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**MISS USA MEETS FEMINISM: A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING
CONTESTANTS' THOUGHTS ON FEMINISM**

By

Julia Van Steenberghe

B.S., University of Maine, 2020

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

(in Human Development)

The Graduate School

University of Maine

May 2022

Advisory Committee:

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented in Partial
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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore pageant contestants' thoughts on feminism. A total of 12 of the 51 state titleholders who had competed in the 2020 Miss USA Competition were interviewed. They were recruited through letters sent to individual State Pageant Directors of Miss USA. The objective of the study was to gain an understanding of how women who compete in beauty pageants view their participation in light of feminism. The focus of the interviews centered on their motivations for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, their own self-identification as a feminist, and any criticism they may have received to suggest pageants do not align with feminist ideals. Titleholders were also invited to add any additional thoughts or suggestions on pageants and feminism. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each interview consisted of a series of open-ended questions. The interviews were transcribed and coding categories were developed.

Sixteen coding categories emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts and were organized under the topics of focus for the study. Specifically, the 16 coding categories were organized according to the four research questions for this study which included: *motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, self-identification as a feminist, and experience with anti-feminist critique*. Three overarching themes emerged from a further

analysis of the 16 coding categories and include *Pageants are Empowering*, *Swimsuit is Complicated*, and *Pageantry Has Evolved*. This study revealed that these women had many reasons for entering pageants, the least of which was related to beauty. Most women felt pageantry supported feminist ideals, and personally identified themselves as a feminist, yet had experience being told by outsiders that their participation was anti-feminist and they were not feminists. Much of the outside criticism centered on the swimsuit competition, however most of the titleholders found swimsuit to be empowering. They also felt pageants had evolved and did not see “beauty pageant” as an appropriate descriptor for their participation. Implications for the study findings are discussed, including ways in which pageants might better support feminist ideals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout the research process and writing of my thesis I have received a tremendous amount of support and guidance from faculty, peers, family, and friends. The saying “it takes a village” was truly exemplified throughout this process and I am eternally grateful for my own personal village and all they did for me throughout this journey.

I would first like to thank my Chair, Dr. Sandra Caron, whose expertise and guidance was invaluable throughout this entire process. Dr. Caron believed in me and supported my idea of giving women who participate in pageantry a voice from the very beginning. She encouraged me to write this thesis and gave me the confidence that not only was this subject worthy of investigation, but that I was worthy of conducting it. Dr. Caron pushed me past my limits and gave me the confidence to accomplish more than I ever believed I was capable of.

In addition to the support of Dr. Caron, I am very thankful for the support from all my committee members. I would like to thank Dr. Julie DellaMattera and Dr. Sid Mitchell for their feedback and assistance throughout the study design process and writing process. I would also like to thank the College of Education and Human Development and the University of Maine Graduate School for helping to instill in me a lifelong passion for learning and providing me with the resources and support to make this thesis happen. Additionally, I want to thank my former colleagues at the University of Maine Office of Admission, in particular Nicole Forbes, Matt LeClair, and Dr. Mary Mahoney-O’Neil for their words of wisdom and encouragement.

I would next like to thank the State Directors within the Miss USA Organization, especially my own former Directors, Laurie Clemente and Anthony Clemente, for helping me with the recruitment of participants for this study. To the twelve women who took the time to

share your stories— this thesis wouldn't have been possible without you. Thank you for giving a voice to the titleholders who have come before you, and all the women who will come after you.

I owe a big thank you to Dr. Nicole Achey, Dr. Caron's former doctoral student, and alumna of the College of Education and Human Development, who helped guide me throughout the analysis process. To Emma Richardson, a peer in the Human Development program who quickly became a friend. Emma's words of wisdom and calming presence throughout the stress and exhaustion of this process were there when I needed them the most. Working with Amelia Sullivan, a fellow Graduate Student at the University of Maine, allowed me to learn in an interdisciplinary manner that helped expand my horizons and look at my work from a different perspective. The stress relieving power-walks and pep talks we shared made this whole process more enjoyable.

My family deserves my endless gratitude. First, to Simon Perry, for his infinite amount of patience, encouragement and love. To my brothers for their humor when times were tough and reminding me not to take things too seriously. To my father for pushing me to believe in myself and reminding me I am capable of anything I put my mind to. To my mother for bringing me meals, helping with chores and errands, and keeping me sane when the process became all consuming, but most of all, for teaching me how to have fun, be good, and to always learn a lot.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this research and thesis to the memory of Cheslie Kryst. Cheslie's memory kept me working when I wanted to give up and kept me grounded throughout the writing process on what mattered the most: sharing these young women's stories.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Critics have long questioned beauty pageants, often saying that they reinforce the idea that women should be valued primarily for their physical appearance. The most notable protest happened at Miss America in 1968 led by the Women's Liberation Front that sparked a feminist revolution (Gay, 2018). *The Smithsonian Magazine* article described this event as not only involving women protesting Miss America and its "misogynistic attitudes toward women and beauty" but also how the nation collectively treated women (Gay, 2018). While this Miss America protest may be one of the most well-known, there were many more that occurred both before and after 1968. For example, Miss America 1972 was harassed and even had her life threatened by various feminists as she traveled throughout the country to promote the pageant. In 1974, the National Organization of Women protested the Miss America pageant by marching up and down the boardwalk chanting and labeling Miss America as a degrading, mindless boob-girlie symbol (Gay, 2018).

The Miss World Organization, another major pageant system, is no stranger to protests either. In 1970 the British Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) was infuriated by the organizations objectification of women and wanted to make an emotional declaration against the misogyny (Hall, 2020). According to *The Independent*, approximately 60 women crashed the event and assaulted the stage and host with flour bombs, rotten fruit and vegetables. (Hall, 2020). Jenny Fortune, who was a 20-year-old participant in the protest, reflected back on the events and her views on feminism. Fortune said she never believed that they would be able to pull the protest off, but she just wanted to be a part of something (Hall, 2020). What sparked Fortune's interest was a talk she heard at the 1969 UK WLM meeting, making Fortune realize that

feminism was “against oppression and exploitation” (Hall, 2020). Following this same rationale, 14 years after the protest of Miss World, a host network of Miss World, the BBC, stopped televising the event. Michael Grade, who was the controller of BBC One, shared he no longer thought the contest merited national air time, saying “They are an anachronism in this day and age of equality and verging on offensive.” (Hall, 2020).

A quarter of a century after the 1970 protest of Miss World, the 1996 Miss World competition was home to its own protest (Reuters, 1996). According to the *New York Times* article, both feminist and nationalist protestors flooded the event, including the Forum for Awakening Women, who picketed the pageant and threatened mass suicide (Reuters, 1996). The *Los Angeles Times* described the dozens of groups that have protested the Miss World pageant to be an odd mix of both modern feminists and “turn-back-the-clock Hindu nationalists” (Bearak, 1996). The protesters argued that not only did the pageant degrade women, but they also threatened Indian culture with Western appropriation. One man even went as far as lighting himself on fire, resulting in his death (Reuters, 1996). According to Pramila Nesargi, a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party, his death was worth it as he sacrificed himself for the cause of women (Goldenberg, 1996).

Protestors argued that Miss World was vulgar, obscene and based on appearances (Bearak, 1996). One feminist from the group Liberation, agreed that some of the nationalist protesting had gone too far, but wanted to find a way to counter the idea of women working to outshine other women based on appearances (Bearak, 1996). Pageant spokesperson Ashwami Singla said, “Is rewarding women for hard work vulgar? These women are achievers. They’ll go on to be doctors, lawyers, fashion models. Is this vulgar? How dare they!” (Bearak, 1996).

Today, the criticism persists. A 2015 article in *The Guardian* categorized under “feminism” shared the authors views on Miss Universe. The author, Jessica Valenti, said that, “The contests are an antiquated reminder of exactly what we don’t want for women, and they should have no place in our future” (Valenti, 2015). Valenti continued to describe the long-debated swimsuit competition as “explicitly vacuous” and the entire competition as nothing more than “an opportunity to ogle gorgeous, scantily-clad women and pit them against each other” (Valenti, 2015). In addition, a perspective piece in *The Washington Post* in 2018 criticized such competitions in the article, “The Miss America Pageant taught us to ogle women’s bodies. Can it now teach us to value their ideas?” It argued that “Beauty pageants reinforce the gendered power dynamics in our culture” continuing to say that “...women are disproportionately judged by appearance” (Hamlin, 2018).

As recently as 2019, the University of California, Santa Barbara’s *Daily Nexus* published an article titled, “Argument in the Office: Are Beauty Pageants Feminist or Flawed” saying “Beauty pageants like Miss Universe are surrounded by controversy, hated by many yet watched by millions.” (Mantai, 2019). The author went on to say how the overwhelming argument surrounding those who are “anti-pageant” is how they teach young people, especially young women, that they must conform to inconceivable standards of beauty. The author went further to explain that the arguments from others also contain critics saying that competitions are “burdensome” with their expectations, and expect women to be “gorgeous, intelligent, and poised” (Mantai, 2019).

While these protests and newspaper commentaries criticize beauty pageants for opposing feminist ideals and claim they are overly focused on women’s looks and therefore degrade women, the question arises, “How do the contestants view their participation in light of

feminism?” Two recent examples were found. The first example to shed light on how contestants view their participation in light of feminism includes an interview in *Ms. Magazine* with Meagan Tandy, a former Miss California USA (Geismar, 2016). In reflecting on her time competing for Miss USA, she describes how being a feminist influenced her experience.

I actually find pageantry to be extremely empowering as a woman. Many people might not realize this but pageants really help you gain confidence in yourself. When you participate in a pageant, you get to represent yourself and all that you work for.....I can understand why some people look down on pageants. I know that people get especially, leery when it comes to swimsuit competitions. It's important to keep in mind that beauty pageants are really about fitness and not all about sex and parading women around. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but I believe participating in pageants helped me grow as a woman (response to third question).

The other relevant example of speaking with contestants about their views on feminism came in the final round of the 2017 Miss USA competition. The three finalists were each asked, “What do you consider feminism to be, and do you consider yourself a feminist?” (2017 Miss USA Competition, 2017). Meredith Gould, representing Minnesota, did not answer directly whether or not she considered herself to be a feminist. Gould said the following:

Modern day feminist is not only about supporting other women, it is about being any gender in this entire country and this entire world and not being afraid to lift those up around you. It is about being unapologetically yourself. In this pageant we have incredible representatives of what it means to be a woman, whether they are on this stage, hosting this pageant with us, or judging the contestants on this stage. (Pintura Channel, 2017, 4:13)

Chhavi Verg, representing New Jersey, answered directly that she considers herself to be a feminist, and that feminism to her is about equality among the genders and she believes that women are still not granted the same opportunities and rights as men. Verg said the following when answering:

Feminism is striving for equality, and I do consider myself to be a feminist. I think it is a misconception when people believe that feminism is women being better than men, but it is really not. It is a fight for equality, and we need to realize if we want a stable society, a better future for every individual, we need to be equal. That is why I advocate for education for women. Women are still held back in many places of the world, they still do not have the right to their independence, that right to their equality, all because of education. Once we do take that step, I believe that an equal world will be a better world. (Pintura Channel, 2017, 4:58).

McCullough, representing the District of Colombia, responded to the question about feminism and being a feminist by saying she does not use the word “feminism” but believes in equality:

So, as a women scientist in the government, I’ve liked to lately transpose the word feminism to equalism. I don’t really want to consider myself, I try not to consider myself like this die hard, ya know, like “I don’t really care about men” but one thing I am going to say is though women, we are just as equal as men when it comes to opportunity in the workplace. And I say firsthand that I have witnessed the impact that women have in leadership in the medical sciences as well as in the office environment, so as Miss USA I would help to promote that leadership responsibility to women globally to women worldwide (Pintura Channel, 2017, 3:09).

When McCullough went on later that evening to be crowned Miss USA 2017, her denouncement of the word feminism made the popular press erupt with criticism. Sources such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Yahoo Sports*, *USA Today* and the *Insider* shared the story and the controversy that erupted on social media following McCullough's statement. McCullough's first week as Miss USA was filled with questions regarding her statement.

Statement of the Problem

Over two and a half million girls and young women in the U.S participate in pageants on the local, state, regional, and national level (Statistic Brain, 2021). As just one example, consider the Miss USA competition. What begins with thousands of young women competing across the country, moves to 51 young women representing their state, and ends with just one being crowned Miss USA. Yet there has been little research of pageant participants beyond a handful of studies on their body image and self-esteem. There has been no research on how women who participate in beauty pageants feel about their participation as it relates to their thoughts on feminism. While there has been long-standing criticism by feminists about beauty pageants and the women who compete in them, there is no research asking the participants how they feel and define themselves. Such an understanding would provide a more accurate view of the contestants and their sense of self.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the meaning beauty pageant participation has for women who compete. Knowing that we have moved beyond defining women simply by their physical appearance, how do these women justify what they are doing in light of feminism? Women who competed in the 2020 Miss USA Competition were interviewed to gain a better understanding of their perspective on being a contestant in beauty pageants.

The overarching research question which guided the study was: *How do women who compete in beauty pageants view their participation in light of feminism?* Four sub-research questions included:

1. What motivates these women to participate in beauty pageants?
2. In what ways do these women believe pageantry to be supportive or unsupportive of feminist ideals?
3. Do these women see themselves as feminists? Why or why not?
4. What has been their experience with those who might suggest what they are doing is not in alignment with feminist ideals?

Research Assumptions

The researcher assumed that

1. The participants responded honestly and shared their insights and experiences.
2. The participants were open to talking about their views on feminism with the researcher.
3. The researcher was able to set aside her own experiences as a contestant and any preconceived ideas and beliefs about feminism and participants who participate in the Miss USA Competition.

Definition of Terms

Feminism – Feminism has been defined similarly by different sources. Many point to equality and equal opportunity between men and women. For example, three dictionary definitions include:

- The belief in social, economic, political equality amongst the sexes. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021).

- The belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. (Merriam-Webster, 2021)
- The belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021).

Miss USA Competition - The Miss USA competition is composed of three rounds of competition. The interview round, swimsuit round, and evening gown round. The 2020 competition marked the last year that Miss USA was produced by the Miss Universe Organization. The 2021 competition was under the newly created Miss USA organization, a franchise of the Miss Universe Organization (Miss USA Organization, 2021).

Miss USA Contestant - Contestants must be between the ages of 18 and 28 years old before January 1st in the year they wish to compete at Miss USA. Miss USA Contestants must be childless and never married. Miss USA Contestants must have residency in the state they are representing. Miss USA Contestants can compete numerous times for the state title, but can only ever hold one state title and only compete at Miss USA once. (Miss Universe Organization, 2021).

Pageantry – While pageantry typically refers to the act of participating in a pageant, pageantry can also refer to the entire year of the titleholder’s reign.

System – A pageant system refers to the pageant organization. For example, the Miss Universe Organization is home to the most well-known pageant system in the world. Different pageant systems can consist of different criteria and requirements.

Titleholder – A titleholder refers to a contestant who has won or been appointed a title within a specific pageant system. There are titleholders at the local, state, national, and international level.

Women who are Miss USA State Titleholders can only win/be appointed one state title and can only compete at Miss USA one time.

Chapter Summary

With so many girls and young women competing in so many beauty pageant competitions, it is long overdue that researchers seek to understand the views of contestants. There is an abundance of critiques and commentaries about these competitions and those who compete in them, yet there is a gap in the literature in understanding how the participants themselves feel about what they are doing. The few studies that have involved beauty pageant contestants have been limited to asking them about their body image and self-esteem. This research provided a systematic examination of the perspectives of participants with the intention of understanding what their participation means and their views on feminism.

Specifically, this qualitative study involves in-depth interviews with 12 participants from the 2020 Miss USA Competition. This study aimed to allow the participants to reflect on their experiences in competing as a woman, in light of feminist ideals. The researcher set aside her own experiences and any preconceived ideas and beliefs about feminism and participants who participate in the Miss USA Competition.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will begin by providing an overview of beauty pageants. This will be followed by research on women who compete in such pageants, as well as research on understanding of feminism.

Overview of Pageants

This section will provide a review of the history of pageants, pageant systems and statistics, and specific information on the Miss USA Competition.

Background of Pageants

In the U.S., the most well-known and largest pageants include Miss America and Miss USA. On the world stage, major contests include the yearly Miss World competition (founded in 1951), Miss Universe (founded in 1952), Miss International (founded in 1960) and Miss Earth (founded in 2001 with environmental awareness as its concern).

In terms of numbers of contests, there were over 7,500 beauty pageants franchised between the Miss America Organization and Miss USA Organization in the United States alone (Banet-Weiser, 1999). That number does not include other pageant systems, small-town events, and other organizations. It is estimated that approximately 2.5 million girls and young women compete in more than 100,000 beauty pageants each year in the U.S (Statistic Brain, 2021).

Pageantry is an incredibly expensive industry for contestants and lucrative on many different levels for the organizers, sponsors and coaches. The pursuit of a title and a crown has grown into a \$5 billion-a-year industry. According to DeNinno (2014), not only do the contestants pay entry fees that are on average between \$300 and \$500 for local and state competitions, but some entry fees are well over \$1,000. Coaching and wardrobe costs can range

significantly as well. Some members of the Miss USA Class of 2020 gowns were valued at over \$20,000. Pageant coaching is often over \$100 an hour, and some contestants put in as many as three sessions a week. (DeNinno, 2014). Winners often receive cash awards, scholarships, sponsorships for wardrobe, services, travel, products and much more. For example, Miss Texas USA 2021 is awarded a car for the duration of her reign, which is not that unique in the world of pageants. In addition, the rights to own a franchise cost more than most realize and take years of experience to become a director in some systems.

