perceptions on the differences between the two countries, most participants explained that beauty practices were far more practised in Iran than in Belgium. The participants also reported diminished levels of daily make-up usage and changed attitudes towards fashion and hair management such as opting for Western clothing. The change in beauty practices was sometimes associated with the fear of othering. 'I do not want to seem different from others', Kiana (37) explained on why her interest in beauty practices was diminished after migration to Belgium. Another participant made a clear distinction between the practices that would reduce the chances of her being racially profiled and the practices that would make her pass as 'white',

After waking up [Belgian women] brush their teeth, wear a shawl and maybe earrings, and get out of the house, that's it [...] If I do that, I too look like Belgians [...] If I wear my [usual] make-up, then it becomes obvious that I am not. (Nasim, 36)

As Nasim explained, beauty practices were not only perceived to be less prevalent, but also considered signs of women's origin and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Tara (41) also stated that she would be interested in beauty practices that are 'normal' in the context where she lived. For Tara (41), Iranian beauty practices were no longer relevant in Belgium, because they did not give her a sense of normalcy and were perceived as unruly. Two participants stated that they liked the lack of interest in beauty in Belgium: 'what I like here [in Belgium] is the simplicity' (Fariba, 30). Others expressed more ambivalent viewpoints, expressing that each country is different, and they believed in 'to each their own'.

The participants agreed that strict dress codes were significant in women's tendency to practise beauty in Iran, but not all of them found the hijab to be the most important factor. Discussing the differences amongst Iranian and Belgian women and their attitudes towards beauty practices,

participants offered different explanations by pointing to existing sexist, patriarchal environments in Iran, which hinder women's development and orientate them towards trivial matters,

Iranian women have tried so hard to make progress, made so many efforts but have been disappointed so many times [...] because of their gender [...] there are so many obstacles, in the job market, in education [...] when they are so disappointed they do not have anything to keep busy with, and so they are inclined to focus on their appearance. (Darya, 41)

Another participant mentioned the Western beauty trends that were popularised through different media and global celebrity culture and affected Iranian women's everyday beauty. '[Women in Iran] do not know how low consumption of make-up is here [in Europe] [...] they take models from [celebrities]'; explained Maryam (28). Another participant specifically referred to American celebrity culture's influence in Iran and compared that to Europe. 'European [celebrity] counterparts [do not] wear as much make-up or wear it more subtly', explained Soudabe (33). The reliance of Iranians on media as a source of information on the outside world is partly caused by political and economic sanctions against Iran and, consequently, the lack of mobility for many of its citizens. Additionally, with limitations on self-expression in offline spaces and bound by geographical limitations, many take to social media for entertainment and self-expression.

The hair, covered in public by the compulsory hijab in Iran, was explained by the participants to have been 'freed' after migration. 'I look totally different when showing my hair. If I show my hijabi pictures to my Belgian colleagues, they never believe it is me in the picture', explained Tara (41). For two participants who quit wearing the hijab after migration, their hair played an important role in routine beauty practices. One of the two women (Reyhaneh, 38) opted for dying her hair and the other one enjoyed 'finally' getting shorter haircuts, because 'it is harder to manage shorter hair under the veil' (Tara, 41). Another participant explained that the invisibility of female hair dramatically affected women's beauty practices. 'In terms of make-up usage [...] when your hair is visible, it contributes to your beauty and you do not have to wear make-up anymore', explained Homa (33). Two other participants mentioned they, in Belgium, cut their hair short to a certain length that would not be desirable for women in Iran. According to most participants, beauty trends in Iran were social trends that had then turned into collective habitus, rather than a result of constraints imposed by the hijab:

I think [the hijab] may have some effect [...] I do not think it is the main reason though. [Beauty] is just a trend in Iran. And everyone copies everyone [...] when something becomes a trend, everyone starts following it. (Nasim, 36)

While participants mentioned paying less attention to beauty practices after migration, a different story was presented by a participant who did not perform beauty practices before migrating because of her religious beliefs. After criticising sexual objectification of women in commercialised global media, she explained that her tendency to avoid beauty practices had changed after migration and she no longer considered beauty practices against her moral standpoints:

[Before] I was strongly against [make-up usage]; I never wore make-up in Iran. I felt more comfortable not wearing it [...] When I came [to Belgium], I was a bit depressed and [practising beauty] made me feel happier. [It was] fake happiness, but anyway. (Soheila, 31)

Soheila's experience with beauty practices has been mostly positive. She interpreted the veil as a symbol of resistance to the commodification of women's bodies in Western popular media, but considered daily beauty practices a coping mechanism that eased the difficulties of migration. In line with this, Tara (41) stated, 'it is really just like any other thing you do for yourself. The grooming and caring for yourself has a soothing effect'. As this example showed, not all interpretations of beauty practices were problematised or criticised. 'I think wearing make-up is good... why not?', stated Micha (30), further explaining that fashion and beauty gave her a feeling of empowerment no matter in which country or context. One participant mentioned how she admired the aesthetic creativity of local Iranian women despite limitations they faced in fashion choices:

