

**Beyond the Crown: A Qualitative Research Study on Pageant Women and the Looking-Glass Self**

**By**

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M.A. Thesis

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I have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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**Approvals**

This Masters Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the  
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### **Abstract**

Pageantry has existed in society for hundreds of years and is still prevalent within society today. Pageant contestants voluntarily compete in systems to hear what judges have to say about their intellect, talent, and poise. However, the opinions of the judges seem to not be the true influential voice in a pageant queen's life. Previous research has reported that it is the people closest to us that have the most positive or devastating impact on the way we view ourselves. The question this study sought to answer was, "How have the opinions of others had an impact on the self-image of pageant women?" This study compiled 14 questions that were crafted through the lens of the communication theory, the looking-glass self. After interviewing 11 former pageant queens, the data was then analyzed through Creswell's six-step process. The results found that family, coaches, directors, fellow pageant contestants, and the pageant industry were the most influential voices in a pageant queen's life over the course of her reign. The opinion of the judges was not an opinion listed by any of the interviewees to have had a lasting impact on their self-image. These findings implicate how we speak to our inner circle and how they speak about us has the greatest level of influence over the negative or positive formation of one's self-concept.

*Keywords:* pageantry, pageant queens, looking-glass self theory, self-image, self-esteem, qualitative, communication, interviews

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First and foremost, all glory is given to God. He was my greatest strength and comfort over the course of this thesis project. Hebrews 12:1-3 states,

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (NIV)

This project revolved around how the opinions of others shape our self-image. To define my own self-image, I look to the work Jesus did on the cross. In the Lord's eyes, I have shed the shame of being a sinner and am eternally defined as being His child. I am saved, chosen, and deeply loved by the Lord. This project will be marked as milestone in my life as I gladly persevere for the sake of my savior, Jesus Christ.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

The greatest controversy within pageantry has always been whether it celebrates young women for their beauty and accomplishments or if the competition cattle brands them (Little & Little, 2023). Some may believe that pageantry is an outdated practice, rarely celebrated in today's society, but recent statistics show that over 250,000 American children participate in pageants each year (Lindner, 2023). This statistic emphasizes that pageantry is still alive and well within the United States. Such a significant number of children involved in this competitive arena causes questions to be raised about the psychological, social, and emotional impact that pageants may be having on the impressionable minds of these young women. These women voluntarily sign up to be scored by a panel of judges, all with the hope of walking away with a sparkly new crown and the incredible opportunities that come along with it. Pageantry plays a unique role in adapting to everchanging societal beauty norms, political ideologies, and markets while simultaneously being an influencing factor in the beauty practices of viewing audiences and social media followers alike (Prohaska, 2023). Pageants promise to provide sisterhood, growth in life skills, and unforgettable experiences. Underneath all the glitz and glamour, this research project seeks to understand how the communication directed toward pageant girls may have impacted their self-image long after they give up the crown.

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to analyze how the opinions of others have an impact on the self-image of pageant girls. Girls enter pageantry with the clear understanding that they will be walking onstage to be judged. The problem is that the judgments do not end there. If they win the title, these women are expected to become the face of their pageant's brand and encounter all the judgments that come along with it, both in person and on social media. This

chapter is an introduction to the rest of the study. The contents of this chapter include the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the significance of the study, the research question, and ends with a summary.

### **Background**

The following study observes how the opinions of others can aid in the formation of a person's self-image. Women who had competed in pageantry were selected as the focus of this study because of the unique acknowledgment they make to be judged when they agree to compete. Within pageantry, girls are taught how to present their bodies, learn skills that constitute a winning talent, and how to speak in a way that will win them the crown. Banet-Weiser (1999) takes this thought even further by postulating that the previous skills these women have learned are all specific forms of gendered labor that include investments in the self through consumer capitalism. The following section will address the history of pageantry.

### **Historical Overview**

Beautiful women have been celebrated in the United States, tracing back to the "May Day" tradition. Here, young women were selected to serve as symbols of bounty and community ideals (American Experience, 2019). The first modern pageant in America was introduced by Phineas T. Barnum in the 1850s (American Experience, 2019). Barnum is most notably known for his circus of odd and curious things. Barnum hosted national contests where flowers, dogs, chickens and even children were put on display for judges to choose a winner. Barnum thought he could do something similar with women, calling for all the "handsomest" girls to compete. This proved to be a huge disappointment, as no respectable girl in the Victorian era would put herself on display like that (American Experience, 2019). Barnum then had the genius idea to adapt to the culture, calling for women to submit a picture of themselves to be displayed at the

museum (American Experience, 2019). Whichever 10 received the most votes, an oil painting would be commissioned of them, and it would be included in a fine arts book published out of France called, *World's Book of Female Beauty*. Although the museum was sold before any of this came to pass, it did open the door for technology to bridge the gap between low-brow entertainment with the appeal of high-brow culture (American Experience, 2019).

In the coming decades, America's idea of beauty began to shift. The growing cosmetics industry in the 1920s emerged around the same time as pageant culture. The very first Miss America pageant was hosted on the Atlantic City Boardwalk, in 1921, to entice tourists to stay in the city past Labor Day (American Experience, 2019). For weeks, the pageant was promoted up and down the East Coast, promising to showcase "thousands of the most beautiful girls in the land" (American Experience, 2019, para. 20). Ultimately, this drew a crowd of over 100,000 spectators who watched as 16-year-old Margaret Gorman of Washington D.C. was crowned and wrapped in an American flag. Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, would be quoted in the *New York Times* remarking, "She represents the type of womanhood America needs — strong, red-blooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood. It is in her type that the hope of the country rests" (American Experience, 2019, para. 22). This is a prime example of what would come to be expected of the women crowned as Miss America for the next 100 years. Did Margaret know that when she was crowned, she would bear the responsibility of representing the type of women America needed at that moment in time? As our country has changed and culture has shifted, so have the women in our society. With the invention of television, millions of people have watched the Miss America pageant every year, waiting to see what the "ideal" woman looks like (*Our History*, n.d.). Miss America has taken her place alongside other media images that seemed to define America to the

world, and the women onstage “embodied the dreams of every young girl” (*Our History*, n.d., para. 9).