History of Pageants

Historically, beauty contests in different forms can be traced back to the medieval times and were even referenced as far back as in Greek mythology (Cohen et al., 1996). However, P.T Barnum of Barnum and Bailey's circus is thought to be the founder of the American beauty pageant (Cohen et al., 1996; Grout 2013). In 1854, Barnum's attempt at a beauty pageant was not well received, but it launched a new wave of beauty contests primarily held in newspapers sometimes receiving thousands of entries (Cohen et al., 1996; The Library of Congress, 2008). The more interest the mainstream media took in the competitions, the more they grew. This made the competitions more enticing for participants to enter, and more rewarding for the winners (Grout, 2013).

Over six decades after Barnum's attempted pageant, Miss America was born. The 1921 development of this competition went far beyond local entertainment found in newspapers and periodicals; this became large-scale national entertainment (Grout, 2013). The competition was developed to prolong the summer tourist season in Atlantic City. In the early years, women from cities across the U.S. who had won their newspapers' "popularity contest" (aka Inter-City Beauty) came to Atlantic City for a day of parades, mingling with the crowds, and a final

appearance on stage. Wearing a sash indicating what city they represented, they were judged on personality, social grace, and swimsuit competition by 50 percent audience applause and 50 percent judges' decision. The competition evolved into local competitions being held in towns and cities within each state, with one woman eventually chosen to represent their state in the annual Miss America competition in Atlantic City. When Miss America 1950, Yolande Betbeze, refused to pose in pageant sponsor Catalina Swimwear's bathing suit, they pulled their sponsorship. In 1952, Catalina Swimwear decided to create their own competition and another major pageant was born: Miss USA.

In a bit of irony, according to Watson and Martin (2004), beauty pageants have their roots in the women's suffrage movement of 1910, when women promoting feminist ideals put on their own pageant by taking to the streets to promote women's rights. Suffragists wore sashes with words such as "Votes for Women" and performed skits in public parks about important women in history in order to educate on the value of women (Watson & Martin, 2004). In 1921, when the Miss America pageant was created, the participants also wore sashes like the suffragists of 1910. However, unlike their suffragists' sashes which promoted political slogans and values, the new pageant participants' sashes were adorned with the name of the city or state the participant represented. While the women suffragists promoted solidarity among women as a way of encouraging liberation (Watson & Martin, 2004), early critics of the Miss America Pageant felt it was promoting values that were contrary to the women suffragists' beliefs. The suffragists saw the pageant as pitting woman against each other in a contest where they would be judged by men and seek male approval based on their physical beauty.

Miss America vs Miss USA

Miss USA has many distinct differences to Miss America, despite the major differences, Miss USA and Miss America are commonly confused by those outside the pageant community. After winning Miss America, the new titleholder does not go on to compete at an international competition, while Miss USA continues and competes at Miss Universe (Miss America Organization, 2021, Miss Universe Organization, 2021). Both Miss America and Miss USA are full-time, contractual employees of their respective organizations for the duration of their reigns with Miss USA making a six-figure salary (Miss America Organization, 2021, Miss Universe Organization, 2021, Miss USA 2021). Unlike Miss America who does not move to a new residence, Miss USA is expected to move to an official apartment provided by the Organization. Until this Fall, the winner moved to New York City to live with Miss Universe, and after the 2021 competition the new winner will move to Los Angeles, living alone under the directorship of the Miss USA Organization.

As of 2018, the Miss America Organization made a major shift from its roots. After nearly 100 years, they announced that they would no longer judge contestants on their outward appearance (Miss America Organization, 2021). This meant the elimination of the competition's origin, the swimsuit competition, and more time focusing on the contestant's voices and stories (Miss America Organization, 2021). In Miss America the contestants are now judged on interview, social impact statement, evening wear and talent (Miss America Organization, 2021).

Miss USA contestants are judged on interview, swimsuit, evening gown and the final question. The most obvious differences between the competitions currently lie with Miss America having a talent portion, and Miss USA having no talent portion and still having the swimsuit competition. With research having been conducted on Miss America pageants prior to

their 2018 remodel, no research has been conducted since the major organization changes, and no research has been done looking at the contestants of Miss USA specifically. Until the 2021 competition, Miss USA was under the ownership of the Miss Universe Organization. As of 2021 over 10,000 women compete in their system each year. With so many contestants and over 5.5 million viewers tuning in to the nation competition annually, the organization has a bigger reach and role in the United States and the world than some may realize.

On their websites, Miss America, Miss USA and its parent organization Miss Universe all describe themselves using feminist ideals of empowerment and the importance of giving women a voice:

- “Miss America is more than a title, it’s a movement of empowering young women everywhere to dream big, to insist that their voices be heard and to inspire change in the world around them” and “The organization stands for empowering young women across the country to be the best they can be through leadership, talent, communication skills and smarts” (Miss America Organization, 2021).
- “We are the Miss USA Organization, a globally-recognized pageant platform that celebrates the unique beauty of women across cultures. Beyond well-known, we remain relevant to mainstream culture, as we connect young women to their own beauty and help activate their voice. We are a sisterhood in arms, a family of movers and shakers in beauty and business, poised to positively impact the status of women by bringing pageants to the everyday lives of everyday Americans” (Miss USA Organization, 2021).
- “Miss Universe Organization (MUO) empowers women to realize their ambition and build self-confidence, acting as a catalyst for future success. The MUO community is a sisterhood that is committed to uplifting and empowering one another. The delegates and

titleholders that have participated in the MUO system are able to cultivate their personal, professional, and philanthropic goals. These women are forward thinking and motivated to not just talk about change, but to initiate it. Research has shown the #1 obstacle for women to overcome in reaching their potential is a lack of self-confidence. By developing self-confidence through MUO experiences, women have gone onto high-profile careers in government, business, finance, broadcasting and entertainment” (Miss Universe Organization, 2021).

Research on Women in Pageants

Despite the millions of girls and young women who have participated in pageants (as noted above), there is a dearth of research on these participants. Only a handful of studies have been conducted on beauty pageant contestants and their focus has been limited to issues of body image and self-esteem. Based on the vast number of women who participate in some form of beauty pageants annually, there is a clear need to fill this academic void in order to understand the motivation and meaning given to their participation. The few studies that have been conducted will be reviewed below.

Three studies included women who had participated in the Miss America pageant system. In a study by Maddox (2001), she interviewed 11 state titleholders about their view of themselves as results of participating in the Miss America 1985 competition fifteen years earlier (Maddox, 2001). Maddox, a former contestant of Miss America 1985, found it had profound impacts on herself and wanted to study the effects their participation in Miss America had on fellow contestants view of themselves. Maddox interviewed the winner, the second and fourth runner-up, three recipients of non-finalist talent awards, and five contestants who received no special award or placement at Miss America 1985 (Maddox, 2001). Maddox used a semi-

structured style of interviewing with a protocol of 15 questions. Maddox concluded the women seemed to have two main reasons for competing: 1) to receive validation as a woman and/or and 2) to use the pageant as a professional stepping stone (Maddox, 2001). Maddox found the former contestants reported both positive and negative effects when reflecting on their participation. Some of the reported positive benefits include the experience gained, the opportunities to perform before audiences of such a large size, travel, meeting numerous celebrities, and scholarship money earned (Maddox, 2001). The negative effects discussed included feelings of disappointment, failure, shame, and self-doubt (Maddox, 2001). Maddox reported there was a shift in how contestants saw themselves, putting a greater emphasis on their appearance as a result of participating (Maddox, 2001). Maddox states that the Miss America Pageant of 1985 is “situated within a patriarchal framework” (Maddox, 2001), however, the women she interviewed did not discuss feeling objectified nor did they bring up the effects of male domination.

The second study to include the Miss America pageant system contestants was by Bowers (2016). It focused on social stereotyping and self-esteem. Bowers explored the perceptions of five local titleholders between the ages of 18 and 24 through an hour-long interview focusing on seven questions. Bowers looked at how and why contestants compete in local Miss America pageants despite the negative stereotypes surrounding contestants. As a former Miss America pageant system participant, she recruited participants via her connections to the organization. Each participant in the study had to be a current local titleholder in the Miss America pageant system, no former titleholders were interviewed. The qualitative study found that they had all been exposed to stereotypes toward Miss America pageant system titleholders (Bowers, 2016). The study also found that societal stereotypes had no influence on contestants’ decision to compete in the Miss America Organization or self-esteem (Bowers, 2016).

Furthermore, those who participated in the study expressed that their self-efficacy increased through peer motivation and promotion of their platform (Bowers, 2016).

The third study was by Everhart (2011) who compared 20 women who had competed in the Miss America pageantry system in the state of Hawaii to 20 women from Hawaii and West Virginia who had never participated in a beauty pageant. She examined the impact of competing in beauty pageants on body dissatisfaction, depression and self-esteem. As a former Miss America pageant system participant, Everhart recruited the 20 women through her network of pageant participants; the other 20 non-pageant participants were randomly selected. Each women completed three questionnaires – one on self-esteem, one on attitudes toward body weight, and another on depression. Everhart (2011) found that those who had competed in beauty pageants had a lower level of body satisfaction than those who had not competed. She (2011) also found that those who have competed in beauty pageants had a higher level of self-esteem. There was no significant difference in depression scores between those who competed in pageants and those who did not (Everhart, 2011).

Similar to Everhart, two other studies also looked at those who had participated in pageants and focused on issues of self-esteem and body image. Thompson and Hammond (2003) surveyed beauty pageant contestants from 43 states. The goal of the study was to explore body image, self-esteem, and eating disorders among beauty pageant contestants (Thompson & Hammond, 2003). A survey was originally mailed to 300 pageant contestants and a total of 131 participated in the study; 94% who had participated in a pageant and 6% who planned to participate in the next year. Almost all (90%) of the women who had participated in a pageant reported being a pageant finalist or winner, and over half (55%) competed at the national and/or international level. They completed a 50-item survey that covered a range of issues from pageant

participation, dieting, and perceptions of eating disorders, to attitudes toward ideal self, self-esteem, and body image. Thompson and Hammond found that a quarter (26%) of the women perceived that they had, or were told they had, an eating disorder. Nearly half of the surveyed contestants (48.5%) reported wanting to be thinner, and over half (57%) were trying to lose weight (Thompson & Hammond, 2003). They found higher scores on self-esteem were significantly associated with increased level of competition. Self-esteem was not associated with the number of times a woman was a winner or a finalist, but how high the level of competition was (Thompson & Hammond, 2003).

A similar study was conducted by Wonderlich et al. (2005) to evaluate the association between childhood beauty pageant participation and adult disordered eating, body dissatisfaction, depression and self-esteem. The study evaluated 22 women from a larger study of 560 female university students. Eleven of the women in the study had competed in childhood beauty pageants, and 11 of the participants had not. They were paired by age and BMI. They compared their scores on a series of instruments measuring self-esteem, body image, depression, eating disorders, and a bulimia inventory. Their findings revealed that those who competed as children scored higher on body dissatisfaction, interpersonal distrust, and impulse dysregulation than those who did not compete as children (Wonderlich et al., 2005). There was no significant difference between the groups of women in measures of bulimia, body perception, depression and self-esteem (Wonderlich et al., 2005).

According to the authors, their findings suggest that child participation in beauty pageants “may influence adult body dissatisfaction, interpersonal distrust, and impulse dysregulation” (Wonderlich et al., 2005). It is important to note that participation in beauty pageants was measured by a single question, “As a young girl, did you ever participate in any of

the following....” One of the response choices was “Beauty pageants.” There was no information gathered on age of participation, how long they participated, and at what level (e.g., a local state fair vs Miss Teen USA).

Finally, a study by Sang (2016) involved in-depth interviews with 14 women who were competing in either the Miss United America (3 women) or Miss American Elegance System (11 women). These two pageant systems do not have age or beauty requirements; participants ranged in age from 24 to 65. The focus of this qualitative study was to understand women’s meanings of competing in beauty pageants and to understand the role families play (Sang, 2016). Sang had previously participated in beauty pageants throughout childhood. She intentionally did not want to focus on whether pageants were inherently good or bad, but simply wanted to explore the women’s meanings of competing in pageants and how their families had influenced them (Sang, 2016).

Bonding and thriving were two major themes to emerge from her interviews. In terms of bonding, participants described how participating in pageants helped strengthen relationships with family members, including spouses, and in some cases, with their children by teaching them coping skills when they lost. Some utilized the pageant to create special parent-child time when competing side-by-side in the same pageant system (Sang, 2016). Women also described bonding with other participants, and the important friendships they made with other participants by way of sisterhood and comradery.

In terms of thriving, Sang found that many viewed participating in pageants as a means of doing something positive for themselves (Sang, 2016). Women reported that participation in pageants raised their confidence and self-esteem, and was a way to have fun, as well as a to give back to the community by promoting important causes. Others described how participating in

pageants improved their interview and communication skills to better their chances in the workforce (Sang, 2016). She also found that some participants lacked family support for competing, however, those women went on to compete and felt their experience was positive.

Research on Measuring Feminism

While the definition of feminism generally refers to the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities (Merriam-Webster, 2021), who identifies as a feminist or who holds feminist values has been a popular research topic in Women's Studies and social psychology. A variety of different frameworks and instruments have been developed to try to organize what it means to be a feminist. As Russo points out in her 1998 editorial in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* entitled, “Measuring feminist attitudes: Just what does it mean to be a feminist?” there is a wide diversity in attitudes and opinions by those who see themselves as feminists. She says, “Dictionary definitions aside, clearly the label “feminist” represents very different things to different people.” (Russo p. 315).

One consistent finding from research in this area is that many women do not self-identify as a feminist. In their evaluation of contemporary beliefs about feminism, Swirsky and Angelone (2014) summarized the literature and four potential reasons why women do not self-identify as a feminist: 1) the negative connotation associated with the term “feminism”, 2) the dichotomous nature of the term (e.g., the lack of a grey area between feminist and non-feminist), 3) the belief that feminism is no longer necessary in today’s society, and 4) a focus on the experiences of White upper-to-middle class women and therefore a perceived lack of cultural relevance for many women.

In another example of the challenges to measuring feminism, Elder et al. (2021) compared women who self-identify as either feminists, non-feminists, or anti-feminists on their

beliefs about policy issues related to gender equality. They found women in all three groups supported equal pay for women, parental leave, and access to legal abortion. Their findings suggest that measuring feminism by support for such issues would lead to dramatically different results than simply asking if someone self-identifies as a feminist (Elder et al., 2021). Their findings support Russo's argument that the label "feminist" has different meanings and the difficulties in measuring feminism. Recognizing this challenge supports the need for a qualitative research approach to understanding how women in the current study define feminism and identify their support for feminist ideals.

Chapter Summary

Beauty pageants have a long history in this country dating back to 1921 with the start of Miss America, followed by Miss USA in 1952. There is also a long history of criticism by feminist organizations or by women who consider themselves feminists who see such pageants as counter to feminist ideals. Considering that there are thousands of pageants held each year, and literally millions of girls and young women competing, it is surprising that there is so little research to understand the women who participate (beyond the handful of studies reviewed above), and no research to date to understand how these women see their participation in light of feminism and if they consider themselves as supporting feminist ideals or defining themselves as feminists. There has been some research examining how women in general view feminism or if they define themselves as feminists, but no studies have specifically been designed to examine beauty pageant participants' thoughts on feminism. These women deserve to have a voice to be understood from their perspective.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I will discuss the purpose of the study and the research questions, and the methodological approach, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, instrumentation, data analysis process, and acknowledgement of risks and limitations. The research study focused on interviews with women who competed in the 2020 Miss USA Competition. As one of 51 state titleholders who competed in the 2020 Miss USA Competition (representing Maine), I believe my personal connection to this event and the other contestants led to greater interest and participation in my research.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore contestants' motivations for beauty pageant participation, as well as their views on feminism. Knowing that we have moved beyond defining women simply by their physical appearance, this study sought to understand how these women view beauty pageant participation when considering feminism. State titleholders who competed in the 2020 Miss USA Competition were interviewed to gain a better understanding of their perspective on being a contestant in beauty pageants.

The overarching research question guiding the study was: *How do women who compete in beauty pageants view their participation in light of feminism?* The four sub-research questions included:

1. What motivates these women to participate in beauty pageants?
2. In what ways do these women believe pageantry to be supportive or unsupportive of feminist ideals?
3. Do these women see themselves as feminists? Why or why not?

4. What has been their experience with those who might suggest what they are doing is not in alignment with feminist ideals?

Study Design

A qualitative study was well suited to understanding how contestants view their participation in beauty pageants in light of feminism. Qualitative research seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of participants (Creswell, 2018) and derives its findings from activities that do not involve statistical procedures and hypothesis-testing as required in quantitative research. Qualitative inquiry is completed with a small number of participants. This method is used to allow individuals to share their stories (Creswell, 2018).

This study's design included the recruitment of 12 state titleholders who competed in the 2020 Miss USA Competition who were asked to describe their thoughts and feelings about beauty pageant participation and feminism. The study design was appropriate for this type of one-on-one interview setting where a research participant's story will be heard. Qualitative research investigates the social phenomenon of an individual or group of individuals who have had the same experience (Creswell, 2018).