[Iranian women in Iran] are sometimes so tasteful [...] I really like their taste [...] with their clothes, they have bypassed the restrictions [...] But because they have been given that restricted frame to work with, they have focused a lot on the face. (Darya, 41)

The comments above are examples of the (inter)personal affective capacity of beauty practices in the form of emotional coping, soothing oneself, or creating joy in others. This affective aspect has been mentioned in studies on Iranian women's beauty practices (see, e.g., Jafari & Maclaran, 2014), and

in other contexts where individual and collective beauty practices go beyond the desire to appeal to the male gaze, and extend to the realm of fun/play (Craig, 2006; Hammidi & Kaiser, 1999). The participants' perceptions on beauty practices in Iran and in Belgium also entailed experiences of body policing and a racial gaze, which is discussed in the following section.

Beauty and racialisation in Iran and Belgium

There was a racialised dimension to beauty practices of the participants, some of whom explicitly expressed satisfaction with being mistaken for European citizens because of the way they looked. A participant expressed that she was 'happy' to have an 'international' appearance; however, when explaining what she meant by 'international' – 'lighter skin, hair colour, and eyes' – it became clear that she meant 'white'. Another participant used the word 'fortunately' to explain that she was often mistaken for being Spanish. When asked why she considered this a positive thing, she explained, 'because certainly [Belgians'] opinions on the Spanish are much better than [their opinions on] the Middle Eastern' (Farah, 33). Another participant lightened her hair colour after migration for aesthetic reasons, and to look more like a natural blonde:

I am not a natural blond, if you can tell that from my [hair] roots. I changed my hair to blonde [after migration]. I do not think that it would affect things a lot, but maybe to some extent, a black head is still a black head⁴ [sic] you know. (Reyhaneh, 38)

Examples like these revealed that the participants perceived Belgians to hold racialised perspectives that favoured Eurocentric bodily attributes. For the participants, the nose was specifically seen as an attribute that highlighted ethnic/racial background. This is compatible with other studies on Iranian women who consider a prominent nose as an ethnic marker (Karim, 2013; Rahbari et al., 2018). The participants considered the nose a marker of Iranianness that was aesthetically inferior to the 'European nose'. The pressure to correct the nose is amplified by the societal pressure on women to conform to beauty standards:

In the Iranian race [sic], there are noses that do look problematic. That can affect the morale of a woman in a society in which your appearance is extremely important. You are just evaluated in terms of your appearance, especially as a woman. (Fariba, 30)

Fariba's comment revealed that, besides believing in a hierarchy of racial differences in facial features, she also recognised the existing social pressure on women to conform to an idealistic image. This example shows the cross-cutting effect of racialised heterosexism on women's beauty practices. Another participant admitted that racial differences in body shape and size of the nose existed amongst Iranians; however, she further added that the level of beauty attributed to small noses was a result of social discourses, and subject to change:

Iranians have larger noses than other [people]; but like, Cleopatra was well-known for her big nose. It is all about trends. If [Cleopatra's beauty] was the trend today, we would not only not reduce the size of the nose, but we would even add to it. (Soudabe, 33)

One participant built on her criticism of beauty practices in Iran, and then denounced what she perceived as Western emancipation prescriptions. 'I do not like the [Western] feminist movement that says you should not shave', explained Charlotte (35). Another participant also believed that differences in beauty trends were just cultural and one could not compare Iran with Belgium. As she explained, 'it is not better or worse than Iran [in Belgium], it is just [different]' (Nasim, 36). Tara (41) highlighted that, despite the pressure on Iranian women, resistance to beauty ideals is also present:

My nose has continuously been a topic of discussion in the family. All my female cousins had nose jobs because this [pointed to the nose] runs in the family... I resisted and I am happy I did... My relatives tell me 'you are lucky you do not have to do it anymore because you live in Belgium' and I have to remind them that I have lived most of my life in Iran with the same nose. (Tara, 41)

As Tara's comment connotes, beauty practices – in this case, nose surgery – are sometimes perceived by the local Iranians as a necessary evil in Iran and are not always a desired practice. This quotation was followed by Tara's (41) contextualisation of female beauty in Iran. She explained, 'yes, big noses are not loved in Iran, but if you look around here [in Belgium], big noses do not stand out; the operated ones do'. This comment highlights that conformity to the bodily standards in each context was crucial for Tara.

The participants also recognised that their experiences were not specific to the Iranian context. They compared Iran to its neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Turkey, Saudi Arabia) and made distinctions between different countries in Europe, and between Europe and North America. Their

savviness on body politics and how it affected popular beauty discourses were reflected in their contextualised explanations.