Miss America is a prime example of the magnitude of expectation that is demanded from pageant girls. Bartky (1997) emphasizes the fact that women, in general, experience constant body surveillance and are expected to adhere to cultural ideals of beauty and femininity to avoid stigma and sanctions. Pageants take this one step further by being “fields of active cultural production” where cultural standards about beauty are constricted, displayed, and reinforced (King-O’Riain, 2008, p. 74). With all these expectations placed upon their shoulders, it leads people to wonder what lasting effects those heavy expectations can have on a young person. The purpose of this study is to see how the opinions of others ultimately impacts the way pageant women view themselves.

### **Societal Impact**

Once a woman is crowned as a new queen, overnight, it seems as though the expectations of the organization and the opinions of people online can judge how “successful” her reign is. What will be studied in this project is how the communication with these women, whether by the judges, friends, family members, or strangers on social media, had an impact on how they now perceive themselves. It is important to note that these are real women, who had to face very real backlash from the public because of their race, skin color, religion, or sexual histories which will be showcased in the following examples. Miss America has a deep history that spans over 100 years, where contestants have been judged on their ability to embody femininity and become relentlessly committed to consumption and commodity culture (Prohaska, 2023). For this section, former Miss America case studies will be used to illustrate the point that pageant queens are judged and discriminated against long after they step off stage. For example, in 1945, Bess

Myerson won Miss America right after the conclusion of World War II. The pageant asked her to change her name to something that sounded less Jewish, but she refused (Independent, 2015). In a way, it seemed as though the pageant was asking her to give up a piece of her own identity and take on a new identity as Miss America. Throughout her year as Miss America, she faced hate and anti-Semitism (Independent, 2015). In the late 60s, protestors used the pageant as a symbol for everything wrong with the treatment of women in America. Incidentally, feminists also targeted the women competing in the pageant, saying they were part of a “degrading, mindless-boob-girlie symbol” (Goodman, 2017, para. 6). The first black Miss America, Vanessa Williams, was crowned in 1984. Williams went on to receive hate mail and death threats throughout her reign and was forced to resign after unauthorized nude photos were published of her (American Experience, 2019). In 2009, former chief executive officer of Miss America, Sam Haskell, repeatedly spread false rumors about the sex life of the current Miss America, Mallory Hagan (Konstantinides, 2023). These rumors soon spread all throughout the tight knit organization. Claire Adkisson, Miss New York 2010, said, "We started to hear allegations that Mallory had slept with someone in every state she was visiting as Miss America, which is categorically untrue" (Konstantinides, 2023, para. 12). Hagan ultimately confided in another unnamed Miss America that the rumors made her feel as though the pageant's legacy was more important than her own feelings (Konstantinides, 2023).

Another aspect of the title is that Miss America winners are expected to promote not only their platforms but also the organization through social media. This has opened them up to intense cyberbullying over the years which can cause profound psychosocial issues such as depression, anxiety, severe isolation, and suicide (Ryan, 2022b). Even as recent as 2013, when Nina Davuluri won, she quickly became a target for racism and xenophobia on Twitter

(*Understanding Twitter Racism: The 2014 Miss America Pageant*, 2016). As an Indian American, she was often misidentified as Middle Eastern and associated with terrorist organizations (*Understanding Twitter Racism: The 2014 Miss America Pageant*, 2016). But what if the women who were chosen to wear the Miss America crown not only represented the ideal women in America's current culture but also had to face the dark side of the current culture as well? The question remains if the opinions of others impact the way these pageant women see themselves.

Many little girls dream of growing up and winning the Miss USA or Miss America crown (*Our History*, n.d.). For Cheslie Kryst, it was her mother inspired her love of pageantry and piqued her interest in competing (*Thoughts of Miss USA 2019*, n.d.). Cheslie's mother was the first black woman to win Mrs. North Carolina, and Cheslie was determined to follow in her footsteps (*Thoughts of Miss USA 2019*, n.d.). She began competing in pageants when she was a teenager and then took a break to attend to University of South Carolina (nytimes.com, 2022b). She then went on to earn her masters of business of administration and law degree from Wake Forest University (*Thoughts of Miss USA 2019*, n.d.). In 2019, she returned to pageantry and won Miss North Carolina USA and then went on to earn the title of Miss USA. She was 28 years old when she won, making her the oldest Miss USA to wear the crown (nytimes.com, 2022b). She did very well on the universal stage, placing in the top 10. When she gave up her Miss USA title, she took her dream job as a correspondent for "Extra." Throughout her reign, she was told that she was not pretty enough to be Miss USA or that she had a man's body (Bryant, 2023). April Simpkins, Cheslie's mother, revealed that her daughter kept her battle with depression private in part because of the negative comments she received on social media (Bryant, 2023). Although Cheslie admitted to struggling with internet bullying, it still came as a complete shock when she

decided to take her own life on January 30, 2022. This was a girl who was seemingly successful at every stage in life. She came from a loving family, was a college athlete, earned her law degree, won one of the most prestigious pageant titles in the country, and found a new career afterward. And yet, it seems that the perceptions and opinions of others about her body were enough to change how she too saw her worth. These words were potentially powerful enough that it was a contributing factor to why she decided to jump from the balcony of her high-rise apartment. This study sought to understand how the communication of others can affect the self-image of pageant women. Words have the power to both empower other's self-esteem, as well as tear it down. The tragic story of Cheslie Kryst is a prime example that this project is worth researching.

These cases suggest that pageant queens have been discriminated against since the very beginning, long before social media was ever created. However, it seems as though social media is the main avenue being used to discriminate and discredit the winners, while one of their main responsibilities as title holders is to promote the organization on social media. Social media is a vast communication tool that affects the lives of over five billion people worldwide (Chaffey, 2024). Surveys suggest that over 93% of teens, which is approximately 37 million teenagers, use social media in the United States alone (Chaddock, 2024). This research seeks to uncover how the opinions of others, both communicated in person and on social media, take a toll on the self-image of pageant women.