Participants and Sampling Procedures

Participants for this study were state titleholders who competed in the 2020 Miss USA Competition. According to their guidelines, contestants must be between the ages of 18 and 28 years old before January 1st in the year they wish to compete at Miss USA. Furthermore, Miss USA Contestants must be childless and never married. Miss USA Contestants must have residency in the state they are representing (Miss USA Organization, 2021).

In terms of sample size, the number of participants for qualitative analyses is typically much smaller than for quantitative analyses. The sample size of qualitative studies strives to

obtain enough data to sufficiently describe the phenomenon of interest, address the research questions, and attain saturation (Creswell, 2018). For example, Creswell (2018) recommends an appropriate sample size of five to twenty-five. Ultimately, the required number of participants will depend on when saturation is reached. 12 state titleholders in the 2020 Miss USA Competition participated in this study.

Recruitment of Participants

Initial correspondence involved sending a recruitment letter (see Appendix A) and a copy of the Letter of Invitation (see Appendix B) and the Informed Consent (see Appendix C) via electronic mail to the Miss USA State Pageant Directors requesting that they send information about my study to their 2020 state titleholder(s). These documents provided clarification on the purpose of the study, instructions on how individuals can schedule interviews and participate in the study, as well as the informed consent letter. I went through the state directors to ensure no former titleholders felt any pressure or obligation given my relationship to them. A follow-up correspondence was sent to interested participants once they indicated that they had an interest in participating in the study after reading the Informed Consent form. If the response had been limited, State Pageant Directors would have been called directly, but this step was not needed.

As previously noted, in 2020 I was my state's titleholder and had participated in the Miss USA Competition. Although being a state titleholder does create bias and assumption, it also creates sensitivity and understanding to those who have been involved in pageantry. Qualitative research is about the relationship with the participant. And every attempt was made not to allow personal biases and assumptions to interfere with the analysis of the participants' own experiences. Efforts to reduce bias are discussed further in the sections on trustworthiness and data analysis.

Informed Consent

Permission to conduct research involving human subjects was obtained from the university's IRB and all subsequent guidelines related to the study were strictly adhered to. I completed the CITI Program as a requirement of the graduate school at the University of Maine at Orono and the institution's IRB.

Interested participants were asked to review the Informed Consent form that stated the purpose of the study, procedures, risks, benefits, and assurance of protection of confidentiality (see Appendix C). As part of the Informed Consent, participants were informed that should they become uncomfortable at any time in the interview process, they had a choice to not answer the question or to stop the interview for any reason and without any negative consequences. In addition, participants were informed that interviews would be taped (if they agreed or extensive notes will be taken). The interview was transcribed without any identifying information and a pseudonym was assigned. The taped interviews were erased after they were transcribed. Care was taken to assure the confidentiality of all participants and risks were minimal within this study design.

Data Collection

Interviews and Instrumentation

State titleholders who competed in the 2020 Miss USA Competition were invited by their State Directors to participate in my study. Those contestants who contacted me directly were invited to participate in an in-depth ninety-minute interview which explored how they view their participation in light of feminism. All of the interviews were conducted in a private setting over zoom to allow for privacy. Each interview was recorded using a personal tape recorder.

This study used one instrument for the collection of data. An interview guide with several questions (see Appendix D) was used within this qualitative study. Research questions focused on understanding the motivations these women see of competing in beauty pageants, the ways these women believe their participation is supportive or unsupportive of feminist ideals, their experience with those who might suggest what they are doing is not in alignment with feminist ideals, and if and how these women see themselves as feminists. Open questions facilitated an opportunity for participants to give reflective responses and descriptive examples. Additional probing questions were asked when clarification was needed.

Specifically, the individual interviews consisted of five demographic questions and a set of 16 open-ended questions that addressed the research questions. The university's institutional review board approved these questions. The five questions pertaining to demographics included age, race/ethnicity, State, number of years competing in pageantry, and number of years competed in Miss USA state pageant. The interview questions (Appendix D) focused on the four research areas of interest: Questions 1–2 focused on motivation for participating (e.g., “How did you get interested in participating in pageants?”); Questions 3-8 asked about pageantry support for feminist ideals (e.g., “Feminist ideals include such things as equality, fairness, empowerment of women, seeing women as strong and capable. Do you believe that pageantry promotes such feminist ideals? Why or why not?”); Questions 9-13 asked about self-identification as a feminist (e.g., “What do you consider feminism to be, and do you consider yourself a feminist?”); and, lastly, Questions 14-16 focused on experience with anti-feminist critique (e.g., “Has anyone ever told you that your participation is “anti-feminist” in that you are not advancing women or feminist ideals?”). Finally, titleholders were invited to add any additional thoughts or suggestions related to pageants and feminism.

The interviews were a semi-structured format. Semi-structured interviews are in-depth interviews where the respondents answer preset open-ended questions; these types of interviews are conducted once only, and with an individual and generally cover the duration of thirty minutes to an hour or more (Creswell, 2018). The format of this study mirrored the outline of a semi-structured interview where the interviews had a core question and several associated questions related to the central question (Creswell, 2018). When taking into account the lack of research in understanding beauty contestants' thoughts on feminism, in-depth interviewing was the most appropriate method.

Trustworthiness

More often in qualitative research, validity is described in terms of establishing trustworthiness in the methods used and conclusions obtained (Maxwell, 2005). I used several methods to protect trustworthiness and reduce researcher bias. Establishing trustworthiness involved pilot testing the interview questions and related procedures with an individual who met interviewee criteria yet was not participating in the formal study (Maxwell, 2005; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This allowed me to assess if the interview functioned properly and to identify any questions that needed revision. Some proposed questions were rewritten for clarity prior to seeking IRB approval. Furthermore, establishing trustworthiness in the conclusions obtained involved member checking procedures that were used to ensure that responses were accurately recorded (Maxwell, 2005). These procedures were implemented during the interviews by clarifying with each participant that her intended response had been captured (Maxwell, 2005). In addition, I used my notes for trustworthiness by comparing side comments I wrote during and after the interviews with the transcript responses to assess if they were contradictory in message or tone.

Data Analysis Process

The data for this study was analyzed by the author, with the assistance of her thesis advisor in order to add another layer of trustworthiness. Multiple qualitative coding methods were incorporated into this study. Interview transcriptions were highlighted for “significant statements,” sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The intent of this qualitative study was to provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by the study participants, in this case their views on feminism in light of their participation in beauty pageants.

Transcribing

Each of the taped interviews were transcribed as soon as possible. The audio recording was sent through an online program called Rev.com. This is a reliable source where transcribing services are purchased and kept in a secure account where the account owner has a unique username and password to log in. At the start of each interview the researcher stated the time and date of the interview, and each participant was given a number. The assigned interview number was how each transcript was referenced through the coding process. No identifying information was included in the transcription. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Once transcribed, the tapes were erased. Transcribing the tapes allowed for ease of data coding and establishment of emergent themes.

Coding

Data analysis in the form of coding of the transcript was conducted by the researcher and her thesis advisor. Before the collection of data, I had identified areas that emerged from a

review of the literature focusing on previous research on women's participation in pageants and feminist critiques appearing in popular press. I also identified areas where gaps appeared in the previous research on pageantry and feminism. These formed the basis for my four research questions, which were focused on motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, self-identification as a feminist, and experience with anti-feminist critique.

Initial coding categories were created in response to the research questions. These were compared, differences discussed, and coding categories refined. Additions of new codes or changes in code definitions were determined by consensus. When no new codes emerged, it was assumed that saturation had been achieved.

For this study, a coding category was established when three or more participants discussed this topic. A total of 16 coding categories were identified from the initial coding. These were then organized under the research topics of focus for this study: *motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, self-identification as feminist, and experience with anti-feminist critique*. These coding categories and supporting quotes from the interviews will be described in detail in Chapter Four: Findings.

After the initial analysis identified the 16 coding categories, we conducted a secondary analysis of open coding to further examine the participant interview transcripts to identify overarching themes across the four areas of motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, self-identification as a feminist, and experience with anti-feminist critique (Maxwell, 2005; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). We separately examined the 16 coding categories and transcripts to identify overarching themes. We then compared the potential themes and the quotes supporting those themes, reached an agreement about any differences, and refined the themes. The three overarching themes include *Pageants are Empowering, Swimsuit is*

Complicated, and *Pageantry has Evolved*. The connections between the 16 coding categories and these three broad themes will be presented in Chapter Four: Findings.

Risks

The risks to participants in this proposed study were minimal. Participants read and stated they understood the Informed Consent form (Appendix C) prior to being interviewed.

Participants were provided a copy of the consent form. Discomfort in talking about feminism was a potential risk. Risks were minimized by allowing the interview to progress at a comfortable pace and by allowing her to decline to answer any question or to discontinue the interview at any point.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and names were not used in the transcribing of the data or the presenting of the data. No identifying information will be included in the transcription. If a participant discussed identifying information, the content was modified since the consent form stated, “identifying information will be kept confidential and will not be reported in any publications.”

Limitations of the Study Design

There were several assumed limitations of this qualitative study based on a review of the literature. These limitations concern the fact that the results of the study only included state titleholders of the 2020 Miss USA Competition, and therefore, the findings may have limited applicability to other participants in previous years. There was also a possibility that only state titleholders who were comfortable enough with discussing issues of feminism would agree to participate in the study. This meant that the study could lack input by state titleholders who are not as comfortable with issues of feminism. Also, for this study, only state titleholders were the focus of this study. Omitting participation from other women who competed within each state as

finalists for the state title could be a limitation to this study. Furthermore, using a convenience sample, the study is limited in its generalizability. Limitations are discussed further in Chapter Five: Discussion.

Chapter Summary

This qualitative study explored how state titleholders of the 2020 Miss USA Competition perceive their participation in beauty pageants, in light of feminism. The interviews had a semi-structured format and each of the interviews was recorded and then transcribed. Once the data was transcribed, the taped interview was erased. Participant anonymity was ensured, and IRB permission was obtained before beginning data collection. Risks were kept to a minimum. A written explanation of the study was provided to the participant and informed consent was obtained. Data analysis involved identifying 16 coding categories in the initial analysis, and three overarching themes in the secondary analysis. There are limitations to this study, however; given the lack of research on this topic, results within this study are noteworthy.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the data analysis, including the coding categories and overarching themes. Chapter Five provides a discussion of the findings as they relate to previous research, limitations, suggestions for future research, implications and conclusion.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter will present the findings that illustrate the answer to the overarching research question: *How do women who compete in beauty pageants view their participation in light of feminism?* The four sub-questions that will be answered are:

- Sub-Research Question 1. *What motivates these women to participate in beauty pageants?*
- Sub-Research Question 2. *In what ways do these women believe pageantry to be supportive or unsupportive of feminist ideals?*
- Sub-Research Question 3. *Do these women see themselves as feminists? Why or why not?*
- Sub-Research Question 4. *What has been their experience with those who might suggest what they are doing is not in alignment with feminist ideals?*

Within this chapter, the 16 coding categories and the three broad themes will be presented. Each sub-research question will be answered in its order of presentation and will identify the coding categories that emerged from interviews with Miss USA state titleholders regarding their motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, their self-identification as feminist, and their response to criticism that pageants are anti-feminist. Direct quotations from interview transcriptions are provided throughout this chapter. Each section concludes with a summary highlighting the main findings to answer each sub-research question. This will be followed by an analysis of the three broad themes. Finally, a chapter summary will highlight the main findings to answer the overarching research question.

The Participants

Twelve Miss USA state titleholders who participated in Miss USA 2020 out of a possible 50 state titleholders were interviewed for this study. Participants have been given pseudonyms in an effort to best protect their identities. There was one in-depth interview consisting of a series of open-ended questions with each participant (see Appendix D). All interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Individual interviews took place over a two-and-a-half-month period. Miss USA state titleholders participating in the study represented diverse regions of the United States including the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, Southwest, Northwest, and Midwest.

Participant Sample Demographics

Twelve women participated in this study. The overall age of the participants ranged from 22 to 29 years old, with the average age being 25 years old. Eight participants identified their race as Caucasian/White, two identified as Hispanic/Latina, and two identified as Black. Years of participating in pageants ranged from 2 to 24 years with the average number of years the women participated in pageants being 8. The number of years the women participated specifically in their Miss USA state pageant ranged from 1 to 8 years with the average number of years being 3-4 years.

The Coding Categories

The coding categories presented below are organized around the four sub-questions: motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, their self-identification as a feminist, and their experience with criticism that pageants are anti-feminist. The coding categories that emerged from the interviews for each of the sub-questions are presented within each section below (see Table 1).

Table 1

Coding Categories for Motivation for Participating, Pageantry Support for Feminist Ideals, Self-Identification as a Feminist, and Criticism That It's Anti-Feminist

Motivation for Participating

- It was a great way to showcase my talent
- I really found so much self-confidence
- I wanted to improve my communication skills
- It was a great opportunity to get out of my comfort zone
- I wanted to make a positive impact on others
- It provided great connections and opened doors
- It gave me a sense of belonging

Pageantry Support for Feminist Ideals

- Oh yes, pageants definitely align with feminism
- Yes, at least on the surface, but there's more work left to do
- Yes, pageants don't just support feminist ideals, they push them

Self-Identification as a Feminist

- I am a feminist and I call myself a feminist!
- Yes, and pageantry has only strengthened my commitment to feminism
- I'm a feminist, but I don't call myself one

Criticism That It's Anti-Feminist

- The criticism is based on the history of pageants, but that's not accurate today
- The criticism is justified—we've come a long way, but still have a long way to go
- The criticism is based on a lack of knowledge and understanding

Motivation for Participating

In this section, I describe the titleholder's motivation for participating in pageants. I answer the first sub-research question: *What motivates these women to participate in pageants?* To answer this research question, participants were asked how they became interested in participating in pageants and what motivated them, especially knowing that as women living in the United States, they can participate in so many things, so why pageants? The titleholders all had multiple reasons for participating. Several mentioned how they initially became aware of pageantry as something to consider: Five of the women interviewed said they received a letter in the mail inviting them to compete, six of the women said their parent suggested it, and three women said they were inspired by someone they knew personally who participated in pageants.

Seven coding categories for their motivation to participate emerged from the transcriptions of the in-depth interviews: *It's a great way to showcase my talent; I really found so much self-confidence; I wanted to improve my communication skills; It was a great opportunity to get out of my comfort zone; I wanted to make a positive impact on others; It provided great connections and opened doors; and It gave me a sense of belonging* (See Table 1). The seven coding categories are discussed below and direct quotations from the interview transcriptions are offered to support the findings.

It was a great way to showcase my talent. The first coding category to emerge from the interviews regarding the titleholder's motivation for participating was the idea that participating in pageantry allowed the titleholders to showcase their talents. Many of the titleholders interviewed had previous experience on stage whether that was acting, singing, or dancing.

One titleholder who suffered a career-ending injury described her passion for participating in pageantry as a way to find a new love and purpose for dance in her life.

I loved what the system was doing for me... allowing me to find my dance passion in a more selfless light. I'd always danced for myself. And at this point, I found a platform, an initiative that I really liked. (Bailey)

Bailey describes how participating in pageants allowed her to showcase her talent. Prior to participating in pageants, she shares how her motivation behind dance was always to dance for herself, but participating in pageants allowed her to showcase her talent in a new and selfless way.

Another titleholder shared her history with dance.

I grew up a dancer... this was a place that allowed me to display my talent. (Francesca)

Francesca shares her history with dance, and how participating in pageantry allowed her to share her talent with others.

I really found so much self-confidence. The second coding category to emerge from the interviews regarding the titleholder's motivation for participating was that titleholders found self-confidence. Many of the titleholders interviewed explicitly stated they gained confidence in themselves through competing and many of the titleholders shared wanting to gain confidence was what motivated them to participate initially. When asked about their motivation for participating, titleholders shared that the growth they saw in themselves each year kept them coming back. One titleholder described participating in pageants as something that helped her build confidence.

As I got older, I started to see the benefits of it... It really made me come out of my shell.

So, for me, I was like 1, I am having fun, and 2, I really feel confident when I do this and

I'm not scared like I am at school. (Ava)

Ava found confidence in herself through participating in pageants and when she said “I really feel confident when I do this” she revealed her underlying motivation is deeper than simply having fun while participating.

In another experience, one titleholder discussed how she began to participate at the recommendation of her father to help her gain confidence in herself.

I started competing because I was very self-conscious about myself and I needed something to boost up my confidence. And that’s exactly what pageants did for me.

(Genevieve)

Genevieve was inspired and motivated to participate as a way to gain confidence. She revealed that participating in pageants boosted her confidence.

I wanted to improve my communication skills. The third coding category to emerge from the interviews regarding the titleholder’s motivation for participating was that titleholders were motivated to participate because they wanted to improve their communication skills. One titleholder shared that her fear of public speaking motivated her participate in pageants.

I definitely had a lot of social skills that I wanted to work on. I was deathly afraid of public speaking. So, pageants were a great opportunity. (Danielle)

Danielle was motivated to participate in pageants as a way to work on communication skills and improve something she was “deathly afraid of.”

Another titleholder shared that participating in pageants helped her get to know herself on a deeper level and communicate that with others.

I mean I feel that pageants really helped me be able to communicate with people better, and also get to know myself on a deeper level and be able to communicate that with the world. (Lyla)

Lyla shared how pageants allowed her to share her passions with others due to the communication skills she was able to gain.

