

**“Nightmares In Tiaras”:**

**Beauty pageants and their detrimental effect on young girls in our society**

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Contemporary Issues in the Fashion Industry

May 22, 2023

“Beauty is only skin deep”, a quote written by Sir Thomas Overbury, should be ingrained into the developing minds of young girls. Unfortunately, external factors like beauty pageants pave the way for their minds to be manipulated into thinking that only their physical aspects matter to the world. Beauty pageants have been around since the mid 1800s and have been creating a false reality ever since. Pageant shows like *Toddlers and Tiaras* and universally displayed pageants like *Miss USA* and *Miss America* have been adversely affecting young girls for years. Beauty pageants teach unhealthy competitive habits and spread a dangerous message that only beauty is important. In combination, beauty pageants focus on one’s outer appearance and in result create girls who become hyper focused on perfecting it. Not only are these pageants unethical to the girls who compete but also, immoral to the principles of the world at large. This research paper will elucidate the negative but transformative ways that beauty pageants have on young girls in our society. It will first establish the general facts of beauty pageants, then discuss how they are detrimental to young girls both competing and watching, and finally address proper next steps while addressing the opposition.

A beauty pageant is defined as a competition in which women are judged on how physically attractive they are (Cambridge, 2023). Beauty pageants originated from Ancient Greece and Paris in 1854 and competitors range in age from 6 months to 25 years old. These pageants typically have multiple categories and participating girls are judged based on how well they do compared to the other competitors. In a typical pageant the categories can include talent, swimwear, outfit of choice, evening wear, etc. The smaller winning titles are usually grouped by age and one girl is crowned “supreme”- the highest title of the entire competition. Most times the winners receive gifts such as: money, crowns, sashes, toys, etc. During beauty pageants, girls go through a rigorous audition process where they are chosen based on their hair style, makeup, and

outfit- all physical attributes of one particular beauty standard. This beauty standard embraces girls who are thin built, above average height, and with fair/light colored skin. There is an obvious lack of diversity in beauty pageants in regards to body type, height, and skin color (De La Cruz, 2018). Instilling a single beauty standard into the minds of young girls will impact them negatively as they grow older. This ideology teaches girls that beauty is the only important aspect in life which is far from the truth. Girls should be taught that beauty is a facet to be proud of but it should not be the main focus of their life.

Majority of young girls were introduced to beauty pageants in the form of an American documentary-style show, *Toddlers and Tiaras*. This show aired from 2009 to 2016 on TLC's original TV network. This 45-minute show featured different beauty pageant girls from all over the world. *Toddlers and Tiaras* gave an invasive glimpse into the pageant girl's personal lives and began to seep into the brains of young girls watching from across the world. Many controversial events happened at the hands of this show that showed the pageant world in a negative light. In one episode, a 4 year old contestant had her chest and buttocks padded to resemble the body of singer-actress Dolly Parton. This incident sparked fire into many adults at home watching because of how over-sexualized and objectified this young girl was on national television. While a 4 year old wearing fake breasts is an extreme version of this type of objectification, this sexiness begins to normalize the expectation of little girls' appearances. These beauty pageants added to the increasing problem of oversexualization and made young girls at home yearning to have fake breasts and buttocks too. Another controversial occurrence involved a 3 year old contestant who was dressed as a prostitute on stage to resemble actor Julia Roberts in the film *Pretty Women*. Much like the previous incident, not only was the contestant objectified but young girls at home were now heavily influenced by this inappropriate

performance. Everyone in society suffers when children are sexualized, but those hurt worse are the children themselves (Henson, 2011). These, and plenty more, episodes show just how beauty pageants influenced young girls in the worst way.