### **Theoretical Overview**

The looking-glass self, created by Charles Cooley, claims that "individuals' self-conceptions result from assimilating the judgments of significant others" (Griffin, 1994, p. 60). Through social interactions, people use others as a "mirror" for how they then see themselves.



This project attempts to understand how the opinions of others communicated to former pageant queens changed the way that they ultimately saw themselves. What complicates this theory and makes it worth studying is the element of social media. The exposure to social media has led to an ever-increasing a greater number of “mirrors” through which a person can view themselves. This has introduced a new concept to the theory, the “cyber” self. Mary Aiken explains,

The cyber self is the version of him or herself a person chooses to present on a digital platform. As in real life, the cyber self may interact with other individuals, receive social feedback, and align to social conformities. However, the differences between cyber self and actual self are profound. (Perception Is Reality: The Looking-Glass Self | Lesley University, n.d., para. 7)

This proposes a new dimension to the research project. Using this theory, this project uncovered how the opinions of others have shaped how former pageant queens now view themselves.

### **The Problem Statement**

This study endeavored to analyze how the opinions of others have an impact on the self-image of pageant women. The problem is that previous research addresses the impact that social media has made on young women or has addressed the physical changes women go through to conform to Western beauty standards. No other study has endeavored to understand the psychological effects that communication has had on the formation of the self-image of women who have competed in pageantry. There also appears to be a gap in the literature on how unrealistic expectations placed on pageant women can have damaging effects that can last for years. This study addresses these gaps in Chapter II: Literature Review. There has been a significant amount of research associated with how pageant queens are societal symbols, how pageantry promotes the thin ideal, and the positive effects that come because of pageantry

involvement. Other studies have looked at the evolution of pageantry and whether it will be able to survive in today's modern climate. This study's focus is specifically on how the communication of others play a direct role in the formation of a beauty queen's self-image. This study is beneficial to the field of research on interpersonal and intrapersonal communication, bringing more awareness to the power of words and the impact they can have on another's self-image.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to analyze how the opinions of others have an impact on the self-image of pageant women. In Chapter II: Literature Review, this research paper will provide an examination of the current literature revolving around pageantry and the looking-glass self theory. Next, Chapter III: Methodology will provide an in-depth look at how this project was organized and the procures that were put into place to accomplish its goal. Following this, Chapter IV: Findings showcases the results of the study and isolates the relevant parts of data revealed in the interviews. This information created significant data to conclude how the opinions of others shape the self-images of pageant women. Finally, Chapter V: Discussion will create a capstone for this thesis. This chapter provides a meaningful dialogue concerning the data that was collected throughout the study as well as providing a space to put any concluding thoughts on the project.

### **Significance of Study**

First, this study aids in the continuation of research within the field of communication. According to the National Communication Association (2021), "Communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, and is the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through

humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry” (para. 1). The goal of this research study is to examine how the opinions of others impacts the self-image of pageant women. Specifically, this research project revolves around interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. Interpersonal communication can be defined as how pairs of people communicate in personal relationships (*What Is Communication?*, 2021). Intrapersonal communication can be defined as “communication with one’s self, and that may include self-talk, acts of imagination and visualization, and even recall and memory” (McLean, 2005, para. 1). A communication theory, the looking-glass self, was used to as a theoretical perspective to help render the results of this study. In the end, this study aided the continuation of scholarly work in the field of communication.

Additionally, this study addresses the paradox of pageantry. Many women go into pageantry to gain more self-confidence, compete to gain status, or be recognized for their beauty. Even if that status is achieved, many of these highly successful women leave the pageant industry with worse self-image issues than when they started. To win a pageant, the judges look for girls who are well-rounded and highly successful (Shappert, 2009). This project sought to understand the effects that the validation of winning brought on young women in the pageant world. Pageant girls are not alone in having people voice their opinions of their performance to them. The significance of this study is that virtually everyone in the world has a friend, family member, coworker, or even stranger voice an opinion about who they are. Social media has also created a new wave of opinions for people to be bombarded with. Social media has created an increase of opportunities in the public sphere for women to be pressured to conform to a strict set of beauty norms, particularly the thin ideal (Prohaska, 2023). These pressures have only intensified in recent years, pushing women to invest in their bodies to seek perfection (Elias et

al., 2017). These harsh opinions may be crucial in the formation of a healthy mindset or self-image. This research project interviewed 11 former pageant queens, and uncovered how outside opinions shaped the way they saw themselves.

This study also helped establish whether pageantry still has a place in today's society. Miss USA and Miss America have recently both tried to adapt to the changing times. In 2018, Miss America decided to eliminate its swimsuit competition even though that sector of competition is what the pageant was founded upon over 100 years ago. Miss USA decided to rebrand as a multi-cultural, "pro-women" pageant (Prohaska, 2023). Transgender women are now eligible to compete in Miss USA as well as married women and mothers (Team, 2022). Both transitions were to demonstrate that the systems are listening to current political conversations and attempting to provide a space for women to achieve upward mobility. Miss Universe 2020, Andrea Mezza was quoted saying,

A few people are against these changes because they always wanted to see a single beautiful woman who is available for a relationship. They always wanted to see a woman that from the outside looks so perfect that she is almost unreachable. The former is sexist, and the latter is unrealistic. (Keller, 2022, para. 11)

This quote highlights an expectation that has historically been placed on pageant queens, that she must be so perfect she almost doesn't seem real. These expectations of perfection are being placed on normal girls who live relatively regular lives. Everyone has difficult days, but when the opinion makes the girls feel they are not allowed to showcase those hard days, those expectations may have damaging effects that could last for years. No matter how inclusive a pageant attempts to be, at the end of the show there can only be one girl crowned. If the interviews prove that pageantry was more detrimental to these women's psyche than helpful,

potentially all the recent changes in the pageant world are simply an attempt to save an industry that should die off. If the interviews reveal that pageantry helped mold these women into successful members of society, then maybe we should continue to adapt pageantry so it can survive in these times.