It was a great opportunity to get out of my comfort zone. The fourth coding category to emerge from the interviews regarding the titleholder's motivation for participating was that participating in pageants was an opportunity to get outside of the titleholder's comfort zone. One titleholder shared how participating allowed her to try something new.

I didn't have the greatest high school experience, so I wasn't really looking to do more in my high school because I didn't like my high school. So, for me, it was really an opportunity to try something new. (Camille)

Camille reveals participating served as an escape from her negative high school experience and allowed her to try something new.

Another titleholder shared that her pathway in pageants started with stepping out of her comfort zone.

That's kind of how my journey began, was putting myself out there in this really uncomfortable and vulnerable position. (Bailey)

Bailey reveals that participating in pageants was something that put her out of her comfort zone.

I wanted to make a positive impact on others. The fifth coding category to emerge from the interviews regarding the titleholder's motivation for participating was that titleholders were motivated to participate by the desire to make a positive impact on others. One titleholder shared that she wanted to give back to her community.

I really liked the service, the community service, especially leaving my state to go to college and then coming back to my state as a professional. I felt like I owed it to my state to give back everything that I gained here. (Francesca)

Francesca shares how she enjoyed the community service aspect of pageants and was motivated to participate by a desire to give back to the community she grew up in.

Another titleholder shared that she wanted to inspire people.

Every year I was becoming more and more. I was growing into the woman that I am today and that was very addicting... I had the desire to inspire people. I had a strong, strong drive to do that and not be the average famous person, but like the person that actually impacted something. (Katelyn)

Katelyn shared how she was motivated to continue to participate in pageants by her drive to make an impact and be different from others with a large following and influence.

It provided great connections and opened doors. The sixth coding category to emerge from the interviews regarding the titleholder's motivation for participating was the connections that can be gained by participating in pageantry and the opportunities that came from participating. One titleholder shared that she gained many opportunities from participating that she owes to pageants.

The amazing opportunities and connections you can get from pageantry was a big plus for me. I've had a lot of amazing opportunities come to me that I don't think I would've received if I wasn't a pageant queen. (Ella)

Ella reveals that she has gained many opportunities because she participated in pageants. She shares that she does not believe she would have had the same opportunities if she had not chosen to participate.

Another titleholder shared how she was initially motivated to participate by the hopes that she would gain connections in the industry she was currently in.

I was like oh, this will open doors for me in the entertainment world... that was kind of how I always looked at it. It wasn't until I won my actual state title... I found myself realizing, wait, I don't actually want that anymore. It was always just a stepping stone until I actually had the opportunity and it was truly mine to do what I wanted with it. And then I realized what my true passions were. (Helena)

Helena reveals that she was initially motivated to participate as a way to advance her dreams of a career in the entertainment world. When she had the opportunities presented to her, she realized she wanted more.

It gave me a sense of belonging. The seventh and final coding category to emerge from the interviews regarding the titleholder's motivation for participating was that participating gave the titleholders a sense of belonging. One titleholder shared that competing was something that she had not always thought about. While for some titleholders participating in pageants, especially Miss USA and Miss America was always a dream, for Camille, it simply just happened.

It was totally on a whim that I decided to compete... It was an opportunity to get away from high school as bad as that sounds... so for me it was so much fun and such an escape to be able to go out into the community... to finally meet girls that weren't like, awful people to me, which was again a breath of fresh air compared to what I was used to, unfortunately. (Camille)

Camille felt that participating allowed her to escape from the girls in her high school who were not kind to her. Participating in pageants allowed her to meet girls who treated her with respect and provided her with an escape.

Another titleholder shared that due to health concerns as a child, she was unable to participate in many activities such as sports or after-school programs that required regular commitment. She revealed this made her feel isolated at times.

I basically had school and then I would come home and have like nothing else.... So, when I got that letter in the mail, I was like this is something that is not necessarily like a sport that you had to do every week. It's something that I think would be really fun, something new to do....I finally felt like I found a community I could belong and thrive in. It gave me something to look forward to and work towards every year, but also gave me some of the best friends that I'm still in touch with today. When I look at my life, 90% of the people I'm friends with, are in touch with, or keep up with on social media are people I met over the years through pageantry. Pageantry gave me a community I'll belong to for the rest of my life. (Isabelle)

Isabelle outlined how pageantry was a community for her and gave her meaningful connections.

Motivation for Participating summary. Each woman interviewed provided multiple reasons for why they participated in pageants. There were seven coding categories that emerged that encapsulated the titleholder's motivation for participating. The motivation to return year after year was described by a few titleholders as a desire to continue to improve themselves. This desire was internal and was shown by some of the titleholders in the coding categories of *It was a great opportunity to get out of my comfort zone; I really found so much self-confidence; and I wanted to make a positive impact on others.* One contestant described it as the "Pageant Bug."

The first coding category that emerged was that participating allowed the titleholders to showcase their talents. The women in this coding category all had prior experience with acting,

singing, and dance. All the titleholders in this coding category had been involved with their talent for many years prior to participating in pageantry.

A second coding category that emerged related to the titleholder's motivation for participating in pageants was to gain self-confidence, or that they decided to continue to participate due to the self-confidence they gained from participating. The self-confidence was gained in a variety of ways, through gaining comfort with their bodies or gaining a better understanding and comfort with themselves.

The third coding category to emerge related to the titleholder's motivation for participating was the desire to improve communication skills. They expressed that pageantry ultimately helped them with the improvement of their public speaking skills. One titleholder shared that motivation was driven by the dream at the time of having a career in broadcasting, with others simply wanting to gain that skill for themselves.

The fourth coding category was the opportunity it gave the titleholders to step outside of their comfort zone. Some said it was as simple as wanting to try something new, and for others, it was deeper, something they felt they had to do to grow and develop into the women they had always wanted to become.

The fifth coding category related to the titleholder's motivation for participating was the desire to make an impact on others. This ranged from wanting to give back to their communities, wanting to serve as a resource to other young people, wanting to inspire others, and wanting to make a positive impact on others. While some titleholders referenced wanting the ability to make a large impact associated with the fame and recognition that comes to many titleholders, others looked at it on a smaller scale, simply wanting to make a difference in any way they could.

The sixth coding category for participating was the connections and doors that participating in pageants can open. For example, one titleholder expressed this as something that she owes the success of her career. Another titleholder was driven by the idea of gaining connections and exposure to help advance her career within her craft.

Finally, the seventh coding category to emerge related to the titleholder's motivation for participating was the sense of belonging it gave the titleholders or the sense of belonging they were hoping to gain. Titleholders discussed the support they felt from fellow participants, saying they felt empowered by the other women involved. Many titleholders referenced the lifelong friendships they made through participating in pageants. Some titleholders shared the sense of isolation they experienced during their time in school, some saying they were not treated kindly by their peers and often left out. Pageants provided a sense of belonging to these women and an escape from their negative school experiences.

Pageantry Support for Feminist Ideals

In this section, I describe the titleholder's experiences and views on pageantry support for feminist ideals. Titleholders were asked to consider such feminist ideals as equality, fairness, empowerment of women, seeing women as strong and capable, and then asked if they believe pageantry supports these things. They were also asked about their feelings on the different rounds of competition in the Miss USA system (interview, evening gown, swimsuit) in relation to empowering women and were asked specifically how they felt about Miss America removing the swimsuit portion of the pageant. While all titleholders said that pageantry is supportive of feminist ideals, there was a range of opinions on the degree of support. In terms of their thoughts on the rounds, all found the interview and evening gown rounds to be supportive of feminist ideals, and most found the swimsuit round to be supportive as well. Three coding categories

emerged from the transcriptions of the in-depth interviews: *Oh yes, pageantry definitely aligns with feminism; Yes, at least on the surface, but there's more work left to do* and *Yes, pageants don't just support feminist ideals, they push them* (See Table 1). The three coding categories are discussed below and direct quotations from the interview transcriptions are offered to support the findings.

Oh yes, pageants definitely align with feminism. The first coding category to emerge under pageantry's support for feminist ideals was that pageantry absolutely supports and aligns with feminism. The titleholders in this coding category believe that pageantry fully supports feminism and feminist ideals. One titleholder shared that she thinks that pageantry promotes feminist ideals, even though those on the outside may not see that.

I feel like we as contestants are showing and demonstrating what feminism means to us while we have a fan base that is almost anti-feminism. It's really weird where it's like they're the first ones to tear us down to pick favorites and to pit girls against each other. And usually, it has nothing to do with what the pageant even stands for. And they're picking and choosing which state they think is prettier and which state and they think it has more of, wow or a show factor without ever even looking at what the girl has done to represent, or for other people in general. So, I just, I've found that for me that's kind of where the divide is. I think that if you are a contestant in it, it absolutely promotes feminist ideals. (Helena)

Helena felt strongly that pageants support feminism and feminist ideals, but the pageant fan base often acts in a way that goes against feminism and feminist ideals by ultimately tearing women down.

Another titleholder felt pageantry strongly aligns with feminism and noted in particular the swimsuit portion of the pageant.

The swimsuit portion was actually my favorite part of competing because it really encouraged women to be the healthiest version of themselves that they can be. I felt completely empowered knowing how much hard work I put into my overall health and fitness. I was empowered when I learned how to manage my own diet and to really care about how I was fueling my body... But really there's no more empowering moment than making that decision for yourself and deciding that you want to show off all of your hard work...I think pageantry has been an area in my life that has been the most empowering actually. (Danielle)

Danielle shares how empowering pageantry was for her, and how preparing for the swimsuit competition contributed to the sense of empowerment she felt.

One titleholder shared how her experience in pageantry was positive and how she was supported to work towards her personal and professional goals.

I felt like I was very supported as a woman by my directors in the Miss USA system... I always felt like they championed me to do whatever it was I wanted to do both as a titleholder, but also just as myself. You know, whether that was academically, professionally... I never felt like I was being told to fit a certain look or category or style. And they really wanted me to kind of develop who I was without fear of being criticized or judged or anything like that.... For me competing itself like the act of competing in a pageant was empowering and was something that made me feel like a strong woman. The way pageantry can be feminist is that it gives women an opportunity, and a type of

opportunity to feel empowered and to feel beautiful, and to feel strong without prescribing it as the only correct way of doing so.... (Camille)

Camille shared her thoughts on how pageants are a way for women to feel empowered. Camille believes that pageants provide an opportunity to feel strong and beautiful, but one way that pageants are feminist is that they do not push participating as the only way for women to feel that way.

Yes, at least on the surface, but there's more work left to do. The second coding category to emerge under pageantry's support for feminist ideals was that pageantry aligns with feminism on the surface, but there is work left to do. The contestants in this category shared that it is not a simple question to answer. One titleholder shared her thoughts and said it depends on the pageant system you are in and that not all systems align with feminism.

It gets a little foggy and like, how do I want to say this?... I guess the lines blur a little bit in terms of what system you're competing in. I've been involved with several that were absolutely wonderful, the definition of women's empowerment, definition of being a feminist, everything that they did... they are often run by women and maybe that's why. And yet at the same time, there are other systems... that I do not think that they support those things [feminist ideals]. I think that they claim to be about women's empowerment and they claim to be about wanting women to succeed and all of these things. But at the end of the day, I think it's actually about money... I can confidently say that it's not all of pageantry, but it is certain organizations. (Ava)

Ava shared how some pageant systems do not support feminist ideals and simply use women.

Ava shared that she thinks the organizations that do not support feminist ideals at their core are motivated by money and often brand themselves well, enticing women to compete with the

promise of opportunities and self-growth. She also shares how the organizations she found the most feminist are the ones that are run by women and organizations that may not be as popular or well known.

One titleholder shares how while positive and substantial progress has been made to advance pageantry to support feminist ideals, there is still progress that needs to be made.

Sometimes we still see discrepancies in who was actually signing up to compete, who was actually placing in these pageants, who's winning? There's still a lot of work to be done. But on the other hand, there have been breakthroughs and barriers that have happened. It's really exciting to see how many women of color have won Miss USA in the past five years even. But I think that there's a lot of great things happening on a larger scale. But at the local level, like at the state level and local level, there's still, I think, a lot of issues that need to be tackled regarding equality for all the women competing. Making sure they all feel welcomed. (Ella)

Ella shares how at the local and state level she feels that there need to be improvements made in order to make all women able to compete. The impact local directorship has on an individual feeling welcome and able to compete is an area Ella highlights still needs work.

Another titleholder shares that one aspect that makes it complicated is that while pageantry supports feminist ideals, the organizations are limiting girls and not encouraging them to grow more.

These women are already who they are before they step on that stage. They make the stage and the pageant what it is. And I think that that's a lot of progress that's going unnoticed. But there's so much more to change because those women who are making the pageant different, they are getting a lot of pushback and a lot of standoffishness to make

it even more inclusive and better and enlightening than it could even be today. I think they're saying, stop here. We have you on stage. You're showing that girls have evolved. But are they supporting those women to evolve even more and have a bigger voice in the system? No. (Katelyn)

Katelyn shares that she believes that the women are already who they are before they compete and that some progress is going unnoticed. She infers that she believes that some organizations are not wanting to see girls continue to evolve and push boundaries in pageantry.

Yes, pageants don't just support feminist ideals, they push them. The third and final coding category to emerge from the interviews about the titleholder's views on how pageantry supports feminism is that pageants do more than just support feminist ideals, they actually push them onto the women who participate. One titleholder shared how it seems pageantry and feminists have forgotten to celebrate all women, regardless of their choices.

I can say from my experience, and this wasn't just in pageantry, I think this is just a societal issue in general, because we as women have pushed so hard to break so many glass ceilings and to further ourselves from these barriers, we've neglected to also continue supporting and congratulating the women who want to continue to do those more feminine traditional fields like being a teacher, being a mentor, being a mom, all things that I want to be. I think we need to support women and every field and facet they choose to pursue. That's their choice. (Bailey)

Bailey shares the pressure she has felt from both pageants and society to break glass ceilings and pursue non-feminine fields. She shares how she feels that society and pageants neglect to recognize the importance of women pursuing all different kinds of crafts and roles. Bailey shares how when she switched her career goals from the medical field to education and human

development, she felt that those in society and the pageantry community viewed her as “less than” compared to women in the fields that were valued more highly or as more impressive.

One titleholder shared how she thinks pageants have taken on feminism as a part of their identity in order to stay relevant.

I think for the last several years as feminism has become a bigger movement, I think pageantry is trying to stay relevant. And so, they've kind of taken on that identity as like a feminist outlet.... pageantry has really kind of taken on that ownership of that feminist ideology and I think that a lot of us felt a little bit pressured to take that on too. (Juliette)

Juliette shares how some pageant participants have felt pressured to take ownership of a feminist identity because of the pageant.

This is similar to how another titleholder shared how she felt that while pageantry is based on celebrating women, they also push the extreme feminist views of the organization.

I think that's really the whole premise behind it, is giving women a voice... that crown, that pageant, that system really showcases the individuality of the girl that wins, but also all the girls that compete for that title. And it's not one size fits most, or one size fits all... that's what pageantry is really about, in my opinion, is celebrating women in general, no matter what they look like, where they come from, what struggles they may have faced in life. It's giving everybody the chance to share their story and feel empowered...It was definitely tough because at least with Miss USA and Miss Universe organizations, they are very far left-leaning in that way. In my opinion, they support radical views. And if you're in the middle, or are towards the opposite end of the spectrum, it's very hard to feel like you'll have a voice that'll be heard... (Isabelle)

Isabelle shares her experience with pageantry being all about celebrating and empowering women to share their stories. Isabelle also shares that at times it was tough as Miss USA and Miss Universe were organizations with their foundations based on feminist ideals and how at times it was hard to feel like your voice would be heard if you had opposing, or even different, views of what feminism is then those that the organization pushed. Isabelle shared how she feels some of the actions of the large pageants embrace such extreme views of feminism, it is actually anti-feminist saying. Isabelle shared in her opinion these organizations say, “speak your mind, but only if you believe what we believe.”

Pageantry support for feminist ideals summary. All titleholders shared that pageantry supports feminism and feminist ideals, but the degree of that support varies. Three coding categories emerged from the interviews with the titleholders. The first coding category was that pageants definitely align with feminism. The titleholders stated that pageantry was empowering and their experience reinforced to them that pageantry is very supportive of feminist ideals.

The second coding category that emerged under pageantry support for feminist ideals was titleholders’ recognition that while pageantry does support feminist ideals in some realms, there is still work left that needs to be done. Some titleholders shared they felt the lack of alignment with feminist ideals was at the local level, while others shared they felt it was at the national or international organization level. The titleholders shared a variety of ways that pageantry could better support feminism, and therefore women, with ideas like making the pageants more accessible and encouraging women to use their voice in challenging situations and hard moments. Although titleholders described wanting change to occur, they believed that, as a whole, pageantry supports feminist ideals.

A third and final category that arose under pageantry support for feminist ideals was that titleholders felt that pageants actually push feminism and feminist ideals onto those who participate. By this, titleholders explained that they felt they had to pursue fields and interests that broke glass ceilings and that they were discouraged from pursuing more traditional, feminine roles or interests. This feeling of feminism and feminist ideals being pushed onto them caused some titleholders to experience frustration at times. Titleholders described fearing that their voice and thoughts would not be heard or accepted if they did not outwardly support feminist ideals and what they saw as left-leaning views to the same extent the organizations did.