Another separate but relevant incident that took the beauty world by storm was the death of pageant girl JonBenet Ramsey. Ramsey was a 6 year old beauty pageant queen who was brutally murdered in her Colorado home. Without going into the many conspiracies and details of her case, her death emphasized how young girls were being possibly targeted due to their oversexualized persona. It is not a good idea to put your child on public display (Chang, 2012). It was widely believed that JonBenet Ramsey was preyed upon due to the “full makeup, older woman” image that she embodied and also her popularity in her town and through the media. Although, now the main conspiracy of the case is to be believed that she was killed by her sibling, her death sent out a message to the world. Beauty pageants are putting girls on a pedestal for their physical appearance, making them an open target for predators. The underlying issue demonstrates how negatively these pageants can be for young girls.

Moreover, beauty pageants are a detrimental influence to girls at home watching them. Young girls exposed to hypersexualized media content can negatively impact their cognitive and emotional development as they age into their teen and adult years (Zurbriggen, 2008). During this cognitive stage, young girls develop their own ideas and opinions which become stunted by pageants that push a sexualized narrative. Girls become focused on maturing too fast and lose focus of their school work, family, and friends. In terms of emotional development, as girls grow they become aware of their emotions and feelings towards the world. Watching these pageants influences their emotions in a negative way which include: more tantrums, developing bad habits, and aggressive behaviors. Even with a “talent” portion of the competition, beauty

pageants rarely showcase the mental strength and abilities of young girls. Actually, the talent portions on *Toddlers and Tiaras* caused the most controversy because of the inappropriate outfits and dances. This causes the girls exposed to this content less likely to pursue careers and hobbies in STEM and puts them more at risk for sexual occupations. Mainly, the girls who watched these pageants dealt with new found insecurities and noticeably low self esteem. Most beauty pageant competitors came from wealthy families who had no issue showcasing their pageant splurges. If you want to compete seriously, you need to be prepared- and that means money (Salinas, 2012). Seeing pageant girls on TV, flaunting their pricey wardrobes, hair, and prizes makes other girls feel insecure, especially girls who grow up in less fortunate families. These pageants make girls who can't afford to compete feel less worthy and less "beautiful". Now, not only are young girls self-conscious of their physical looks but their social economic status as well.

The negative influence of beauty pageants do not limit itself to the girls at home watching, this is merely the beginning. Girls who compete in beauty pageants are more prone to deal with mental illnesses such as depression, substance abuse, and body dysmorphia. To begin, depression is one of the main issues that pageant girls deal with as they age in the industry. Primarily, this is caused by the excessive stress placed on them in hopes of winning the first place crown. Former Miss USA winner, Cheslie Kryst is a perfect example of how detrimental these pageants can be. In January of 2022, Kryst jumped to her death from her New York City apartment in an apparent suicide. She left behind only an instagram post that read "May this day bring you rest and peace". Kryst not only won Miss USA but she was highly supported for being an African American winner. She was the ideal beauty standard: tall, skinny, and beautiful but suffered from severe depression caused by the pressure of pageantry. Kryst's death supported the idea that you can fit society's idea of beauty on the outside and suffer intensively inside.

Additionally, former *Toddlers and Tiaras* pageant girl Kailia Posey took her own life in May of 2022 by apparent suicide. She was found hanging from a tree in her neighborhood park by her community. Just months apart from Kryst's suicide, Posey's death shocked the beauty world. Both girls have much in common and the main shared issue is that they both were raised in the pageant world. Although depression is mainly looked to as the culprit for their deaths, the majority of the blame should come from the pageant industry.

As well, body dysmorphia is another mental illness prevalent in pageant girls. Body dysmorphia is a mental health condition involving obsessive focus on a perceived flaw in appearance. When children are asked to focus on their looks, they can develop self-esteem issues that carry on through adulthood (Adams Jr., 2017). It is proven that low self-esteem and body dysmorphia go hand in hand where the main focus leads back to being too heavily focused on physical appearance. As beautiful as these girls are, the feeling of not being good enough until you win shoots their self-esteem to an all time low.