It may be easy to view pageantry as primarily awarding idealized versions of femininity on a competitive stage, but pageantry may be resonating with something deeper. Pageants are held all around the world and yet remain incredibly similar to one another. Historians Colleen Ballerino Cohen and Richard Wilk write, "Whether the title is for Miss Universe or the Crooked Tree Cashew Queen, these contests showcase values, concepts, and behavior that exist at the center of a group's sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender, and place" (American Experience, 2019, para. 29).

This paper uncovered that there is something deeper occurring on and off the pageant stage for these women. As these women represent systems, ideas and opinions are being thrown at them that may uplift or threaten the core value of who they truly are, long after they no longer wear the pageant sash. Pageants tend to underscore the importance of beauty queens as symbols within society. Sending women out to compete on an international level plays a part in the world's cultural economy (American Experience, 2019). In 1994, women from India won both the Miss World pageant as well as the Miss Universe pageant, representing that some of the most beautiful women in the world come from India. These two girls created a way for India to stake a claim in international commercial culture and became symbols of national pride (American Experience, 2019). Both on a national and international stage, participants, organizers, and audiences are looking for shared values and a way to feel national pride (American Experience, 2019). People may dismiss pageants as trivial and vain, but what keeps audiences captivated is

the mysterious process of how an individual girl can somehow become a beacon of hope and a shared national identity. In the end, this research paper wanted to know the positive and negative lasting effects on self-image that come along with becoming a beacon of hope for that society.

### **Research Question**

For this qualitative research study, the following research question was proposed:

RQ1: How do the opinions of others impact the self-image of pageant women?

### **Summary**

This thesis is a qualitative study accomplished through the use of 11 interviews. The purpose of this research was to examine how the opinions of others have an impact on the self-image of pageant women. This study is of importance to the field of communication as it relates to how important perceptions and opinions can be in the formation of self-worth. This chapter included the relevant background of the study, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, and the research question.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

### **Overview**

This chapter evaluates the origins of pageantry, the creation of Miss America, and the current climate of today's pageant culture. Additionally, this chapter will take a deep dive into what previous research has to say about the positives and negatives of the pageant world. More specifically, the positives of pageantry will include topics such as the following: how pageantry allows women to become symbols of society, can cultivate a larger conversation that transcends pageantry, promotes self-discipline, and provides a platform for women to accomplish their dreams. The negatives of pageantry discussed in previous research will center around the promotion of the thin ideal, mental health troubles, body dissatisfaction, and the effect these competitions have on the parent-child relationship. Social media's effect on young women will also be evaluated and discussed as running a social media account is a major responsibility for titleholders.

Next, this literature review will provide previous research done using the communication theory, the looking-glass self. No other study has endeavored to understand the psychological effects that communication has had on the formation of the self-image of women who have competed in pageantry. There also appears to be a gap in the literature on how unrealistic expectations placed on pageant women can have damaging effects that can last for years. This gap in research will be filled with the completion of this project. This thesis project addressed the question, "How have the opinions of others impacted the self-image of women who grew up in pageantry?" This literature review outlines the history of pageantry and the prior research that has so far been done within the world of pageantry.

### **Related Literature**

## **The History of Pageantry**

This section will look at the history behind pageantry and how society has always placed overwhelming expectations on its beauty queens. Throughout its history, pageantry has been a mode to define proper femininity for women within a particular nation. Pageantry promotes specific morals, practices, and aesthetics, while stigmatizing others (Prohaska, 2023). The relationship between beauty and competition can potentially be traced back to ancient Greece (Editor in Chief, 2019). The fictional story of a mortal man named Paris, written by Apollodorus, soon became a legend. As the story goes, Paris was called upon by the goddesses to judge who was the most beautiful (American Experience, 2019). Each goddess offered different brides to entice Paris to choose her: Hera, goddess of marriage, vowed to give him a kingdom, Athena, goddess of war, offered him victory in battle, and Aphrodite, goddess of beauty, promised him the hand of Helen (American Experience, 2019). Paris could not resist obtaining Helen of Troy, the most beautiful mortal of the time, and promptly chose Aphrodite as the winner of the dispute. This subsequently started the Trojan War, memorializing a legend that highlights the price of comparing beauty with others (American Experience, 2019). Now, as for the Greeks themselves, there is no historical evidence that they ever held beauty contests for women. The closest relation to one was called the *euandra*, “a contest for physique”, that judged men at the yearly Athenian festival (American Experience, 2019, para. 2). The most direct correlation to the historical creation of pageantry dates back to European festivals during the medieval era. Queens were always selected at English May Day celebrations. May Day celebrations in America looked similar; young pretty women were selected to participate in public celebrations as symbols of bounty and community ideals (American Experience, 2019). Both George Washington and



General Lafayette experienced being greeted and celebrated by women dressed in white as they headed home from war (American Experience, 2019).

These examples are mentioned to illustrate that women have been chosen and celebrated for their beauty for centuries. The first modern beauty pageant was introduced in the 1850's by America's greatest showman, Phineas T. Barnum. Barnum was known all over the country for his dime museum located in New York City (American Experience, 2019). After having enormous success with his "national contests" where dogs, children, flowers, and chickens had all been showcased and judged, Barnum had the grand idea to do something similar with women. His dreams of the "most handsome ladies in America" competition being well received were quickly dashed (American Experience, 2019, para. 4). Women in the Victorian era could not be enticed to publicly display themselves, no matter how pretty the winning tiara was. As an alternate plan, Barnum changed the competition so that women could send in photographs of themselves to be judged. The winning photos would be turned into oil portraits that would be reproduced in a "fine arts" book (American Experience, 2019, para. 5). Although Barnum sold his museum before this new type of pageant could take place, it pioneered a new type of commercial entertainment (American Experience, 2019).

For the next few decades, picture contests would become widespread as a classy way for women to have their beauty recognized (American Experience, 2019). One of the most popular occurred in 1905 when promoters of the St. Louis Exposition sought out the city newspaper to select a young lady to become the representative from their city to hold a pageant title at the Exposition (American Experience, 2019). According to the reports, over 40,000 women threw their hats in the ring to win the title (Editor in Chief, 2019).