Self-Identification as a Feminist

This section will examine how titleholders self-identify with feminism and as a feminist. This will answer the third sub-research question: *Do these women see themselves as feminists? Why or why not?* The interview questions associated with this research question inquired about what titleholders consider feminism to be, if they consider themselves as a feminist, if hearing a definition of feminism impacts their self-identification as a feminist, if they use the word “feminism” to describe themselves, and how their self-identification influences their participation in pageants. In the interview, they were read this definition: “Feminism has been defined similarly by different sources. Many point to equality and equal opportunity between men and women. Encyclopedia Britannica defines feminism as ‘the belief in social, economic, political equality amongst the sexes.’” All of the women considered themselves supportive of feminist ideals and consider themselves to be feminists based on the definition of feminism read to them in the interview. Three distinct coding categories emerged in their self-identification as a feminist: *I am a feminist and I call myself a feminist; Yes, and pageantry has only strengthened*

my commitment to feminism; and *I'm a feminist, but I don't call myself one* (See Table 1). These coding categories and direct quotes from titleholders' interviews are discussed below.

I am a feminist and I call myself a feminist! The first coding category related to the titleholder's self-identification as a feminist and openly calling themselves feminist. The women in this category shared how they feel that being a feminist is a strong and important part of who they are and they use the term "feminist" to describe themselves.

One titleholder shares how many people misunderstand feminism, but that doesn't make her any less of a feminist or afraid to identify as one.

I think the word gets misunderstood and I even misunderstood the past until someone helped me understand better. Do I consider myself a feminist? Oh yeah, I would say so! I don't understand people who are not. Once I understood what the word actually meant, I don't understand why not everyone wouldn't want that? (Francesca)

Francesca used to not understand feminism herself, but since someone helped her, she cannot understand how an individual wouldn't identify as a feminist.

Another titleholder shared her personal definition of feminism as someone who advocates for equality among the genders.

I am first and foremost a feminist because I believe that a feminist is someone who advocates for the equality of all men and women. Someone who believes that women have all the capable and amazing qualities that men have that in terms of like anywhere in our lives, whether it's the workforce, whether it's the educational field like we just need to see more equality between women and men. And I always fight for that. I believe we should all be feminists in our daily lives. (Ella)

Ella discussed how to her feminism is about equality and advocating for equality. Later she goes on to share how she would say advocate is a word she uses in conjunction with feminism.

Another titleholder shared her own definition of feminism as well, explaining how pageantry helps women's progress and path for equality.

Yeah, most definitely...being a feminist just really means, you know, uplifting each other, supporting one another. Participation is helping women's progress. I'm just kind of there to remind myself and others around me of the importance of it because I think pageant girls in themselves already get such a bad stereotype, and already get so much crap from other people who have never experienced that before... If no one else is going to defend us, we have to be there to defend each other, you know, if that all makes sense, but it's just really being there to back each other up. (Genevieve)

Genevieve shares the challenges women who participate in pageantry face and the importance of seeing what you are doing by participating in pageantry as feminism.

Yes, and pageantry has only strengthened my commitment to feminism. Another coding category that emerged from the in-depth interviews with titleholders shared how for many women, participating in pageantry has only strengthened their commitment to feminism. These titleholders shared how they thought they were strong in their feminism until they participated and then their self-identification only got stronger. One titleholder discussed her experiences in pageantry as an experience that made her strong in many ways, including her views on feminism and self-identification as a feminist.

Oh, yeah, 100 percent. I proudly describe myself as that regardless of the pushback that I've received for doing so... I thought I was a strong feminist. I thought that I was a strong woman. I thought I was a strong intellectual. I thought it was a strong activist. And

my reign made me so much stronger, so much more passionate about life. I do think that somewhere along my journey, my voice was empowered even more by my experience because of the negativity that I had to push back on.... I have a lot less fear because I've been through the pageant world. I have a lot less fear for speaking up. (Katelyn)

Katelyn shares that despite the pushback she has received, she still self-identifies as a feminist. She shares how her strengthened self-identification as a feminist emerged from the negative experiences she faced during her reign. Katelyn shares how she was discouraged from talking about issues she was passionate about by her state directors. Instead of allowing this attempt of being silenced to tear her down, it empowered her to use her voice and not be afraid of speaking up and speaking out on issues and topics that were important to her. While she experienced a variety of negativity during her time as a titleholder, she is now more passionate about life and a stronger activist and feminist because of pageants.

Another titleholder discussed how pageantry strengthened feminism for her, and how she is thankful for that.

I've always considered myself a feminist because obviously I want women to be equal and we've worked so hard as a society to make it to where women are equal in comparison to men and they can do whatever they want in their lives... I think it's [pageants] actually strengthened my idea of feminism because you realize women moving forward, we kind of stand on the shoulders of the women who have come before us. And we really want to keep empowering women of our generation and being examples to younger women. And that's exactly what pageants are about, is just being an example to the next generation. So, I definitely was super thankful for that to just kinda

be strengthened through my pageant journey. So, I definitely have continued those and I'll carry those ideals with me for the rest of my life. (Danielle)

Danielle described how her main reason for identifying as a feminist is her desire for equality. She shared how pageants are about setting a strong example for the people of future generations, and how that helped strengthen her identification as a feminist.

Another titleholder focused on the idea of feminism as based on equality, and how her participation in pageantry really strengthened her understanding of feminism.

I absolutely consider myself a feminist.... for me, feminism is truly about equality. And I think that a lot of times we have different ideas. And I think that for those who don't truly understand feminism, realize what it means, where they think, oh, well, you're just a man-hater and you just want women to rise above men. No, that's not necessarily the case because I think that there are a lot of great men in this world who deserve respect and who are accused of things daily that they shouldn't be. But ultimately, I think it's about receiving equal treatment in everything that we do and being recognized as capable individuals instead of "Well, can she do this job because she's a woman?" It's not being questioned on the basis of our sex and gender at any given point in time. I think that pageantry kind of encouraged those feminist ideals for me. (Helena)

Helena shares how feminism is not about women being viewed as superior to men. Helena sees feminism as women being recognized as strong and capable and not being questioned of their competency or capability because of their gender. Helena shares how pageantry helped encourage her to explore feminism and her identity as a feminist.

I'm a feminist, but I don't call myself one. The third and final coding category identified by titleholder's self-identification with feminism is the idea that they believe in

feminist ideals, but do not use “feminist” as a label to describe themselves. They use other terms such as “stemminist,” “traditional feminist” and “moderate feminist.” This theme emerged from the interviews with titleholders in a very clear way. They identify as a feminist, but due to what they perceive as the negative associations and extreme views of feminism, they did not want to label themselves as feminists without being able to provide a further explanation for that label.

One titleholder shared that while she sees herself as a feminist, she needs to provide further clarification before telling others that.

I do think I'm a feminist. I think I always have been, but I also think that I'm more of like a traditional feminist than perhaps a modern feminist. I think I'll always be a feminist because I'm always going to want women to be empowered. I'm always going to want all women to always be respected no matter what area of life they're in. I would throw in the word traditional or something like that because I think, you know, a lot of people do you think, oh, like a stereotypical feminist, you don't like men and you want this and you do this and all these kinds of really extreme things that are not necessarily true for everyone.

(Ava)

Ava stated that she needs to throw in a word like traditional because many people make assumptions when the word feminism is involved that might not be true to her self-identification. She chooses the word traditional to go with feminism as it allows her to provide an explanation.

A different titleholder shared how in very specific situations when given the chance to elaborate and use her own term, then she may say she is a feminist to others.

I guess in that very specific, very niche example, yes... But more generally, no. I don't really think there's a reason why, but I think a lot of it kind of comes from like the connotation that the word has developed over the last, I don't even know, like five years,

ten years, I have no idea. But it just seems that as I've gotten older and gone through like college and, and paid more attention to social issues, it seems like the word kind of carries like this, this more radical connotation to it. Which is interesting because I don't think it was ever intended to be that way, but I think most people, if someone describes themselves as a feminist, picture that kind of more radical image. And for whatever reason, I just don't want to be wrongly imagined by someone I am meeting. (Camille)

Camille has experienced people associating feminism with radical views, which makes her not want to use the term feminist when describing herself to others. Camille shares that she tries to live her life in a way that embodies feminism.

In another example, a titleholder explained how her view is that feminism has gone too far.

I don't identify myself as a quote, unquote feminist in how feminism is portrayed today. I do believe in women's rights. I do believe that women should be paid equally, should vote, should be able to do whatever they want to do in life. Whether that's being a stay-at-home mom or being the CEO of a company. But I think that feminism today has gone a little bit too far. And I see, like a lot of different aspects of life, if you don't agree 100% on everything that the quote unquote feminism movement promotes, then the quote unquote feminists, put you down and say that you're not one. (Isabelle)

Isabelle shares how while she supports feminist ideals, she does not like how feminism is portrayed today. She expressed how she has experienced when you do not agree 100% with those who have more extreme feminist views, the extreme feminists often put you down and doubt your commitment to feminism.

Self-identification as a feminist summary. All of the women identified themselves as feminists when provided with the definition of feminism. Many things influence titleholders' self-identification as a feminist. Three major coding categories emerged from the interviews. The first coding category was a clear self-identification as a feminist and with feminist ideals. These titleholders were strong in their convictions and openly used the word feminism to describe themselves to others in their lives. They identified as feminists before pageantry and continued to identify themselves as such as a participant.

The second coding category that emerged was how the titleholder's self-identification as a feminist was either developed or strengthened through their participation in pageantry. The titleholders stated their definition of feminism, and their self-identification as a feminist developed because of their experiences and relationships in pageantry.

The third and final coding category that emerged under self-identification as a feminist was the titleholder's acknowledgment that they support feminist ideals and agreed with the definition of feminism, but don't use "that word" because they feel it is associated with radical views and actions. The titleholders in this coding category shared how they felt that saying they were a feminist did not leave room to explain themselves, therefore they liked being able to use an alternative word or elaborate when using the word feminism. The titleholders in this group did not want to be associated with those who have beliefs and values that are more extreme and, in the titleholder's opinion those extremists are actually "anti-feminists."

Experience with Anti-Feminist Critique

This section examines how titleholders have experienced criticism that pageants are anti-feminist. This will answer the fourth sub-research question: *What has been their experience with those who might suggest what they are doing is not in alignment with feminist ideals?* The

interview questions associated with this research question inquired about what experience the contestants have had with criticism that their participation is anti-feminist, their reaction to hearing different pieces of published criticism, and how they have or would respond to criticism that pageants and participating in pageants is anti-feminist. All of the titleholders had experience with anti-feminist criticism of pageantry and/or criticism of their participation. In addition, all of the titleholders noted that the criticism came from other women, many of whom identified themselves as feminists. There were three distinct coding categories that emerged: *The criticism is based on the history of pageants, but it's not accurate today*; *The criticism is justified – we've come a long way, but still have a long way to go*; and *The criticism is based on a lack of knowledge and understanding* (See Table 1). These coding categories and direct quotes from titleholders' interviews are discussed below.

The criticism is based on the history of pageants, but it's not accurate today. The first coding category to emerge regarding criticism of pageantry is that the criticism is based on pageantry's past, and the criticism is not accurate today. One titleholder shared how, from her perspective, historically women have been forced to choose and were told they cannot do or have it all, and how pageants today allow women to embrace all sides of themselves.

I think that in the past, women often have been... they've been told that they need to choose their pathways, that they need to choose where they want to go or what they want to do. You can't have it all. You can't do both. You can't do this and also be that. You can't be educated and also compete in a pageant. You can't try to be in law school and also be a model. You can't.... I would say I understand where those sentiments come from based on the history of pageantry. But I'd say today, in this day and age, I don't agree because I am literally a walking contradiction to those statements. (Ella)

Ella shares how she is a walking contradiction to the criticism she was asked to provide feedback on. Ella understands where the criticism stems from but argues that today they are not relevant or accurate and her participation and success in pageantry proves that.

Another titleholder shares an experience she had in an academic setting where she witnessed her classmates and professor make outdated assumptions about pageantry.

I had a class a couple of years ago. And during that class and one of the sections we were studying, we went over the concept of body positivity and did a little deep dive into women's empowerment within body positivity. But the main content we used was the satire of pageantry. Just videos people had created that have facts misconstrued, just straight-up lies, and misconceptions... I felt very frustrated with the fact that there was only a one-sided perception of this pageant lifestyle because of the swimsuit and the evening gowns. However, that did give me an opportunity to write a paper once we had finished that section on my experience... bringing to light the misconceptions that were listed within that entire content area. And oddly enough, I had every person in that class respond to me and actually see where I was coming from, see how someone who had already been a state titleholder and was preparing to compete for another state title, found the empowerment and the body positivity within that powerful. I also was able to talk about the diversity of the bodies that are in swimsuit and evening gown, the diversity of the looks and the styles that women are bringing to the stage now... I think we just have to continue taking those bold steps. It wasn't necessarily fun for me to kind of put myself out there that way. But at the same time, if we don't speak out and kind of share why we feel it's empowering, no one's going to ever change their mind from the misconceptions they have... It's easy to watch some of these older movies that have pageant girls and

they are the full stereotype of what a pageant is. And sometimes people only watch those movies. (Bailey)

Bailey shares how she chose to stand up for herself and speak up regarding the outdated stereotypes and misconstrued information that were presented to her classmates. Bailey explains how putting herself out there was challenging, but it must be done to break the stereotypes so many people have due to the way pageants are often portrayed, especially in older media.

Another titleholder shared how over the years pageantry has completely changed and how people need to take the time to educate themselves prior to making assumptions and judgments.

These people have not ever sat down and watched a pageant from start to finish. They probably just see the swimsuit photos and make an opinion. Because sure, pageantry probably started out that way that it really was a beauty contest. But over the past however many years, I mean, pageantry has completely changed.... The interview competition, onstage question, there are interviews in-between....And it's mainly about the girls' stories and where they come from...I would just invite them to actually sit down and watch a pageant and experience all that goes into it. And kind of open their mind because once you watch a pageant, once you watch someone prepare for a pageant, I think it's hard to deny how much work goes into it, how much thought, how much of a team effort it is, and how much it really is about supporting each other and sharing your stories and uplifting others. (Isabelle)

Isabelle explains how pageants today are about the participant's stories and far more than the swimsuit competition. She believes that if the individuals who criticize pageantry took the time to learn, they would have a different perception of participating.

The criticism is justified—we've come a long way, but still have a long way to go.

The second coding category to emerge when examining titleholders' response to criticism was that it is often justified and valid, and while lots of progress has occurred, much more progress still needs to happen. One titleholder shares how many pageant participants recognize the need for change and advocate for that change. She shares she understands the root of the criticism.

I understand the thoughts. I should start off with that. I wish they knew the women in the system, instead of the system. I think the women that have gone through this system, not all, I will say some, a lot, a lot more than you think, have tried to change things. But you can't quite make a change that big in such a short amount of time. It takes things like this, it takes more women like us to change it. And I think, I think we have moved the needle in so many ways. Like, I can't remember a time watching a pageant when I was younger where there were engineers competing, or there were journalists competing, or there were already people who were in their master's program or who had graduated or teachers competing. It was always a route to get to where you wanted to go. (Katelyn)

Katelyn shares how titleholders want to advocate for positive change in pageantry, but due to the short nature of their reigns and the large commitments during that time, it can be challenging to do so. Katelyn also explains how she wishes the critics knew the women who participate, rather than just those who put on the pageants and the organizations as a whole.

Another titleholder shares that she believes that Miss USA is helping women's progress but acknowledged that pageants have can still do more. The criticism she has received has centered around the swimsuit portion, but she believes there has been positive progress.

The only negative things that I've heard, kind of going back to what I was saying earlier about the swimsuit portion of competition... I had friends saying that it's obviously not

inclusive in the way that they would like to see. But, you know, I have started to see women of all body types who feel comfortable competing on the pageant stage. And I think as long as that continues to be appreciated, that is a norm within pageantry to see all body types being represented at Miss USA. I think that that's really important because even looking at like the girls who were competing our year versus like 20 years ago, I mean, we're definitely a lot healthier, stronger. Women were encouraged to be like stick thin... I definitely think that we're moving in the right direction for women and for pageantry in general. (Danielle)

Danielle acknowledges there has been a lot of criticism surrounding the swimsuit portion, but from her perspective, that portion of the pageant has evolved to include all kinds of body types.

The criticism is based on a lack of knowledge and understanding. The third coding category to emerge under participants' experience with anti-feminist critique was that it was based on sheer ignorance. Titleholders felt the women who criticized pageantry and their participation had no idea what they were talking about and lacked a basic understanding of what it entails.

One titleholder shares how she believes the criticism comes from a lack of understanding of all that goes into pageantry.

I think those people don't know somebody who's been in a beauty pageant before or at least the experience that I have had. And I think a lot of my peers have had. Because you walk on stage in your gown, and in your swimsuit for probably a total altogether of like five minutes. And the rest of the time you're in an interview, you have to talk. You're asked to talk about things that are important to you and you're asked to talk about things

that are important to your state, your country, the world... It's much more than just physical appearance... It's a year title. It's not just about one day. (Francesca)

Francesca explains how there is a lot more that goes into participating in a pageant or the titleholder's reign than the audience may see.

Another titleholder shared how the women who have criticized pageants because they believe they are destructive to women but do not understand how empowering they are to those who participate.

