

The Societal and Cultural Dynamics of Beauty Pageants: Their Influence on Self- Development and Personal Growth

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Abstract Beauty pageants have long been a subject of cultural fascination and academic debate, serving as both platforms for empowerment and symbols of objectification. This research review examines various scholarly works exploring the psychological, social, and cultural implications of beauty pageants. Studies indicate that participants engage in pageantry for reasons ranging from self-expression and personal growth to professional opportunities and advocacy (Sang, 2014; De La Cruz, 2018). Family support plays a crucial role in shaping contestants' experiences, both as a source of encouragement and as a site of tension (Smith, 2014). The societal impact of beauty pageants extends beyond the competition stage, influencing body image perceptions and reinforcing—or challenging—traditional beauty norms (Carpenter & Churchill, 2023; Anandan, 2020). Research also highlights the interplay between feminism and beauty pageants, with some scholars arguing that modern competitions have evolved into platforms for advocacy and social change, while others critique their continued emphasis on physical appearance (Van Steenberghe, 2020; Abboud, 2023). Furthermore, international pageants perpetuate Eurocentric beauty ideals, contributing to cultural hegemony and consumerism in developing nations (Velmet, 2014; Shissler, 2004). The inclusion of married women in beauty contests marks a significant shift in redefining societal expectations of femininity (Diva Pageants, n.d.). Additionally, the emergence of beauty pageants as tools for political and cultural expression in countries like Turkey and India demonstrates their broader societal significance (Diva Pageants, n.d.). This review synthesizes key academic perspectives on beauty pageants, addressing their role in shaping individual self-concept, influencing health behaviors, and fostering discussions on gender, race, and representation. By exploring these dimensions, this paper contributes to an understanding of the multifaceted nature of beauty pageants and their evolving relevance in contemporary society. Beauty pageants have evolved over time, their impact on gender roles, societal beauty standards, and

self-perception remains contested. This review also synthesizes key studies on beauty pageants, exploring their implications through various lenses, including feminism, cultural hegemony, and empowerment.

Keywords: Beauty pageants, body image, cultural hegemony, self-perception, empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Beauty pageants have existed for over a century, evolving from simple contests of physical appearance to complex social institutions with economic, cultural, and political implications. (Velmet, 2014). Initially established to promote commercial interests, these competitions have shaped and been shaped by societal beauty norms. While some argue that pageants empower participants by providing platforms for self-expression, advocacy, and career opportunities, others contend that they reinforce patriarchal beauty standards and perpetuate unrealistic body ideals (Abboud, 2023). This review examines literature on beauty pageants, focusing on their impact on participants' self-image, societal expectations, and gender representations. Beauty pageants have been a prominent cultural phenomenon for over a century, shaping societal norms and individual self-perceptions. While critics argue that they perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards and reinforce patriarchal ideals, proponents highlight their role in empowering women through scholarships, professional networking, and advocacy.

METHODS

This review synthesizes findings from multiple academic sources, including qualitative and quantitative research studies, dissertations, and peer-

reviewed journal articles. The analysis follows a thematic approach, categorizing findings into key areas: motivations for participation, family dynamics, societal perceptions, psychological and emotional effects, and contemporary reforms (Sang, 2014; De La Cruz, 2018; Stiekes, 2024). The review draws from feminist theories, social comparison theory, and cultural hegemony perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of beauty pageants' role in modern society (Carpenter & Churchill, 2023; Van Steenberghe, 2020).

RESULTS

1. Motivations for Participation

- Growing interest of women in the field of fashion, beauty and social media has given rise to women's participation in beauty pageants.
- Participants engage in beauty pageants for various reasons, including personal development, advocacy, cultural representation, and professional growth (Sang, 2014; Stiekes, 2024).
- Due to criteria of inclusion in beauty pageants women irrespective of their fields are participating in the pageants for networking or their brand promotion (Diva Pageants, n.d.).
- Ethnic-specific pageants offer spaces for cultural pride, allowing women to navigate identity within multicultural societies (Velmet, 2014).

2. Role of Family

- Supportive families act as pillars of encouragement, specially husband and children being supportive
- Some contestants face familial resistance, particularly from members who perceive pageants as superficial or objectifying.
- Supportive families act as pillars of encouragement, with spouses and children often playing a critical role (Smith, 2014). However, some contestants face familial resistance, particularly from members who perceive pageants as superficial or objectifying (De La Cruz, 2018).

3. Impact on Children and Next Generations

- Women serve as role models for their children. By witnessing their mother's achievements, children learn valuable lessons about

perseverance, self-confidence, and the importance of pursuing one's dreams. Such experiences contribute to raising the next generation with broader perspectives on gender roles and self-worth.

4. Societal Beauty Standards and Social Comparisons

- Pageants predominantly promote Eurocentric beauty ideals, leading to body dissatisfaction among viewers and participants (Velmet, 2014; Shissler, 2004).
- Studies reveal increased dieting behaviours and self-image concerns, particularly when contestants conform to traditional beauty norms (Carpenter & Churchill, 2023).

5. Psychological and Emotional Effects

- Pageants influence self-perception through external validation, aligning with Cooley's "looking-glass self" theory (Stiekes, 2024).
- Contestants experience both empowerment (confidence, networking, advocacy) and detrimental effects (self-doubt, eating disorders, unrealistic beauty expectations) (Anandan, 2020).
- Inclusions of all body shapes in beauty pageants have given confidence to many women.
- The rigorous preparation process, including physical training, mental conditioning, and skincare routines, helps build self-discipline and confidence.
- The journey from self-doubt to self-acceptance can have a ripple effect on family members, fostering an atmosphere of self-growth and motivation within the household.