### ***Miss America's History***

As the times changed in America, so did people's attitudes about beauty pageants (American Experience, 2019). By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, beach resorts began to hold pageants to entertain their vacationers. In 1921, as a ploy to lure tourists to extend their stay past Labor Day, Atlantic City organizers rallied together to put on the very first Miss America pageant (Editor in Chief, 2019). Stressing that the girls should look youthful and wholesome, the Businessman's League sent out ads for women to submit their photos from Pittsburgh to Washington D.C. (American Experience, 2019). Whoever won their local newspaper competition would then travel to Atlantic City to compete in a bathing suit parade. This "Bathers' Revue" caused quite a stir because the Atlantic City beach had an ordinance in place that forbade women to bare their knees at the beach (American Experience, 2019, para. 17). The swimsuit competition now communicated a confusing message of both control and power (Collins, 2020). A study named "It Takes Work Ethic to Get Two-piece Ready: Neoliberalism, Postfeminist Healthism, and Aesthetic Labor in U.S. Pageantry", reported that pageant participants must embody respectability and purity while also being sexualized (Prohaska, 2023). The winner would be chosen not only by the panel of judges but also by the volume of applause she received. On September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1921, a crowd of 100,000 people chose Margaret Gorman of Washington D.C. as their winner (American Experience, 2019). As she was crowned and wrapped in an American flag, Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, would be quoted saying, "She represents the type of womanhood America needs — strong, red-blooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood. It is in her type that the hope of the country rests" (American Experience, 2019, para. 22). This seems to illustrate that from the very first Miss America pageant, there was always a strong expectation that whoever won was considered the nation's ideal woman. Margaret Gorman was

16 years old, judged only on what she looked like in a swimsuit, and yet was deemed as the prime example of what America needs in a woman. Faria and Fluri (2022) describe it as “the beauty of these participants must integrate a set of apparent contradictory expectations; to be a virginal and sexy, smart but demure, entrepreneurial but committed to caring roles in the home” (p. 5).

The pageant occurred almost exactly one year after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which allowed women the right to vote (Collins, 2020). It is almost ironic that a year after women were given the right to vote, a new form of pageantry emerged where women in turn were the thing being voted upon. In the late 1960s, the Miss America pageant was used as a tool by feminists to protest everything unjust happening to women in the United States. “Pageant officials have often considered feminists to be enemies of women's agency, envious of pageant contestants and out of touch with the modern woman” (Prohaska, 2023, para. 9). In the 90s, pageant contestants spoke with media outlets claiming that they had overcome sexism in America and found material success without the aid of feminism because of their merits (Prohaska, 2023). Now, over 100 years since Miss America began, the modern woman has certainly evolved and what America needs to see in a pageant title holder has changed with it. In 2018, Miss America rejected the pageant label and rebranded itself as a scholarship organization. Miss America wanted to modernize itself by emphasizing how its system empowers women to achieve their goals based on their talent and merit (Prohaska, 2023).

A study was also done by Lavenda (1996) on how a small Minnesota community rejected the label of “beauty pageant” when referring to the local competitions that happen every year even though the actual competition was not altered. This study shows how even on a micro-level within pageantry, systems are wary of the negative connotation that is associated with pageantry

and feminism. Prohaska (2023) reiterated that the neoliberal focus on individual female empowerment rather than social justice feminism has been a constant factor permeating pageant rhetoric from its inception. Miss America has always disagreed with these notions, claiming that the pageant promotes feminism because it uplifts women to practice agency and achieve their goals (Dow,1993; Tice, 2012). Even as the times continue to change, what has not changed is the judgment and expectation that American society places on their beauty queens. This paper will continue to explore the psyche of a pageant queen, and how it is ultimately shaping the ways they may view themselves.

### **Existing Research**

It may be easy to take a shallow look at pageantry, deem it vain or outdated, and move on. This qualitative research paper sought to take a deeper look and truly understand how the opinions of others impact the way these women ultimately see themselves. This competitive arena is not objective like sports. In pageantry, judges score the contestant's outward appearance, intellect, their passions, and then ultimately only crown one girl as the winner (Philip, 2024). The first section will be a recollection of research that has previously listed the positive aspects of pageantry, and how these competitions may set them up for success later in life.

### **The Positives of Pageantry**

This section will address the positive impacts that pageantry has had on individuals. The following topics will include how pageantry allows women to become symbols of society, can cultivate a larger conversation that transcends pageantry, promotes self-discipline, and provides a platform for women to accomplish their dreams.

#### ***Symbols of Society***

Pageantry is not just an American phenomenon. These competitions occur all over the world and serve to promote societal connections (Editor in Chief, 2018). A major positive of pageantry is its knack for bringing people together who are passionate about the same things, and its ability to build bridges between cultures and societies (Editor in Chief, 2018). Historians Colleen Ballerino Cohen and Richard Wilk remarked on how similar pageants are to one another throughout our incredibly diverse world (American Experience, 2019). The contests showcase values, concepts, and behavior that exist at the center of a group's sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender, and place (American Experience, 2019). Regardless of whether a person supports the concept of pageantry, everyone intrinsically feels a sense of pride when their state does well on the Miss America stage. The beauty queen is no longer solely herself; she now bears the responsibility of representing a group of people, their culture, and their ideals. International pageants create national aspirations (American Experience, 2019). Cultural scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser has suggested that many countries send contestants to pageants to make a claim (Editor in Chief, 2019). These contestants now play a part in the world's cultural economy, and these countries now claim inclusion in the "family of nations" that makes up the international community (American Experience, 2019, para. 38).

People look for ways to share values and feel a sense of pride. In 1994, women from India won both the Miss World and the Miss Universe pageants (American Experience, 2019). It seemed as though people all over India celebrated this win as if they were the ones onstage. This allowed India to say that they held a monopoly over the most beautiful women on the planet. In 1996, pageant organizers and sponsors of the Miss World pageant chose India to be the host nation of the competition (Prohaska, 2023). They made this decision because India had several international winners in the previous years, and this showed the nation's modernization and

commitment to a Western feminine disciplinary project (Prohaska, 2023). India's success in hosting the Miss World pageant cemented the country as a major player in the world economy (Prohaska, 2023). This influenced global companies to expand their markets in India and mold the image of the "New Indian Women" as a girl who is empowered through consumption (Prohaska, 2023, para. 14).