So many feminists, or people that claim to be feminists, are also part of the problem in terms of being destructed towards other women. I mean, in my opinion, women should be able to do whatever the heck that they want. If they want to go into STEM and do research in whatever. Or they want to go into a beauty pageant, or they wanted to both. Like good Lord! That's crazy, right? In this day and age there's no reason why we shouldn't be able to celebrate our body, beauty, whatever that may look like. I never felt that when I was competing, I was trying to live up to some unrealistic standard. I always felt like it was just an opportunity to like play with makeup and dress up and get to explore that avenue of like my feminine side... It looks one way on the outside. But when do you actually do it, and go through the motions and get the experience, it feels completely different on the inside. (Juliette)

Juliette shares how important it is for people on the outside of pageantry to understand how pro-feminist is it for women to be able to celebrate themselves in a way that they choose.

Another titleholder talked about the lack of understanding of what pageants are all about. It's inherently anti-feminist to tell a woman who willingly does something and willing subjects herself, quote-unquote, to a competition like this, to say that she can't do that

because it is bad for women. When we make the choice for ourselves to compete, and we say, for whatever reason, whatever motivation we have for it, we say that we want to challenge ourselves in this space, to put ourselves out there... I think all you really have to do is point to the type of work that these women often do as titleholders...A lot of us put so much effort into advancing women specifically or just our communities... I think it's really just about people not understanding the whole picture and to kind of meet them where they're at and try and get them to see what other layers there are to pageantry beyond, just like the on-stage portion. (Camille)

Camille finds that it is important to try to educate those who lack an understanding of pageants and all that a titleholder does with their platform to advocate for women and others.

Experience with anti-feminist critique summary. Three coding categories emerged from the participant's experience with anti-feminist critique. All of the titleholders shared that women were their biggest critics, specifically women who identify as feminists. The first coding category was that the criticism was based on the history of pageants, but it is no longer accurate today. Overall, the titleholders in that coding category felt the criticism they and pageants receive is no longer relevant, and critiques just do not know enough about modern-day pageantry. The titleholders stated that the criticism is outdated and no longer relevant.

The second coding category to emerge under participants' experience with anti-feminist critique was that while the criticism may be justified, pageantry has come a long way and there is still work that needs to be done. The titleholders in this coding category were able to understand where the criticism was coming from, (especially around the swimsuit portion) and in certain instances even agreed with it and thought it was justified. Overall, the titleholders think there is still work to be done, but it is also critical to realize how much progress has already been made.

A third and final coding category to emerge was that the criticism of pageantry is based on a lack of knowledge and understanding of what pageantry is all about. The titleholders in this category expressed critics are simply are not educated on pageants and their criticism is not valid. Many of the titleholders shared how many critics think pageants are only about the short time the audience sees on stage and are unaware of the work that comes before participating and the responsibilities that come after for those who are titleholders.

Additional Suggestions Related to Pageants and Feminism

At the conclusion of the interview, titleholders were asked if there were any other ideas, comments, or suggestions they wanted to add as they related to pageantry and feminism. Their suggestions were organized around three areas: *Pageants need to continue to promote all kinds of women; Organizations need to take care of the women who participate; and The public needs to be educated on how empowering pageants are for women.*

Pageants need to continue to promote all kinds of women. One area the titleholders felt that pageantry could improve in as it relates to feminism was how pageants need to continue to encourage all kinds of women to participate. The need to support and promote the women who do choose to participate from different socioeconomic statuses, backgrounds, passions, and goals. Two titleholders described the burden of the cost associated with participating, and one suggested that lowering the cost of the entry fee, or increasing organization-run fundraising opportunities could allow more women to gain access to participate.

Multiple titleholders referenced how, in addition to feeling that extreme views of feminism were being pushed on them by certain pageant systems, they also felt that some systems had a narrow definition of success for women.

One titleholder shared how she hoped that pageants would become more open and inclusive to all kinds of women.

Pageants need to include and encourage more women to participate as well. I was one of the few women who did not have a college education, just a little bit of college education, but I have found great success in other areas of my life and I don't think that should be something that should be frowned upon. I am well educated in my own craft and in my field and I think that should be acknowledged. I would love to see women be able to compete that have success in other areas that isn't a Ph.D. or whatever, and still feel like they can go and win Miss USA. I felt like I was just as capable as everyone else, but because I didn't have a college education, I felt as if I was doubted if that makes sense.

(Lyla)

Lyla felt that women with more societally accepted definitions of success were more likely to do well when participating in certain pageants. She shared how she did not have a formal advanced degree, yet still has been able to find great success within her professional field.

Another titleholder shared similar thoughts regarding outside pressure she has felt from both society and pageantry to choose a career that was deemed as "good enough." She too hopes that pageants can take steps in the right direction to end the stigma around those who choose to follow a path that might not be viewed as "successful" or "admirable."

Just striving to change the stigma around women's empowerment and bring more recognition to some of those underserved or less emphasized fields that women choose to partake in... I think it's hard for us sometimes, there's so much talk and there are so many voices telling us what we should do that we often forget to ask ourselves, what do we want to do? ...My biggest hope is we can see that shift in women's empowerment to be

more open, to be more inclusive, to be more understanding of other women who might not see it as the exact same idea as they do. (Bailey)

In addition to Bailey sharing how she hopes we can become more inclusive and accepting of those who choose to follow an underserved or less emphasized field, she also shares how she hopes pageants can become more understanding of how women view what is empowering differently.

Organizations need to take care of the women who participate. The second group of suggestions for how pageantry might better support feminist ideals surrounds the idea that the organizations need to take care of the women who participate. Some titleholders spoke specifically about the organization taking better care of the women who are titleholders, while many spoke more broadly, encouraging organizations to take care of all women who participate.

One titleholder shared how she hopes the organization implements mental health resources and services for the titleholders.

You don't know what people are going through. And I think as a titleholder, you are putting yourself out there to the public. That can be a little bit destructive over social media. The people that exist out online, it's terrible. I think if the organization were actually to prioritize mental health. I think that that would be really an empowering thing as well. (Juliette)

Juliette shares how prioritizing mental health would be a very empowering thing for pageant organizations to do. Juliette, like many of the other titleholders, mentions how many people online are very critical and unkind to pageant titleholders and having the support of mental health services provided by the organization would help make that a little easier to face. She

feels that supporting titleholder's mental health and well-being is an area that the state directors in the Miss USA system are currently not doing enough.

While one titleholder shares that she has had a very positive experience with her State Directors, she touches on how other women have had different experiences and how she hopes that moving forward all people who are involved with the pageant from the organization's side are invested in the women's success.

But ensuring that there is no misogyny within Directors or anything like that, you know, from within the internal workings of the pageants. None of that that I have experienced, but just making sure that women are always taken very seriously within this role.

(Danielle)

Danielle emphasizes the importance of women being taken seriously when they are titleholders. Other titleholders echo similar thoughts sharing how being a titleholder is a job that gives you the ability to make a large impact on others and that titleholders must have the resources and support from the organization to do the job to the best of their abilities.

One titleholder shares how often titleholders aren't viewed as real people, and instead have very high expectations placed upon them by other participants, the organization, and pageant fans.

I think it's about remembering that the people competing or people, they are human beings. They have thoughts and feelings. They are not a commodity... It's really easy to get lost in the fact that you have 500 people or so competing in your pageant... these are human beings who are competing in your pageant... they need to have a good experience. Like if you're going to have an organization like this that you run, you have to be very careful that it stays about women's empowerment... Your number one goal

should not be about money. It should be about, are all of these women and girls walking away better than when they arrived? Are they happier than when they arrived? Did they grow while they were here? Is this something that's going to benefit them? (Ava)

Ava shares how it can be easy to lose sight of the purpose of a pageant, to empower women when there are so many people participating. She shares how Directors need to focus on the growth the participants are obtaining from their experience and make sure it is a positive, people-centered experience.

The public needs to be educated on how empowering pageants are for women. The third group of suggestions for how pageantry might better support feminist ideals surrounds the idea that the public needs to be educated on how empowering pageants are for women. This suggestion seems to have primarily stemmed from the response to feminist critics and the reaction that the participants had from experiencing criticism. One titleholder's response captured the sentiment of many of the women when she talked about the importance of the pageant system being about to articulate how empowering pageantry is for women.

I've seen articles or opinion pieces about how beauty pageants are bad for women.... and I just wish that they kinda took the time to talk to the women who compete because the reality is, no one forced me to do this, no one forced any of us to do this. So clearly there's some sort of joy or kind of, like reward we feel when we compete. So seeing articles like that is hard. (Camille)

Camille felt it was up to the pageant system to do a better job of explaining what a pageant really is about. She also went on to talk about helping the public understand it is not limited to physical beauty.

I think it's really just about people not understanding the whole picture and to kind of meet them where they're at and try and get them to see what other layers there are to pageantry beyond, just like the on-stage portion... It's so hard because each organization is so different... I think just being articulate about what a beautiful titleholder is and what a beauty pageant really is. In a way that other people could understand. (Camille)

Camille shares the importance of each pageant system having a clear definition of what beauty means to them because it is so much more than physical beauty and the public needs to understand this.

Suggestions related to pageants and feminism summary. Titleholders were quite consistent in their suggestions for ways that pageants could improve or continue to promote feminist ideals. There were three groups of suggestions. The first group of suggestions surrounded the idea of pageantry being open and accepting of all women who wish to participate. Many titleholders shared different perspectives on this, but it all came back to the idea of making all women feel celebrated, welcomed, and powerful regardless of who they are or what their passions are.

The second group of suggestions focused on the organization taking care of those who participate. There were many thoughts on how this could happen, but many titleholders focused on providing mental health resources and services for titleholders to help them cope with the stress and critics they face on a daily basis. Many titleholders shared their own experiences with the stress of balancing many responsibilities, and while some referenced the support they had from their director's, others did not have the same experience. The titleholders recognized the importance of professional mental health services.

The third group of suggestions focused on how the public needs to be educated on how empowering pageants are for women. Many of the women talked about the responsibility of the organization to present the pageant in such a way that the public could understand the important role it plays in inspiring women. Helping the public see how empowering the experience is for women would help those who participate as well.

Three Broad Themes

After 16 coding categories emerged from the initial analysis, a secondary analysis was conducted. Open coding was used to further examine the titleholder's interview transcripts to identify overarching themes across the four areas of motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, self-identification as a feminist, and experience with anti-feminist critique. The 16 coding categories and transcripts were separately examined to identify overarching themes. The potential themes and supporting quotes were examined and analyzed numerous times and three overarching themes emerged. The three broad themes that emerged include *Pageants are Empowering*, *Swimsuit is Complicated*, and *Pageantry has Evolved*. The three broad themes will be described below. Sample quotes from titleholders will be included to clarify how they support these broad overarching themes.

Pageants are Empowering

The first broad theme to emerge was that pageants are viewed as empowering by the titleholders. This was seen across all four of the areas of study, including motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, self-identification as a feminist, and experience with anti-feminist critique.

Empowerment in motivation was apparent in the coding category of "I really found so much self-confidence" and in the coding category "I wanted to improve my communication

skills.” For example, one titleholder talked about how improving communication skills, specifically public speaking skills, was one motivating factor for participating. She shared how her motivation directly relates to the skills she gained through participating and how her experience was empowering.

This has only been a positive in my life and it has changed me in ways that I didn't think were possible and I absolutely have reaped the benefits of everything. From building my personal confidence and working on my public speaking skills, it has really only been nothing but empowering. (Danielle)

Danielle encapsulates the broad theme of how pageants are empowering by illustrating how positive the experience has been for her and how much her confidence and public speaking skills improved.

The idea of pageants being empowering for those who participate was also evident in the support for feminist ideals coding category “Oh yes, pageants definitely align with feminism.” Many of the titleholders shared how for them, pageants supported feminist ideals such as seeing women as both strong and capable and empowering women. Many of the titleholders shared how participating in pageants helped them gain confidence to share their thoughts and opinions, gain the skills and connections to progress in their careers, and help empower women who participate. One titleholder shared how if you participate in pageants, pageants are empowering and support feminist ideals.

If you're a contestant in the experience, I do think that it promotes those ideals because it's really pushing you outside of the box if you want to stand out... like the judges are looking for, you know, this girl who is truly herself. I think that it's not going to push you in the wrong direction if you are a contestant preparing. I think that it really does embrace

these feminist ideals... I think that if you are a contestant in it, it absolutely promotes feminists ideals. (Helena)

Helena shares how pageantry aligning with feminism contributed to how empowering pageantry was to her as a participant.

Likewise, the sense of empowerment was also apparent in how contestants self-identify with feminism. Some titleholders shared how their identification as a feminist only grew and was strengthened by their participation in pageantry. Other titleholders shared how well supported, and sometimes even pushed, it was to be a feminist in pageants. One titleholder shared how being a feminist who participated in pageantry actually positively impacted her experience.

I think it's very well accepted to be a feminist in pageantry. I think it positively impacted my experience in pageantry. I'm trying to picture myself as not a feminist in pageantry.

So, I think it's a good thing to be a feminist in pageantry because that's kinda what it's all about. Empowerment of women. (Francesca)

Francesca shares how the empowerment of women is a core value of pageantry, and what pageantry is all about. She shares how the empowerment of women and being a feminist go together.

Francesca's reflection on how well accepted it is to be a feminist in pageantry leads up directly to how the empowerment of women is shared in the titleholder's response to anti-feminist critique. How empowering pageants are is seen in the coding category "The criticism is based on the history of pageants, but that's not accurate today." Many of the women share how those who criticize pageants saying that pageants are anti-feminist and bad for women are simply uneducated and unaware of the reasons these titleholders participate and how empowering it is for them to do so. Francesca expresses how once those who criticize pageants are able to look

past the misconceptions that are based on the history of pageants, they are able to see how pageants directly align with feminism and how empowering pageants are for participants.

Once people can see past what a traditional beauty pageant is, and once people understand all of the things that go into it and all of the things that we get out of it. I think it aligns with the ideals of feminism.... I think it has a lot to do with self-confidence. And I think that helps women go out and kind of get things that might make them more equal in society. For example, through pageantry, I can gain confidence to earn my education and feel like I have the ability to do anything as a woman. I think it gives women that feeling that the ability to do anything, and say what they want and give them a voice.

(Francesca)

Francesca spoke to the need for critics to understand that pageants today are quite the opposite of being seen as disempowering. Participating in pageantry is empowering for women.

Swimsuit is Complicated

The second overarching theme, swimsuit is complicated, emerged from the secondary analysis of the titleholder's interviews and was evident across all four areas of the study's focus: motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideas, self-identification as a feminist, and experience with anti-feminist critique. What makes it complicated is that many titleholders talked about how empowering the swimsuit portion was for them, while some titleholders were conflicted by it. In addition, when asked about the swimsuit round, almost all titleholders talked about how glad they were that Miss USA has not removed the swimsuit portion from the pageant like Miss America recently did (in 2018). On the other hand, when discussing the criticism received by those on the outside of pageantry, participants said swimsuit

competition was often identified as “The Problem” in terms of being anti-feminist because critics felt it objectifies women.

This sense of complication is first shown in the participants’ motivation. Specifically, a sense of the internal conflict a few titleholders felt regarding the competition is evident when one titleholder shared how, while she loved the confidence it gave her and was able to push her out of her comfort zone, reflecting back she is unsure if she really wanted to participate in that round of competition.

Ever since I was a little girl, I was like, I wanted to be Miss USA.... That's my dream. But I can't because I can't do swimsuit competition... Even as a kid and a young teenager, I was like, I can't be on stage in a swimsuit, I'm just too modest. I can't do it. But then when I decided to compete, I think I was like, oh, it's normal... You know, is it normal? I don't know, but everybody else is doing it. I've watched girls do it for years. Like it has to be normal, it has to be okay. So, I think I just pushed myself out of my comfort zone and was like, I'll do it anyway. But outside of that, I think I just loved all the aspects of pageantry. Like I loved how it made me feel. I loved how confident I felt over the years. I loved all the friends that I made and the opportunities that I had. (Ava)

Ava shares that pageantry as a whole was empowering and made her feel confident and gain opportunities and friendships. Despite the positive aspects Ava shares of her overall pageant experience, she shares the internal battle she faced when trying to normalize the swimsuit competition to fit her personal morals.

Different perspectives of the swimsuit portion by titleholders also appear through the responses to the pageant’s support for feminist ideals and the coding category “Yes, at least on the surface, but there’s still more work left to do.” One titleholder talked about how after she

won the state title and thought about preparing for the swimsuit portion of the national pageant and being on national television, she felt pressure that her body had to look a certain way or someone would criticize her.

I am far more comfortable with my body today than I was as a state titleholder... right now in my life I have no pressure to be any different than I am today. And during my reign, the pressure to be different than what I was the day that I won my state title is what made improving my body so hard because I wasn't doing it from a calm, strong place. I was doing it from a very competitive and narrow minded, scared place. It wasn't so much the improvement that I was making physically, it was where it was coming from that was so detrimental to my health... that's what's hard to admit and say out loud, the place that it was coming from. Even if no one said it, the fact that I knew I was going to be on national television and if I didn't say it, somebody else would say what my body looks like. Yes, that pressure drove me insane at night.... And if I could do it all over again, and somebody like said, "Yeah, you're going to be on national television in a swimsuit" I think I would have gone to therapy before I went to the gym because I needed to battle mental issues that were affecting the way I saw my body before I started working on it, quote unquote, working on it because there was nothing to work on only to improve on. So, I have a very complicated relationship with swimsuit because I think improving your body is always great. I think exercising is always great. I think being conscious of what you put in your body is always great. But the reasoning for why you're doing that during competition versus just every day the way you live your lifestyle. Yeah, I have a problem with those two motivations, competing with each other when it comes to pageants.