Substance abuse in pageant girls are typically noticed as they grow older or towards the end of their career. Substance abuse is defined as an overindulgence in or dependence of an addictive substance, especially alcohol and drugs. Typically seen, girls who grow up in the pageant industry turn to drugs and alcohol for relief and happiness. They tend to seek outlets outside of the pageant world to deal with the troubles they face on a daily basis. Former Miss USA, Tara Conner, has admitted she used cocaine and says she has struggled with alcoholism since she was a teenager (Reuters Staff, 2007). During beauty pageants girls are expected to look their best at all times. This entails always looking beautiful, smiling, and happy. Girls are stripped of their emotions and are told that they should mask their feelings which is done with the help of these substances. Today, beauty pageants are linked to wild nights filled with drinking

alcohol, drugs, and various racy behaviors (Rico, 2007). Pageant girls turn to alcohol as a way to keep their outer appearance healthy while slowly dying inside. However, substances rarely keep one's appearance as well looking as they would hope, because illicit drug use has an impact on the brain and body, physical appearance can show the impacts over time. The appearance of one's teeth, skin, and hair are the main physical aspects that are affected by drug abuse which becomes non-beneficial in a competition like this. Much like abusing any substance, it begins to not work as well as time goes on. This encourages girls to partake in stronger substances such as marijuana, cocaine, meth, heroin, etc. These substances over time alter reality for girls already struggling with mental illness, as discussed before. Depression and substance use become a cocktail made to destroy the mental and physical being of these girls. With the pressure of the competition adding fuel to the fire, pageant girls become highly addicted to drugs and alcohol and their life slips beneath their fingers before they know it. The negative effects of beauty pageants goes beyond the scope of the pageant stage and affects girls throughout their adulthood, essentially ruining their lives one shiny crown at a time.

Although pageants like *Miss America* and *Miss USA* are still around, the popular show *Toddlers and Tiaras* came to an end in 2016. However, the show's legacy still lingers onto many young girls who participated or watched. Many girls who grew up as competitors on this show have left the pageant world but pageant queen Alana Thompson known as Honey Boo Boo continued her pageant life and became the star of her own reality TV show. Although this seems like a major accomplishment, her show gave viewers a behind the scene look at the trouble pageantry caused her and her family. This show showcases how her pageant life led to a life of loneliness and bullying by her peers. All that [her pageant life] makes it difficult to let classmates at her public high school-or anyone beyond family really- get close to her (Frishberg, 2021).

Thompson still deals with the feeling of not being good enough, much like girls do during these beauty pageant competitions. Friends and feeling included is extremely important for a growing child's well being.

Furthermore, *Miss USA* and similar pageants are still around today but many of the contestants work to make sure their physical appearance isn't society's main focus. Pageants place a priority on the importance of getting involved and giving back by providing a dedicated international platform of partnerships with charities, sponsors, and brands around the world. Advancely, the *Miss America* pageant discontinued their swimwear competition in 2018. We will no longer judge our candidates based on their outward physical appearance (Waxman, 2018). Eliminating the swimwear portion lets young girls know that winning these competitions are not solely based on their physical appearance. This change became a step in the right direction and works to create a more non-superficial industry environment. In addition, the ending of *Toddlers and Tiaras* was beneficial to many girls. Most girls were only introduced to these pageants through this TV show so it stopped the damage that it was causing. The ending of this show also allowed girls to aspire to be more than just beautiful.

To conclude, beauty pageants negatively impact the well-being of young girls by hyper-focusing primarily on their physical appearance. Young girls are the future of the world and beauty pageants are detrimental to their mental, physical, and emotional growth. It is proven that beauty pageants place young girls on a pedestal and show them in a negative light. Beauty pageants also impact girls who watch them by making them more insecure and lower their self-esteem. As for the girls who compete, they deal with mental health issues such as depression, self-consciousness, and substance abuse. Society is beginning to stray away from the harmful effects of beauty pageants and working to make competitions versatile for all girls.



Although there has been progress, society as a whole needs to work towards making girls feel beautiful inside and out. Doing this will not only increase the well-being of girls in society but also better the statistics of children who grow to silently suffer at the hands of an unhealthy mental and emotional state.

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