Other countries have also capitalized on the intrigue that pageantry brings. The Miss Uganda Tourism pageant was able to use its platform to highlight the beauty of its nation and its women (Prohaska, 2023). The Miss Uganda Tourism winners are treated as beautiful ambassadors of the country's tourism industry (Prohaska, 2023). Pageant contestants in Uganda are similar to contestants in the United States in the fact that contestants are expected to be well-rounded, well-educated, and conform to Western beauty standards (Prohaska, 2023). It is a mistake to immediately dismiss pageantry as frivolous when it seems as if they have the power to turn an individual woman into a symbol of national identity, group values, and pride.

A beauty queen is a woman chosen by a group of judges to serve as a symbolic representation of their collective identity to a larger, often national, audience. A paper called "Making the Perfect Queen: The Cultural Production of Identities in Beauty Pageants," suggests that a pageant queen is shaped, selected, and even *produced* within the social context of the institution of the beauty pageant (King-O'Riain, 2007). These competitions can be seen as cultural forms of collective self-identity as well as embodied production points of cultural identity. In other words, pageant girls are not just chosen but also made (King-O'Riain, 2007). King-O'Riain (2007) believes that beauty pageants allow us to examine meaning-making within fields of institutions. Seeing culture as a socially constructed product reveals the processes that go into their making. In the Philippines, pageants are not seen as an exploitation of beauty or the

female gender (Farrales, 2018). Instead, this country sees pageantry as part of their heritage. Pageants have always been found in the “Reyes” during town fiestas and the “sagalas” during May festivals. These queens are part of Filipino culture because they include the pageant participant’s entire family (Farrales, 2018).

### *Cultivates a Larger Conversation*

Although pageantry primarily celebrates an idealized version of femininity, there have been occurrences within pageantry that have highlighted the need for a bigger conversation. By the 1950s, pageants were occurring all over the world as a part of decolonization and rising nationalism (Editor in Chief, 2019). A national dialogue on race was generated because of the 1996 Miss Italy pageant (Editor in Chief, 2019). A black Caribbean immigrant named Denny Mendez was awarded the title and struck controversy throughout the country over national identity and what it means to be truly Italian. Commentators everywhere used the Mendez win as a platform to discuss the issue of racial tolerance in Italy (Editor in Chief, 2019).

Additionally, in 1996, the Miss World Contest took place in Bangalore, India. The competition made international news as feminists and nationalist protesters picketed the pageant and threatened mass suicide (American Experience, 2019). This occurred only two years after the people of India celebrated holding a monopoly in the pageant world. Now, they rioted, claiming that pageants introduced Western ideals into their Indian culture. Their message equated to the fact that they believed pageantry degraded women and showcased them as products to be auctioned off (American Experience, 2019). Now, whether this protest has any merit is not the current argument. What is being argued is that pageantry has become a positive tool to magnify both the good and bad that is taking place within a country’s society. It seems as

though pageantry has the power to bond people together while also showing where the country is being torn apart at the seams.

### *Cultivates Self-Discipline*

Another positive aspect of pageantry is that it encourages an incredible amount of self-discipline. Banet-Weiser (2017) believes pageantry upholds and continually creates the feminine ideal. This researcher goes on to say that preparing for the pageant stage “functions as a disciplinary technique that not only produces but *reproduces* the feminine body” (Banet-Weiser, 2017, p. 273). Banet-Weiser (2017) sees pageant queens as setting the standard of ideal for other women. If the pageant queens find success in working out and living a clean lifestyle, other women will want to emulate this and follow, anticipating their social mobility. A qualitative study named “It Takes Work Ethic to Get Two-Piece Ready” conducted its research through interviews with current pageant queens. One of the results from their study concluded that “In a climate where many major U.S. pageants claim to celebrate body diversity, the thin body continues to be valued not only for its aesthetic appeal but also because it demonstrates a woman's willingness to commit to self-entrepreneurship” (Prohaska, 2023, para. 29). This demonstrates that pageants push women towards a disciplined lifestyle. Prohaska (2023) also found in their study that pageantry reinforces broader neoliberal values, specifically self-reliance, continuous improvement, and participation in consumer culture to reach their goals.

To truly have a shot at winning the crown, one must be dedicated to growing in several skills if one wants to be competitive. Being beautiful seems to be only a small piece of pageantry. Beyond a pretty face lies poise, grace, and confidence as the contestants walk across the stage. “Contestants typically participate in various segments including evening gown parades, swimsuit/fitness categories, and talent demonstrations. They may also engage in



interviews with judges, where they can discuss their achievements, goals, and views on various topics” (Philip, 2024, para. 3). This demonstrates the women’s ability to speak eloquently and connect with others. Sy et al. (2021) identify one of the most important occupations for a beauty queen to engage in is autodidacticism (self-education). Continually educating themselves is critical for pageant queens so that they can remain well-informed on imperative worldly matters Sy et al. (2021). Their interpersonal communication skills and expression of self are judged through questions, interviews, and public speaking throughout the competition. If a girl is crowned, she will be expected to use her pageant platform to publicly voice her ideals and advocate for her chosen community service organization (Sy et al., 2021). It is important to note that the queen’s opinions are expected to remain in consonance with the pageant system she is representing (Sy et al., 2021).

Talent makes up a 50% of the Miss America winner’s score (*Miss America Pageant Talent Rules: What You Need to Know - Pageant Planet*, n.d.). The limits on what is acceptable are few and far between. In the last decade, the talent competition has strayed away from classical talents such as singing and dancing. Miss Virginia, Camille Schrier broke stereotypes when she was crowned Miss America 2020 after performing a science experiment (Yahr, 2019). Schrier emphasized with her talent that Miss America is someone who needs to educate and can communicate with others (Yahr, 2019). Pageant winners are also expected to be well-spoken as many competitions require a public speaking portion. If pageantry is truly meant to represent the ideal “today’s girl”, then it needs to be someone genuine and appealing to current values. In the last several years, there has been a huge push for women in STEM (Davies, 2023). According to STEM Women, “Women in STEM statistics for science professionals continue to show positive results for growing gender diversity in these roles. Women now make up 44% of the total

science professional workforce” (Davies, 2023, para. 21). This was probably why Schrier resonated so well with the audience. Highly educated with two undergraduate science degrees and currently pursuing her doctorate in pharmacy, Schrier represents the modern woman who knows she can be both beautiful and intelligent. Schrier was able to use her year as Miss America to inspire little girls across the country that they, too, could have a place in the STEM world (Yahr, 2019).