Katelyn explained that she has a very complicated relationship with the swimsuit because she sees the value in improving your overall health, but the pressure to fit some idealized image was problematic.

To further demonstrate the complicated and conflicting thoughts the titleholders have regarding the swimsuit competition one titleholder shared how her preparation for the swimsuit portion actually healed her prior relationship with food and eating disordered habits, but she acknowledges that her situation may not be the norm.

With great power comes great responsibility. And I think the swimsuit competition is kind of an interesting version of that where it's really easy to take that opportunity to do something amazing for yourself the wrong way... I was never diagnosed with a particular eating disorder, but I developed, like very clearly disordered eating habits.... As I began to prepare for the Miss (..) USA competition, it was really kind of a responsibility that forced me to think back on what I was doing and how I was treating myself and this reality that if want to prepare for this competition, I can't keep doing what I'm doing because I'm simply not going to make it... And it forced me to really think about what I was doing to myself. And if I felt like, did I want people to know that that's how I prepared for the competition? If I won the title like would I feel comfortable with young girls and women asking me how did you get into XYZ shape and not being able to tell them honestly about what I was going through was really scary. (Camille)

Camille felt strongly that her participation in pageantry motivated her to fix her relationship with food. She shared how preparing for the swimsuit portion was empowering and therefore aligned with feminist ideals.

In the area of self-identification as a feminist, an example of how swimsuit is complicated can be seen in “I’m a feminist and I call myself one!” in which some titleholders shared how they felt that the swimsuit portion allowed them to break stereotypes and limitations that are often placed on women. One titleholder shares how she fears boundaries and limitations being placed on her as a woman, and pageantry - specifically the swimsuit round - allows her to break those boundaries.

I just don't like boundaries in any way. I feel educated women can do both things. And as an educated woman, I get scared of getting put in this box, of “Okay, now I am an educated woman, I can't wear this, I can't do that anymore because now I'm educated.” So I like, really, really like the idea of being able to be an educated woman and have my Masters and go for my PhD and be educated, then also wear high heels and a swimsuit, be girly and do both things. I don't like saying this is what one type of person does or should act. I don't think there should be a boundary. I think anyone should be able to do and act and be all the things that they want to be at the same time, they shouldn't have to choose. (Francesca)

Francesca identifies and calls herself a feminist and feels strongly that women should not be limited. She feels that women should be able to be educated and embrace their femininity.

Finally, this broad theme that swimsuit is complicated is shown in the titleholder’s experience with anti-feminist critique. The most common criticism of pageantry by outsiders centered on the swimsuit round. This complication is shown in the coding category of “Criticism is based on a lack of knowledge and understanding.” One titleholder shares how the swimsuit portion is misunderstood by critics who simply don’t take the time to look at the benefits of

pageantry as a whole and instead focus on the negative stereotypes that have often been portrayed in the mainstream media.

I would say that the swimsuit competition is definitely misunderstood by critics and individuals who don't take enough time to understand the benefits of pageantry as a whole and why each category is a category to begin with. Many people's understanding of the swimsuit portion is based on stereotypical images they've seen in the media and in movies. But it actually serves an important purpose - encouraging young women to think about their fitness and health goals and allowing women the opportunity to display their progress, and to enjoy themselves on center stage! (Ella)

Another titleholder echoed Ella's thoughts, sharing how easy it is for people who have never participated to make assumptions about the competition without understanding the participant's motivation.

I think it's easy to make assumptions about swimsuit and disregard the competitor's rationale and motivation. Often you just hear it's sexualizing women or making them an object when in reality many competitors have various reasons why they not only compete in swimsuit but enjoy it. Whether that's a lifestyle change, loving the stage or finding confidence in hard work and dedication these women make that conscious decision to accept the challenge. (Bailey)

Pageantry has Evolved (and needs to continue to do so)

The third overarching theme found across the four areas of motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, self-identification as a feminist, and experience with anti-feminist critique involved how pageantry has evolved and needs to continue to do so. Pageants continued evolution was apparent in the participant's motivation. None of the titleholders

indicated that their motivation for participation had any association with beauty or because they were told they were beautiful. Many critics assume that beauty and showcasing talent are primary motivators, but out of the seven coding categories associated with participant motivation, only one category was associated with the display of talent. The majority of reasons that titleholders shared for participating circled around the personal growth they have gained, or were motivated to gain. Titleholders spoke about their desire to make a positive impact, gain a sense of belonging, and improve self-confidence.

One titleholder reflects on how she has seen the motivations change for many of the contestants and evolve even just during her decade of competing. She also shares how the number of participants in her state pageant has declined in the last 5 years. She notes this change and believes that the decline is directly tied to the change that needs to continue to occur within the Miss USA organization, specifically ensuring the integrity of all the state directors.

I do believe the motivation for women competing in pageants has changed since I started competing 10 years ago. In my state, there has been quite a large decrease, the past 5 years I would say, in the number of women competing. I think this is due to the lack of integrity within the system and the amount of money presumably spent to compete in the first place. (Lyla)

While Lyla notes a lack of integrity in her state pageant, other titleholders shared how celebrated and supported they were by their state directors, sharing that they were advocates for them, and helped them make the most of their reign. This illustrates that there is still change that needs to occur within the local organizations to ensure it is an empowering experience for all who participate.

One titleholder shares that the evolution pageants have experienced and will continue to experience should be welcomed and embraced, as long as the change continues to be positive. Ella shares how there are endless opportunities for change and evolution, some of which may change participants' motivation over time.

Pageantry is changing, and pageantry is evolving. So, we're going to keep seeing shifts in the next five to ten years. Who knows? Maybe we'll see more different types of competitions added. Maybe things will be taken out, put in. Maybe Miss USA will add in a talent portion. Who knows? I think that it's totally okay to change and we should all be open to change as long as it's a good and positive change. (Ella)

Finally, the sense of the evolution of pageantry is most heavily illustrated in the titleholder's response to their experiences with critics. This is seen in the coding category of "Criticism is based on the history of pageants, but that's not accurate today."

I think pageantry has certainly evolved. Not just in what it offers and the diversity of women competing in the major systems, but the competitions themselves have as well. There are so many systems now that cater to a variety of interests and personalities. We don't just have Miss USA and Miss America anymore. There are options that provide various opportunities and challenges within their competitions that really allow women to find a system that best suits their interests. (Bailey)

Bailey illustrates that the evolution of pageantry was needed, as well as the expansion and creation of other systems. Bailey describes that the evolution has made pageants more accessible and inclusive to different types of women, allowing women to choose a system that represents them and their morals, values, and passions. Bailey, like many of the other titleholders, appreciates that different systems exist with different elements of the pageant so that women are

able to explore and find a pageant that their participation in leaves them feeling empowered and uplifted.

Summary of the Coding Categories and Broad Themes

Analysis of the in-depth interviews with the 12 titleholders resulted in 16 coding categories in the initial analysis and three broad themes in the secondary analysis. The coding categories were organized under the four research topics of focus for this study: *motivation for participating*, *pageantry support for feminist ideals*, *self-identification as feminist*, and *experience with anti-feminist critique*. In terms of *motivation for participating*, seven coding categories were identified due to the multiple reasons given by each titleholder to participate in pageants. Although all titleholders felt pageants support feminist ideals, a range of opinions on the degree of support resulted in three coding categories for *pageantry support for feminist ideals*. Three coding categories were identified for *self-identification as a feminist*; all of the women were supportive of feminist ideals and identified as a feminist to some degree, including some openly calling themselves a feminist. In terms of the last research area, *experience with anti-feminist critique*, all of the titleholders had experience with criticism of both pageantry and their participation, resulting in three coding categories being identified.

After 16 coding categories emerged from the initial analysis, a secondary analysis was conducted. Open coding was used to further examine the titleholder's interview transcripts to identify overarching themes across the four areas of motivation for participating, pageantry support for feminist ideals, self-identification as a feminist, and experience with anti-feminist critique. The three broad themes that emerged include *Pageants are Empowering*; *Swimsuit is Complicated*; and *Pageantry has Evolved (and needs to continue to do so)*.

The first broad theme, *Pageants are Empowering*, is how many of the titleholders describe their experience, including building their self-confidence and improving their communication skills. Many titleholders focused on how pageants strengthened their commitment to feminism, how pageants are an outlet in which women are empowered to break stereotypes and break out of the boxes society so often tries to put them into. This is often misunderstood by those on the outside, and titleholders felt critics misunderstood or had an outdated image of pageantry.

The second broad theme, *Swimsuit is Complicated*, is illustrated in many ways. The complication becomes evident when different titleholders share their varying different views on the competition. While the majority of the titleholders shared that they enjoyed the swimsuit portion of pageantry, some shared that it was not as positive an experience for them, but they can still see the value the competition has for others. The idea of health and fitness continuously arose when discussing the swimsuit competition. All contestants appreciated how health and fitness were emphasized through the swimsuit round and agreed that this needs to be a component of the pageant. A few contestants wondered if there were other ways to have that represented. The swimsuit portion was a common reason for anti-feminist critique of pageants.

Another reason that swimsuit is complicated was identified as a broad theme is how the titleholders responded to Miss America removing the swimsuit portion of the pageant. Most were not supportive of the removal; in fact, all of the contestants expressed that they were happy that Miss USA has chosen to keep the swimsuit portion and shared the sentiment of “to each their own.”

The third and final broad theme to arise was *Pageantry has Evolved (and needs to continue to do so)*. The contestants all see how far pageants have come since their inception, but

many point out that progress still needs to happen. Titleholders' motivations were not centered around beauty or being seen as beautiful, but were about empowerment and desire to make a positive impact on others. Titleholders felt it promoted feminist ideals, and in some cases strengthened their self-identification as feminists, despite the anti-feminist criticism they received from women who have never competed in pageants. In terms of the need for pageantry to continue to evolve, titleholders offered a number of suggestions for how pageantry could better support feminist ideals, including the importance of inclusion and access by welcoming all women, making it more financially accessible, making sure those who are state directors are grounded in integrity and the mission of their respective systems. These findings will be discussed in terms of their contributions to the literature in Chapter 5: Discussion.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the meaning beauty pageant participation has for women who compete. To date, there has been no research on how women who participate in beauty pageants feel about their participation as it relates to their thoughts on feminism. While there has been long-standing criticism by feminists about beauty pageants and the women who participate in them, there is no research asking the participants how they feel and define themselves.

This study looked at the overarching research question, *How do women who compete in beauty pageants view their participation in light of feminism?* There were four sub-research questions: *What motivates these women to participate in beauty pageants?; In what ways do these women believe pageantry to be supportive or unsupportive of feminist ideals?; Do these women see themselves as feminists?; and What has been their experience with those who might suggest what they are doing is not in alignment with feminist ideals?* Such an understanding of titleholders' answers to the sub-research questions provides a more accurate view of the contestants and their sense of self.

The study sample consisted of 12 Miss USA 2020 state titleholders who responded to a recruitment letter sent out by state directors. They geographically represented the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, Southwest, Midwest, and Northwest. The participant interviews were analyzed and have cast light upon the collective insights, the common challenges, and the overall views of how pageantry relates to feminism in regard to the titleholder's lives. This study provides new information to the field of research on women who participate in pageants and is the first known study on pageant participants' views on feminism.

Comparison of Findings to Previous Research

As noted in the literature review in Chapter 2, there have been only a handful of studies focused on women who participate in pageantry; most have focused on body image or self-esteem. As in this study, many of the previous studies were conducted by authors who had a personal connection to the organization they researched. In fact, three of the six articles described in the literature review had authors who participated in the Miss America system (Maddox, 2001; Everhart, 2011; Bowers 2016). Another study was conducted by a previous childhood beauty pageant participant (Sang, 2016). It is important to note the connection and relationship between the researcher and the study participants as it shows the access that the researcher had and the familiarity with the inner workings of pageantry.

While none of these previous research studies were directly related to this study in terms of understanding their perspectives on feminism, there are pieces of previous research findings that are relevant or can be compared to the current study. For example, in the previous study by Sang (2016), she found that the women she interviewed said that their beauty pageant participation promoted bonding and helped strengthen relationships with family members, as well as bonding with other participants and the important friendships they made. Similarly, some of the women interviewed for this study also discussed how they increased time and strengthened relationships with their parents while preparing for their participation, and also developed valuable relationships with other pageant participants.

A previous study by Bowers (2016) found that all local participants interviewed had previously been exposed to stereotypes surrounding pageant participation. Similarly, all of the titleholders interviewed for this current study shared that they too had faced negative assumptions and stereotypes surrounding their participation. Bowers (2016) found that the

societal stereotypes had no influence on the young women's decision to participate or self-esteem. Likewise, none of the participants in this study indicated that the criticism they were exposed to influenced their decision to participate or their self-esteem. Additionally, Bowers (2016) found that those who participated in the study expressed that their self-efficacy actually increased through both peer motivation and promotion of their platform. All of the titleholders interviewed for the current study indicated that through participating in pageants they gained confidence in themselves and their abilities.

A 2001 study (Maddock, 2001) of previous Miss America state titleholders from the 1985 competition reported their participation had both positive and negative effects on the titleholders. Some of the positive effects that titleholders shared included the experiences gained and opportunities to perform before large audiences. Titleholders from the 2020 Miss USA competition also reported both positive and negative thoughts when reflecting on their experience with pageants at the national level. Some titleholders in this study also shared that they were motivated by the experiences and opportunities.

Maddox (2001) also reported that the 1985 Miss America state titleholders had a shift in how they saw themselves after participating at the national level. Maddox (2001) shared that the titleholders placed a greater emphasis on their physical appearance as a result of their participation. On the other hand, none of the titleholders interviewed for this study expressed placing a greater emphasis on their physical appearance after competing. In fact, very few of the interviewed titleholders mentioned physical appearance at all. For the few that did reference physical appearance, it related to being better able to present themselves in professional settings, and the others mentioned that participating in pageants made them feel more confident about their physical appearance through participating in rounds such as swimsuit and evening gown.

Contribution to the Literature on Pageantry and Feminism

This study is important because it allows beauty pageant participants to have a voice and provides us an understanding of how beauty pageant participants view feminism in light of their participation. Since there is no known previous research on pageantry and feminism from the point of view of the participants, this study provides new information on a topic that has been overlooked despite the hundreds of commentaries and criticisms by those outside the pageant world. Much of the criticism accuses pageantry and its participants of hurting women and being anti-feminist. For example, Jessica Valenti, an American feminist writer, said that, “The contests are an antiquated reminder of exactly what we don’t want for women, and they should have no place in our future” (Valenti, 2015). Even on the international scale, pageants are criticized. Former controller of *BBC One* shared that he no longer thought the pageant merited national airtime saying, “They are an anachronism in this day and age of equality and verging on offensive” (Hall, 2020). However, based on the findings from the in-depth interviews with the 2020 Miss USA state titleholders, their perspectives contradict such criticism of pageantry and the women who choose to participate.

The contribution of this study is found in the 16 coding categories that emerged from the analysis of the women’s motivation to participate, their thoughts on pageantry’s support for feminist ideals, their own self-identification as a feminist, and the discussion of their experience with feminist critique, as well as the three broad themes that emerged: *Pageants are Empowering*, *Swimsuit is Complicated*, and *Pageantry has Evolved (and needs to continue to do so)*. Together these findings highlight an important **irony**. Specifically, participants see themselves as feminists, and they see pageants as promoting (in some cases pushing) feminism, yet they are criticized by (mostly) other women outside the pageant world who insist they are

hurting women. The criticism appears to be based on an outdated understanding, pure ignorance, or the hour these viewers watched a pageant on television.

Much of the negative comments from others outside pageantry (reported by the participants and in negative commentaries in the media) are based on what they see as a narrow definition of beauty, that they are not positive for girls and women, and concerns about the swimsuit competition. In terms of the criticism about beauty, it is important to note that the titleholders consistently emphasized how pageantry has evolved, and their motivation to be a participant had nothing to do with beauty. Never once in the interviews did the titleholders reference pageantry with the descriptive term “beauty.”

Many of the titleholders interviewed in this study shared that pageants are the most feminist and empowering thing they have ever done and all of them wished that those on the outside would be open-minded enough to listen to the titleholder’s stories and see pageants for what they are: an opportunity for the women who choose to participate to gain confidence, skills, and connections and empower themselves and those around them. Even the titleholders whose experiences within the Miss USA system were not always positive - whether that was based on their feelings towards their time at the national pageant or with their state directors - they still saw the empowerment and positive impact pageantry had on those who chose to participate.

The criticism about the swimsuit portion of pageantry is not shared by the majority of women interviewed for the study. There were different concerns raised by a few of the titleholders who were not as supportive of the swimsuit competition. Of the three rounds, interview was seen consistently identified as the most feminist portion of the pageant. Evening gown was also seen as overwhelmingly supportive by the titleholders and was viewed as incredibly empowering. Swimsuit was viewed from different lenses. For the majority of the

titleholders, the swimsuit portion was empowering. Some could see how there might be problems and the change that may need to occur. A few of the contestants expressed that swimsuit was not empowering for them, and one shared her regret for participating as it went against her personal values of modesty. Swimsuit was often identified as “the problem” participants encountered by feminist critics.