Critical analysis and conclusion

Feminist scholars have theorised beauty as a gendered, racialised, and contested symbolic resource because of the ever-changing nature of beauty standards (Craig, 2006). The findings of this study pointed to the complex intertwinement of racialisation with gendered embodiment and the context-specific nature of beauty. The participants reported different patterns of beauty and (un)veiling after migration and sometimes diminished interest in beauty practices; yet, this decrease was not due to growing indifference towards their appearance. Quite the opposite, transforming to unmarked, supposedly 'white Belgian' bodies became possible for them through avoiding embodied elements and abstinence from intervening with the 'natural' state of the body. Therefore, the popular forms of beauty practices by the participants in Belgium were not necessarily a direct result of personally favouring Western beauty ideals, but a consequence of mechanisms of othering based on visible signs of difference that motivated women's desire to 'blend in'.

This aspect of beauty practices as 'identity work' has been theorised by feminist scholars, who discuss that 'normalcy' and 'passing' as unmarked subjects can be achieved by practising beauty (Davis, 1995, 2003; Finn & Dell, 1999). In the contemporary globalised world, normalcy is created in association with racialised Eurocentric discourses that favour whiteness and physical attributes typically correlated to it (Hunter, 2011; Jha, 2016). The racialised beauty norms are rendered desirable and the social structures of racial inequality prioritise certain looks over others. Racism and sexism intertwine in the form of a normalising discourse that marks women of colour as abnormal and flawed (Craig, 2006). However, the participants did not only show compliance but also resistance to the racialised discourses. Participants either used embodied elements to assimilate to the desired subject of a racialised gaze or resisted/avoided it. Although beauty practices were considered coping mechanisms, in line with discussions by Cahill (2003), beauty work in general was not considered an act of 'pleasure' but rather seeking comfort by conforming to the normalising discourses on racialised female beauty.

To understand whether/how racial biases based on visible ethnic markers affect women's beauty, the complexities of Iranian and Belgian societies were briefly outlined. While the findings showed that there was a correlation between racial bias in Belgian society towards racialised

migrants and women's self-perceptions of their bodies and beauty practices, they also showed that racialisation occurred before migration. The participants' perceptions on beauty practices in both Iran and in Belgium entailed experiences of body policing and a racial/gendered gaze.

For the participants who continued veiling after migration, 'identity work' in the form of embracing a starkly visible difference was a motivation behind veiling. The veil was not always interpreted within the popular Islamic perspective as to render female beauty invisible (as discussed in, e.g., Siraj, 2011), but as a practice of religious identity that was carried parallel to embodied beauty practices. This form of religious agency in veiling and rejecting its classic notion complicates the dichotomous oppressed–emancipated imagery of Muslim women. As shown in other studies, unveiling can also be a political, agentic, and consciously made decision (Fadil, 2011). The rejection of the veil by women of this study, who unveiled after migration, could be precisely explained as an act of reclaiming agency and control over their bodies. Unveiling was not only a political act in opposition to the mandates of the Iranian Islamic regime, but also a decision carefully made to inhabit a desired unmarked space in the Belgian society. A consequence of unveiling was the unleashed female body, beauty, and hair, and while showing off beauty and skin was not an end goal in narratives of unveiling, it constituted an important part of the sense of euphoria and freedom that followed it.

While beauty practices are part of the broader discourses of (self-)perception and (self-)governance of the body, they offer a window to view how gendered and racialising mechanisms impact individual and collective embodied practices and help create, normalise, and naturalise the formation of the other. The Western racialisation of bodily characteristics, such as the size of the buttocks and nose, skin colour, hair texture, or veiling, have served the ideological making of the other and the self in different times and places. Women's diverse (un)veiling and beauty practices in this study neither created homogenous secular embodiments, nor did they lead to the pursuit of Eurocentric beauty. Women adopted diverse strategies to embrace their differences, to eliminate the perceived signs of difference, or to counter possible forms of othering by veiling, unveiling, and using complex forms of beauty practices and gendered embodiment.

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Notes

- 1 Definitions of the 'Western look' vary globally in relation to local beauty practices. They sometimes address the lack of certain features such as darker skin tones, larger eyelids, and nose size. At other times, they refer to the presence of specific characteristics such as a lighter skin tone, straight and lighter hair, a smaller nose, and sharper jawline.
- 2 The data reported here do not clearly distinguish between plastic surgery for medical and for purely aesthetic reasons.
- 3 The Belgian education system is split between 'public' schools and 'free' schools, which are mostly confessional. 'Free' schools are considered accessible and affordable for average Belgians. So, while the 'public' schools have introduced limitations regarding the hijab, it is mostly allowed to attend 'free' schools with the hijab. This means that, although families' choices and access to schools are limited, alternative paths to education of girls who wear the hijab exist.
- 4 *Kalleh-Siah* in Persian, which is literally translatable to 'black head', refers in fact to the colour of the hair.

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