### ***Provides Upward Mobility and Opportunity***

A final positive attribute that this paper would like to highlight about pageantry is its ability to allow today’s youth to find new opportunities and build confidence. The two traditional avenues for a child who grew up in an underprivileged socioeconomic household to change their destiny have always been through academics or athletics (Editor in Chief, 2019). What if pageantry provides a third avenue for children to rise from their circumstances? Winning Miss America results in a \$50,000 scholarship, and winning Miss USA comes with a 6-figure salary. TV show, *Painted Babies*, revealed that one child had amassed over \$100,000 in cash, endorsements, and television deals (Cartwright, 2012). Pageants also offer career-building opportunities (Editor in Chief, 2019). Families in the Philippines see pageants as a place where the responsibility of family, community, and nation all intersect. A study named “Repurposing Beauty Pageants: The Colonial Geographies of Filipina Pageants in Canada” interviewed a Filipino woman on why families in the Philippines want their daughters to compete in pageants. The woman states,

In the Philippines, [they] join a beauty contest because[...] it is status and eventually, they might become an actress, [...] a model. The Philippines is a poor country, and so people capitalize on inborn resources. If you are beautiful, okay, there’s your treasure

chest. People will say oh do not worry, you are poor, you plow the field, you have a beautiful daughter, that will save you. (Farrales, 2018, para. 28)

In the Ecuadorian Amazon, Indigenous pageants have become the ideal place for women to begin a career in politics. A study called “Becoming Politicians: Indigenous Pageants as Training Sites for Public Life,” found after interviewing several pageant contestants, that while many do not imagine themselves as politicians, pageants are an incredible training ground if one wants to enter into the political sphere (Erazo & Benitez, 2022). Indigenous pageants allow contestants to be more comfortable with public speaking, performing, and taking bold stances on political issues. Indigenous pageants as seen as sites of “becoming” (Erazo & Benitez, 2022, para. 1).

In the United States, many celebrities who have found fame started on the pageant stage. Before creating her billion-dollar empire, Oprah Winfrey was crowned Miss Black Tennessee in 1971 (Tschinkel, 2019). To this day, Winfrey still attributes that title as the reason why she was able to land her first job at a radio station (Tschinkel, 2019). One of the most famous news anchors on the planet, Dianne Sawyer, also got her start in pageantry when she won the Kentucky Junior Miss pageant in 1963 (Tschinkel, 2019). There could be a correlation between pageantry and Hollywood. Whatever “it factors” that are honed on a pageant stage may be the same thing necessary to stand out in the entertainment industry. Eva Longoria, Priyanka Chopra, Carrie Underwood, Demi Lovato, Gal Gadot, and Lynda Carter are just a few of Hollywood’s most successful entertainers who first started in pageantry (Tschinkel, 2019).

### **The Dark Side of Pageantry**

This section will outline the negative effects that previous research has associated with pageantry. Topics discussed will include pageantry’s promotion of the thin ideal, mental health

troubles, body dissatisfaction, and the effect these competitions have on the parent-child relationship.

### *Pageantry's Promotion of the Thin Ideal*

While the glitz and glam may initially be enticing, this paper will explore the dark side of the pageantry and the lasting effects the competition may have on a person's psyche. Sy et al.'s (2021) study raises concerns that rhetoric in the pageant world will always promote that the end justifies the means. This means that pageant directors may choose to ignore any harmful or unhealthy side effects that their pageant may be creating if it means they are producing winners. Concerns about body image are strengthened in a society where ultrathin fashion models, diet manuals, and the fitness industry determine beauty and thinness standards (Flannery-Schroeder & Chrisler, 1996). Therefore, the influence of entities such as beauty pageants for young girls and their relation to thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to eating and body image seems like a worthwhile line of research. Pageants seem to communicate the message that beauty is more important than talent. Prohaska's (2023) study emphasizes that aesthetic labor that reifies appearance norms and postfeminist healthism correlates to being a good citizen. The women who are best at embodying these traits are seen as entitled to opportunities for investment. This creates the narrative in society that if women do not fit the beauty norm, then they do not deserve the same opportunities as the women who do fit the norm.

In recent years, pageants such as Miss America have taken strides to eliminate this perception by restructuring their entire organization. As a whole, the beauty pageant industry still creates a divide in society between the "haves" and the "have-nots" (Editor in Chief, 2018). The winner is supposed to be the "ideal" woman, seemingly unattainable to the average person. Over the last century, Western culture has shifted to equating female attractiveness with thinness

(Editor in Chief, 2018). Prohaska's (2023) study found that pageantry is a site that directly reinforces and further perpetuates the connection between thinness and health. A drive to pursue thinness and the pressure to achieve it may stem from sociocultural messages being presented to young girls through popular media. Srivastava's (2020) study looked at the various beauty ideals that globalization has created for women at the international, national, and local levels. This study found that pageantry feeds into the thin beauty ideal. Srivastava (2020) states that the world has never seen a Fat Miss World or Short Miss World. These aesthetics are very normal in the real world and yet they are completely excluded from the women who seem to win in pageants (Srivastava, 2020). Srivastava's research ultimately called attention to the fact that the global image of being thin, tall, and fair is idealized in our world today.

