

Chapter 2

Not Just a Pretty Face: The Cost of Performative Beauty and Visual Appeal in Beauty Pageants

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of the studies on adult beauty pageants involves their creation, negotiation, and implication vis-à-vis national and/or political identity within the pageant industry; or else they examine national pageants which are primarily scholarship-based. The present chapter is an attempt to understand the many psychological costs that come from practicing beauty within the realm of pageantry, and the rationale behind entering into an expensive venture for which there is little to gain, but much to lose emotionally. It will address two main questions: What are the physical and emotional (or metaphysical) costs of entering into and, later, winning, a beauty pageant? Who enters into beauty pageants and why? The objective is to examine the incentive to publicly parade oneself against dozens of other women, at the risk of simply being dismissed at the hands of quasi-objective opinion.

INTRODUCTION

You have to have a certain aesthetic for pageantry... it's so much more than the 'whole you' [that] you put on stage; [it's] what kind of work do you do philosophically, emotionally. It's a whole package that makes you a title holder...

— Denise, International Title Holder

Beauty pageants constitute an interesting phenomenon, both through a cultural and academic lens: Though they have been popularly dismissed as recursively archaic, barbaric, or, when observed with analytic scrutiny, are often slotted into 'sex work' or 'fashion modeling' for their obvious emphasis on exploiting their physical appearance (and therefore seemingly unworthy of further inquiry due to their apparent saturated nature of analysis), they are, in effect, ripe with opportunity for study beyond the

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expected discourses of aesthetic capital (Latham, 1995; Brenner & Cunningham, 1992). In fact, unlike other industries which focus on the aesthetic appearance of the human form, beauty pageant participants often engage in a costly venture while attempting to win the short-lived fame, intensely laboring both their physical bodies and beyond, and creating a purposeful reflection of archetypal femininity, carefully negotiated toward an ‘idealized femininity’ in a modern time (Balogun, 2012).

Unlike the limited previous research conducted on adult beauty pageants, which focuses on the creation, negotiation and implication of national and/or political identity within the international pageant industry (Barnes, 1994; Rogers, 1998; Wu, 1997), or analyses which examine national pageants that are primarily scholarship-based (Banet-Weiser, 1999; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Gundle, 1997), the present paper is an attempt to understand the figurative costs associated with both defining and practicing beauty within the realm of international pageantry, and the rationale behind entering into an expensive venture for which there is exceedingly more to lose and little to gain. Specifically, the present paper will address two main questions: First, what are the physical and meta-physical costs of entering into and, later, winning, a beauty pageant? Second, who enters into beauty pageants and why? In other words, what incentive is there to publically parade oneself against dozens of other women to likely be dismissed at the hands of quasi-objective opinion, at one’s own expense.

The basic plot of any international beauty pageant begins with a group of generally self-selected young women (under age 27) who have undergone a screening process by gatekeepers (pageant managers, talent agents, etc.) in order to enter into their local beauty competitions. Commonly, and as discovered through the present research, at this level, a so-called ‘pageant girl’ will depend on her own community for support in the form of: (a) finances (wherein she must gather sponsors to help her pay for her expenses, including travel, hotel stay, make-up and costume); (b) social upholding (as she must win over her community, generally via philanthropic efforts, in order to obtain popularity and incentivize a following to vote for her to win the ‘popular vote,’ which will fast-track her to a later round in the competition); and (c) emotional support (as she looks towards her community to provide her with encouragement and incentive to go on during particularly stressful and turbulent emotional experience, testing one’s ability to manage the ‘self’). If successful in the local competition, the typical ‘pageant girl’ will then progress to a larger pageant, usually at the state level, competing against winners of other local competitions, respectively. If successful yet again, she will compete bearing the name of her state, “Miss X”, with ‘X’ denoting the name of the state, into a national competition, vying for her country’s title, “Miss Y,” with ‘Y’ denoting the name of her country, alongside other state titleholders. With each subsequent win, the pageant girl receives greater attention, greater praise, and greater reward, with the ultimate reward being the crowned winner of an international title” ‘Miss World,’ ‘Miss Universe,’ ‘Miss Earth,’ or ‘Miss International’. In this sense, beauty pageants are a superb example of the “winner-take-all” model often seen in sports and art, designed such that one clear-cut winner in a concentrated market receives disproportionate benefit from the win in comparison to all others involved (Frank and Cook, 1995).

Despite the categorical name of ‘beauty,’ however, modern pageants purport to judge their contestants on more than physical appearance, suggesting that beauty pageants form a ‘third space’ mediating judging criteria from what is biological fact (the objective value of physical appearance) with social approval (the status of women and what it means to be a woman beyond, or, in conjunction with, physical appeal). The judging criteria, which largely remains amorphous and not defined in particular detail on any official publically accessible websites, nevertheless includes some form of culturally established feminine values such as confidence, ambition, and philanthropic aptitude. To illustrate, for instance, the following is noted on the Miss Universe website:

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