6. Skill Development

- Public Speaking and Communication Skills
- Poise and Presentation Skills
- Leadership and Teamwork

7. Feminism and Pageantry

- While pageants have integrated feminist ideals by promoting intelligence and social advocacy, critiques persist regarding their emphasis on appearance (Van Steenberghe, 2020).
- Some contestants perceive participation as a feminist act of self-determination, while others challenge the industry's lingering

objectification (Abboud, 2023).

8. Cultural and Capitalist Implications

- Global beauty pageants reinforce hegemonic beauty standards, often tied to capitalist consumerism (Velmet, 2014).
- Pageants serve as marketing tools for beauty and fashion industries, influencing spending habits in developing nations (Shissler, 2004).

9. Reforms and Inclusion Efforts

- The biggest reform in beauty pageants is in pageants for married women where any women irrespective of their profession can participate.
- Many married women see beauty pageants as an avenue to break free from societal norms and redefine their identity beyond their roles as wives and mothers (Singh, 2024; Arya, 2024)
- Participation allows them to assert their individuality and demonstrate that they are more than their marital or parental status.
- Walking the ramp or delivering a speech on a public platform fosters self-belief and a pursuit of success. These pageants offer an opportunity for women to challenge traditional expectations and contribute positively to society (Friedman, 2024).
- Beauty pageants have long been a platform for women to showcase their beauty, intelligence, and talent. While traditionally associated with young, single women, the trend is now shifting toward the participation of married women.
- Emerging beauty pageants for Married women allow women of all sizes to walk on stage with confidence feeling more empowered.
- Recent shifts in beauty pageants suggest a move toward inclusivity. Scholarship programs, diversity initiatives, and the elimination of swimsuit rounds in certain pageants reflect changing societal expectations
- Modern pageants have introduced reforms, including the elimination of swimsuit segments and greater emphasis on advocacy.
- In many cultures, beauty pageants are traditionally associated with young, unmarried women. The success of married women in such platforms challenges age-related stereotypes and promotes inclusivity (Singh, 2024; Arya, 2024)

DISCUSSION

With growing interest in Fashion and beauty industries, show business and social media beauty pageants now days have become very fascinating for almost every woman irrespective of their profession. Inclusivity in pageants of all body sizes has given confidence to all women to walk the ramp with confidence. Taking about women led development first to start with self-development that today's women chooses through the path of beauty pageants where she gets opportunity to gain confidence to speak in the public take up social responsibility by addressing social issues and initiate to work for it. Women feel proud to represent their culture or their country on the global stage shows the development of women in modern times. The inclusivity in the beauty pageants whether it be women of any shape, size, profession or colour has given confidence to many women and led to their self-development and empowerment. The review highlights the dual nature of beauty pageants as both sites of empowerment and mechanisms of social control. While they provide participants with opportunities for self-improvement, visibility, and advocacy, they also perpetuate narrow beauty standards that contribute to negative self-perception and societal pressures. Feminist perspectives suggested that true empowerment requires structural changes that prioritize diverse representations of beauty. Some of these pageants now focus on celebrating not just a woman's beauty, but her journey—her triumphs, her struggles, and her contributions to society. For instance, many Mrs. pageants emphasize the role of women as leaders in their communities, encouraging them to use their platforms to influence change. This gives these pageants a new dimension, promoting empowerment to Dare, Dream and Dazzle in the unique challenges faced by married women (Diva Pageants, n.d.). The capitalist undertones of pageantry further complicate its role, as it often serves corporate interests more than individual empowerment. To remain relevant and beneficial, pageants must evolve into platforms that celebrate holistic representations of women, including achievements beyond physical appearance. If pageants continue to provide platforms for women to inspire, influence, and uplift, they may yet redefine what empowerment truly looks like in the 21st century. Beauty pageants continue to influence cultural and

societal perceptions of femininity, self-worth, and success. While they offer empowerment through self-expression and advocacy, they also reinforce exclusionary beauty standards. These pageants are providing a space for married women to step outside traditional roles and embrace their full potential, fostering self-confidence and self-esteem. By shifting focus from external validation to holistic representation, beauty pageants can transition into spaces that genuinely uplift and inspire women. However, recent reforms, including inclusivity efforts for married women and a shift towards advocacy-driven competitions, signal a transformation. These changes suggest that beauty pageants, when restructured to celebrate diverse achievements and identities, have the potential to evolve into platforms of meaningful empowerment.

Moving forward, sustaining relevance will require pageants to redefine beauty beyond superficial attributes and embrace holistic representations of women's contributions to society.

CONCLUSION

Beauty pageants have evolved into complex platforms that balance empowerment and societal influence. They provide women with opportunities for personal growth, networking, and cultural representation while also reinforcing traditional beauty standards. The increasing inclusivity of pageants—welcoming women of all body types, professions, and marital statuses—has contributed to greater self-confidence and empowerment.

While pageants have integrated feminist ideals by valuing intelligence, advocacy, and leadership, critiques persist regarding their emphasis on appearance and their ties to capitalist consumerism. Ethnic and married women's pageants have played a significant role in redefining traditional expectations, allowing participants to break free from limiting societal norms.

However, beauty pageants still function as both a space for self-expression and a mechanism of social control, where Eurocentric beauty ideals continue to shape self-perception and societal expectations. The elimination of swimsuit rounds and the introduction of scholarship and diversity

initiatives mark progressive steps toward inclusivity.

Yet, true empowerment requires structural changes that shift the focus from appearance to holistic achievements.

To remain relevant, pageants must continue evolving into platforms that celebrate women's individuality, resilience, and contributions to society rather than merely their physical attributes. If they successfully foster inspiration and leadership, beauty pageants can redefine empowerment in the modern era.

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