Further, when responding to Miss America’s decision to drop the swimsuit portion, this was where the strongest opinions and feelings about swimsuit came from the Miss USA titleholders. Despite some expressing conflicting opinions on the swimsuit portion, the titleholders defended the Miss USA system’s decision to continue to include it and were happy that those who are interested in competing in a pageant, with or without a swimsuit portion, have options that fit their taste. When asked to reflect upon a quote from a Miss America sponsor who said, “An educated woman does not parade around in a swimsuit” the Miss USA titleholders shared disappointment, anger, and hurt. Some titleholders shared how female empowerment means supporting all women, and not discrediting women who choose to participate in the swimsuit portion. Many titleholders felt it went against feminist ideals to say an educated woman should not parade around in a swimsuit; saying this limits women and prevents them from exploring all avenues and passions they may find empowering. The irony is that they felt it was anti-feminist for Miss America to drop the swimsuit round versus keep it.

Limitations

As previously stated in the Limitations of the Study Design in Chapter 2, there were several assumed limitations of this qualitative study based on a review of the literature. The limitations of the study design concerned the fact that the results of the study only included state titleholders of the 2020 Miss USA Competition and therefore, the findings may have limited

applicability to other titleholders from previous years. Additionally, there was a possibility that only state titleholders who were comfortable enough with discussing issues of feminism would agree to participate in the study. Finally, state titleholders were the focus of this study. This omitted participation from other women who participated at the local and state level. Due to using a convenience sample, the study is limited in its generalizability.

There were several additional limitations to this study. First, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to pageant participants as a whole due to the fact that only those who won a state title in the Miss USA pageant system were interviewed. With thousands of girls and young women who compete each year, only a small fraction win state titles. The views of those who may have had placements that are viewed as less successful may vary from those who were victorious.

Another limitation to the study was that half of the participants were interviewed prior to the suicide of a former 2019 Miss USA, Cheslie Kryst, while the other half of the participants were interviewed closely after. As the former Miss USA titleholder, she personally guided the 2020 Miss USA state titleholders throughout their reign and had a profound impact on all of these women. This may have influenced their ability to reflect clearly on their experience, or it may have resulted in them discovering different thoughts and opinions that they may not have reflected upon such as pageantry's support for women and when asked about suggestions for how pageants could better support women and feminism.

Future Research on Pageantry and Feminism

There is a need for more research on pageant participants' views on feminism. With no previous research to date on pageant participants' views on their participation in light of feminism, further research involving participants will help to fill this gap in the research. The

participants for this qualitative study included 12 state titleholders from the 2020 Miss USA pageant. Future research could consider other participants. For example, future studies could move beyond titleholders (winners) and include interviews with those who were runners-up or anyone who competed on the state level. Other studies could compare feminist perspectives of Miss USA vs Miss America participants to see if there are differences in feminist perspectives on pageantry, since Miss America recently dropped the swimsuit competition.

Other studies could examine how the length of participation in pageantry influences their perspective. In this study, women's participation in pageantry ranged from 2 to 24 years. How might those who began participating more recently compare to those who have made this a lifetime activity when considering feminist perspectives?

Future research might also consider the timing. Studies could include interviews with women several years later after leaving pageantry. As a retrospective study, with some distance between actively participating and later being interviewed, there may be differing perspectives. The women in this study had recently participated as titleholders in 2020. A longitudinal study could follow women across time to understand if and how their perspectives on feminism change (to become more positive or negative). Other studies could interview a cross section of participants from different decades on their thoughts on feminism and pageantry.

Beyond qualitative studies, quantitative studies could involve surveys of large numbers of participants about their thoughts on feminism, pageantry's support for feminist ideals, and their self-identification as a feminist. This would allow for a wider understanding of perspectives.

Studies could also include those involved in the leadership of organizations (i.e., state directors) to understand their thoughts on feminism and the role of pageantry in promoting feminist ideas. Their perspectives could be further compared to the participants who they

oversee. Clearly, there is a need for more research in this area. Prior to this study, the only voice providing a perspective on pageantry and feminism was limited to those outside the system, offering negative critiques suggesting how anti-feminist pageantry is for women. This study allowed the women involved in pageantry to add their voices and perspectives. More studies like this one need to be done to add to our understanding.

Implications and Conclusions

There are a number of implications based on the findings of this study and the three broad categories: *Pageants are Empowering*, *Swimsuit is Complicated*, and *Pageantry has Evolved*.

The first, and perhaps the important implication, is that pageant organizations need to do a better job articulating to the public what is involved and how beneficial participation in pageantry can be for women. The general sentiment from the participants seemed to be summed up by one of the titleholders who said, “This is one of the most empowering feminist things I have done, why don’t you all see that?” If the organizations did a better job educating the public, perhaps this would reduce the number of negative feminist commentaries that ridicule, mock and criticize the very women they should be supporting. Many titleholders felt it was anti-feminist for women to put down other women, pointing out that it went against feminist values of equality, fairness, empowerment of women, and seeing women as strong and capable.

A second implication of the study is to reconsider the reference to “beauty pageants” by dropping the “beauty” and instead simply referring to them as “pageants.” Despite being asked interview questions that referred to beauty pageants, the women interviewed for this study did not discuss beauty as a part of their participation. Their response, when asked about their motivation for participating, did not include responses such as “because I know I am beautiful.” Their responses were centered around a desire to give back, do something to help others, trying

something new, and as a place to showcase their talent as a singer or dancer. Limiting the experience or point of participating to physical beauty was not seen as relevant. In fact, many women talked about the greater diversity of participants. Related to this, they don't see pageantry as a "competition" in the traditional sense of "winners and losers." Many talked about pageantry being a self-challenge and how they were ultimately competing against themselves. In fact, many described the supportive environment among the women they met in pageantry.

The third implication is that as pageant systems continue to evolve, they need to continue to make it a priority to support the women who participate and to promote the great diversity in women. Titleholders acknowledged the need to continue to progress in a variety of ways to make pageants as empowering as possible for the girls and young women who choose to participate. When asked at the end of the interview for any final thoughts on what pageants could do to better support feminist ideals, many pointed to this need to support participants' mental health. For example, state directors who oversee the titleholders that these women are representing far more than themselves, they are representing the entire state. It is important for the state directors to acknowledge the pressure and provide the proper support and resources during and after the titleholder's reign.

In conclusion, this study sought to answer the overarching question, *How do women who compete in beauty pageants view their participation in light of feminism?* The analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed a deeply held belief that pageantry is empowering. These women see themselves as supporting feminist ideals and that pageantry is a place for promoting women and all that they are capable of. The public needs to understand that despite the work that needs to be done, pageants serve as a positive and empowering place for the women who choose to

participate. The pageant organizations need to face the reality that change must continue in order to keep supporting women and to better embrace the great diversity women bring to pageantry.

Feminist ideals include such things as equality, fairness, empowerment of women, and seeing women as strong and capable. This is what pageantry has done for the women who chose to be interviewed for this study. It has helped some women strengthen their convictions related to feminist ideals, and for other women, pageantry was their first real exposure to feminism and what it meant to be a feminist.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Email to State Pageant Directors for Recruiting Participants

Dear (name of State Director):

My name is Julia Van Steenberghe and I am Miss Maine USA 2020. I am also a graduate student in the Master of Science in Human Development program at the University of Maine. My thesis advisor is Dr. Sandra Caron, Professor of Family Relations and Human Sexuality at the University of Maine. I am writing to ask for your assistance in contacting participants for a study I am conducting. I wanted to go through the state directors to ensure no former titleholders would feel any pressure or obligation given my relationship to them. I would greatly appreciate if you could forward my Letter of Invitation (attached) and the Informed Consent (attached) to your 2020 state titleholder(s).

The title of my thesis is *Miss USA Meets Feminism: A Qualitative Study Exploring Contestants' Thoughts on Feminism*. My study will involve interviewing women who have competed at Miss USA to understand how they view feminism in light of their participation. A series of questions will explore what motivates them to compete in a beauty pageant, how they see their participation supporting feminist ideals, if they view themselves as feminists, and any experiences they have had with criticism.

If you have questions, I can be reached at 207-949-3370 or my email is julia.van@maine.edu. You can also contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Sandra Caron, at the

University of Maine in the Human Development program. Dr. Caron's phone number is 207-581-3138 and her email is scaron@maine.edu. Thank you for your assistance with my research.

Sincerely,

Julia Van Steenberghe, Miss Maine USA 2020

Graduate student, Master of Science in Human Development

University of Maine

Appendix B

Letter of Invitation to Miss USA 2020 State Titleholders

My name is Julia Van Steenberghe and I was Miss Maine USA 2020. I am currently a graduate student in Human Development program at the University of Maine. My thesis advisor is Dr. Sandra Caron, Professor of Family Relations and Human Sexuality at the University of Maine. I was fortunate to meet many of you both in person and virtually throughout our unconventional time as titleholders. I asked the state director who oversaw your reign as a titleholder, or who is now overseeing the state you were a titleholder for, to forward you this letter.

I am seeking volunteers for my research study entitled: *Miss USA Meets Feminism: A Qualitative Study Exploring Contestants' Thoughts on Feminism*. My study will involve interviewing women who competed at Miss USA 2020 to understand how you view feminism in light of your participation. A series of questions will explore what motivates you to compete in a beauty pageant, how you see your participation supporting feminist ideals (or not), if you view yourself as a feminist, and any experience with criticism.

You will be asked to take part in an interview that will be digitally recorded for audio. The interview may take up to 90 minutes and will be conducted virtually. Attached is an Informed Consent document that provides further details about this study, guidelines for confidentiality, and pertinent contact information.

If you are interested in participating in this study or if you have further questions, I can be reached at my personal cell phone: 207-949-3370 or my email julia.van@maine.edu. You can also contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Sandra Caron, at the University of Maine in the Human Development program. Dr. Caron's phone number is 207-581-3138 and her email is

scaron@maine.edu. Please note; Due to the time constraint to finish my thesis prior to graduating in May, if I receive an overwhelming response, I plan to select the first 12 women who contact me. Therefore, not all who contact me may be selected for an interview. Thank you for considering this invitation.

Sincerely,

Julia Van Steenberghe, Miss Maine USA 2020

Masters Candidate in Human Development

University of Maine

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Miss USA Meets Feminism: A Qualitative Study Exploring Contestants' Thoughts on Feminism

Julia Van Steenberghe, Masters Candidate in Human Development

University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469

julia.van@maine.edu

207-949-3370

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Julia Van Steenberghe, a graduate student in the Master of Science in Human Development program at the University of Maine. My thesis advisor is Dr. Sandra Caron, Professor of Family Relations and Human Sexuality at the University of Maine. I am interested in interviewing former state titleholders who competed at Miss USA in 2020 to understand how they view feminism in light of their participation.

What Will You Be Asked To Do? If you decide to participate, an interview will be conducted via Zoom and it will be recorded with a handheld device with your permission. All tape recordings (recorded on a handheld device) will be destroyed once transcribed by Rev.com (which is a transcription service) and transcription is verified. You will be asked to take part in a single interview that will be audio-recorded and later transcribed without any identifying information. All tape recordings (recorded on a handheld device) will be destroyed once transcribed and transcription is verified. The interview will take approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted virtually. The purpose of my research is to explore how you, as a former titleholder view feminism in light of your participation. A series of questions will explore what motivates them to compete in a pageant, how you see your participation supporting feminist

ideals (or not), if you view yourself as a feminist, and any experience with criticism. Interviews will be conducted between now and the end of February 2022.

Risks. There are minimal risks to you from participating in this study. The only risks of participating are time and inconvenience.

Benefits. You may benefit from sharing your thoughts and experiences. This research will help us understand how women who participate in beauty pageants see their participation in light of feminism, if they consider themselves as supporting feminist ideals and any challenges they may face. To date, there is no research on this topic. The findings of this study will give these women a voice to be understood from their perspective.

Confidentiality. All information supplied in the context of this study will be used to contribute to this research. While excerpts from the interviews will be utilized in the final results and conclusions, you will be assigned a code name to protect your identity. Your real name and any identifying information will be kept confidential and not appear in any publications. All tape recordings (recorded on a handheld device) will be destroyed once transcribed and transcription is verified. The transcription service is Rev.com. By May 2022, all audio recordings will be transcribed and any remaining audio recordings will be destroyed at that time. All transcripts will be kept on my password protected computer indefinitely. My thesis committee will have access to coded data to ensure the analysis is true to your original words.

Voluntary. Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip questions you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information. If you have further questions about this study, please contact me at:

Julia Van Steenberghe

207-949-3370

julia.van@maine.edu

You may also reach my thesis advisor at:

Dr. Sandra Caron

Professor - Family Relations & Human Sexuality

5749 Merrill Hall, Room 220

University of Maine

Orono, ME 04469-5749

(207)581-3138

scaron@maine.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, 207-581-2657 (or e-mail umric@maine.edu).

Appendix D

Interview Questions

The overarching research question that guided the study: *How do women who compete in beauty pageants view feminism in light of their participation?*

Demographics

1. Age:
2. Race/Ethnicity:
3. State (to be de-identified and described in study as region of country):
4. Number of years competing in pageantry:
5. Number of years competed in Miss USA state pageant:

The sub-research questions guiding the interview included:

Research Question 1: Motivation for Participating: What motivates these women to participate in beauty pageants?

1. How did you get interested in competing in pageants?
2. What motivates you to participate? As a woman, you can do anything... so why this?

Research Question 2: Pageantry Support for Feminist Ideals: In what ways do these women believe pageantry to be supportive or unsupportive of feminist ideals?

- Feminist ideals include such things as equality, fairness, empowerment of women, seeing women as strong and capable.
- 3. Do you believe that pageantry promotes such feminist ideals? Why or why not?
- Miss USA rounds include swimsuit, interview, and evening gown.

4. How do you feel about the *interview portion* of the competition and its relationship to empowering women?
 5. How do you feel about the *evening gown* competition and its relationship to empowering women?
 6. How do you feel about the *swimsuit competition* and its relationship to empowering women?
- A Miss America sponsor stated “*Educated women do not parade around in swimsuits*”
7. How do you feel about this sponsor’s statement?
 8. How do you feel about Miss America removing the swimsuit portion of the competition?

Research Question 3: Self-Identification as a Feminist: Do these women see themselves as feminists? Why or why not?

- In the 2017 Miss USA competition, the three finalists were asked “*What do you consider feminism to be, and do you consider yourself a feminist?*”
9. How would you respond to this question?
- Feminism has been defined similarly by different sources. Many point to equality and equal opportunity between men and women. Encyclopedia Britannica defines feminism as “the belief in social, economic, political equality amongst the sexes.”
10. Hearing this definition, would you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
 11. Do you use the word “feminism” to describe yourself to others? Why or why not?
 - a. And if you don’t use “feminist” to describe yourself publicly, do you use another term?

- b. Or do you identify deep down as a feminist or with feminist values?
- Your personal identification with feminism and your participation in pageants:
 - 12a. For those women who see themselves as a feminist or supporting feminist ideals:

How does seeing yourself as a feminist/someone who supports feminist ideals impact your experience in pageant life?

or
 - 12b. For those women who do not see themselves as a feminist or supporting feminist ideals: How does *not* seeing yourself as a feminist/not supporting feminist ideals impact your experience in pageant life?
- 13. Do you feel like your participation in Miss USA is helping or hurting women's progress? Please explain.

Research Question 4: Experience with anti-feminist critique: What has been their experience with those who might suggest what they are doing (i.e., participating in a beauty pageant) is not in alignment with feminist ideals?

- Critics have long questioned beauty pageants, often saying that they reinforce the idea that women should be valued primarily for their physical appearance. There has been a lot of criticism by feminist groups or women who identify themselves as feminists. For example: "They teach young people, especially young women, that they must conform to inconceivable standards of beauty." or "The contests are an antiquated reminder of exactly what we don't want for women, and they should have no place in our future."
- 14. What are your thoughts on this? Do you agree? Disagree?
- 15. Has anyone ever told you that your participation is "anti-feminist" in that you are not advancing women or feminist ideals?

16. How did you respond? Or How would you respond if that happened?

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

- Please feel free to share any other thoughts related to pageants and feminism.
- What recommendations do you have for how pageants could better support feminist ideals?

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Julia Van Steenberghe was born in Bangor, Maine, and graduated in 2016 from Old Town High School with Highest Honors. She received a Bachelor of Science degree in both Elementary Education and Child Development and Family Relations in May 2020 graduating Summa Cum Laude. As an undergraduate she was actively involved in student life as a member of the Cheer Team and Alpha Phi Sorority. She was a member of several Honors Societies, including Phi Kappa Phi, Kappa Delta Pi, and Order of Omega. Julia competed in Miss USA in 2020 representing the State of Maine.

Julia worked as a graduate assistant for the University of Maine Office of Admissions while attending graduate school. During her time as a graduate student she served as Phi Kappa Phi's student Vice President, as a Senator for Graduate Student Government and as the Graduate Student Representative on the Faculty Senate Library Committee. In addition, she served as Alpha Phi's recruitment advisor, instructed a first-year seminar course, and taught fitness classes at the Campus Recreation Center. She was hired in Spring 2022 as the Recruitment and Engagement Specialist for the University of Maine's Graduate School of Business. Julia was named the 2022 Outstanding Student in Human Development. She is a candidate for the Master of Science degree in Human Development from The University of Maine in May 2022.