Another study was done that showed the trend toward thinness within Playboy centerfolds from 1960 through 1978. The models in Playboy were shown to have a Body Mass Index (BMI) that was decreasing throughout the years, when in reality, there was a significant increase in the average American female's weight, creating a huge discrepancy between the "ideal" woman's weight and what the everyday woman looked like (Garner, Garfinkle, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980). This data was compared to the Miss America winners during the years 1979-1985. The results were that 60% of the winners weighed less than 85% of the weight reported by the Society of Actuaries for their age and height (Wiseman et al., 1992). This desire to be so far removed from what it looked like to be a realistic version of a woman was bound to result in mental health issues. A study done by Balenger (2021) on the Miss USA and Miss America systems found that one-third of the participants had contemplated plastic surgery, worked out five to seven days a week, and followed a strict diet before stepping onto the pageant stage. Pageant queens are considered to be the embodiment of the nation's values and ideal

femininity. If pageants push the idea that anyone can be thin and healthy through hard work alone, it creates the idea that women who cannot or do not want to conform to those beauty standards will face discrimination. Women who have larger body sizes are labeled as lazy, immoral citizens (Prohaska, 2023). There are separate pageants for women who do not align with traditional Western beauty standards. This fact reinforces the idea that these ideals of femininity favor and uplift the young, thin, able-bodied individuals within society (Prohaska, 2023).

### ***Mental Health and Body Dissatisfaction***

One study sought to compare childhood pageant participation with adult mental health, specifically eating disorders, lower self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and depression. Eleven women who were childhood pageant contestants were matched with eleven women who were the same age and BMI. The results were being a former pageant queen may manifest in adult body dissatisfaction, interpersonal distrust, and impulse dysregulation, but not bulimic behaviors, body perception, depression, and self-esteem (Wonderlich, etc., 2005). Another study sought to connect pageantry to self-esteem issues and eating disorders. In a study called “Differences Between Preadolescent Female Beauty Pageant Participants and Nonparticipants on Eating Behaviors and Body Image,” 23 pre-adolescent pageant girls and 23 non-pageant girls were asked to complete both the Eating Behaviors and Body Image Test (EBBIT) for Preadolescent Girls and the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (CSCS). Guiling (2000), predicted that the results of pageant girls' association with self-esteem and eating disorders would be similar to women in dance and sports. Sundgot-Borgen's (1994) research revolved around 600 female athletes. The athletes were divided into groups based on which sport they played. The results of this study discovered that 117 of the athletes were at risk for eating disorders, and 89% of them met the criteria for anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, or anorexia athletica. It was discovered

that athletes who compete in aesthetic and endurance sports (diving, figure skating, sports dance, gymnastics, and rhythmic gymnastics) all had significantly higher amounts of eating disorder struggles in their sports category. Sports that emphasize a need for physical beauty and lean body mass such as ballet and gymnastics also appear to put girls at a higher risk for eating disorders (Brehm & Steffe, 1998). With the knowledge that adolescent girls face pressure within dance and sports to remain thin and “attractive,” Guiling’s (2000) study predicted the same to be true for girls who compete in pageantry. After the participants completed both surveys, the results found that girls who competed in fewer than three pageants were less likely to binge eat than girls who did not compete in pageants, whereas participation in three or more pageants led to higher self-esteem compared to girls who had never competed. It seems that girls who competitively compete in pageantry (three or more pageants) reportedly feel better about their appearance and popularity (Brehm & Steffe, 1998).

Common practices within pageantry may seem tedious or overkill to everyday women. Teeth whitening strips and skin lifting tape are two hidden occupations within modern-day pageants (Sy et al., 2021). A study called “The Dark Side of Occupation Within the Context of Modern-day Beauty Pageants” found that pageant girls have excessively used a drug called glutathione to whiten their skin, partaken in cosmetic surgeries, adhered to risky weight loss regimens, and gotten involved in sex work (Sy et al., 2021). In the Philippines, oral glutathione is warned against but not restricted. Contestants have been known to use this drug because of their desire to become “whiter.” This desire to alter one’s skin tone to conform to a beauty standard poses more than just a physical danger. Valorization of becoming “whiter” to win a pageant title is an issue that continues to plague international pageants today (Sy et al., 2021).

### ***Pageantry’s Effect on the Parent-Child Relationship***

Another factor to be aware of when competing in pageantry is the potential to damage to the parent-child relationship (Editor in Chief, 2018). It seems to be an enormous task for a child to not only compete flawlessly but also to represent the title after winning. Parents of pageant queens invest thousands of dollars into their child's pageant career, hoping that their child will exceed every expectation they have for them (Cartwright, 2012). Dr. Martina Cartwright is a clinician who counsels young entertainers and performers. She draws the comparison between parents of athletes and pageants of pageant queens. Cartwright explains that "achievement by proxy" (ABP) occurs when an adult experiences pride and satisfaction through a child's achievements (Cartwright, 2012, para. 1). Benign ABP is when parents are healthy in their support of their children's pursuit of success while understanding their child's capacity for limitations (Cartwright, 2012). Pathogenic ABP distortion (ABPD) reveals itself when the adult becomes consumed by the child's ability to create social or financial gains through their achievements (Cartwright, 2012). People often claim that pageant parents are living vicariously through their children, pushing them to limits that are not healthy. Objectification occurs when a parent can no longer differentiate their needs and motivation for success from their child's (Cartwright, 2012). At its extreme, potential abuse may occur when the adult has lost all ability to differentiate between themselves and the child. They could force the child to continue to compete regardless of the physical or emotional damage it may be doing to the child. Cartwright coined the term "princess by proxy" (PBP) as a type of ABPD that is specific to pageant parents (Cartwright, 2012, para. 1). PBP occurs when the parent's instinct to protect their child during competition becomes skewed. Dr. Cartwright has witnessed parents at every stage of ABP and ABPD in the pageant world. Parents of pageant girls are at risk of projecting an unhealthy desire to see their daughters made up to be what they deem to be physically perfect (Cartwright, 2012).



The lasting effects of this could be a strained parent-child relationship and/or the child growing up to have adult body dissatisfaction (Cartwright, 2012). Although ABPD is more common in the sports world because pageants are more niche, the risk may be greater for pageant queens due to widespread media culture (Cartwright, 2012). TV shows such as *Toddler and Tiaras* seem to reinforce the false narrative that physical beauty guarantees fame, fortune, and a happily ever after (Cartwright, 2012).

### ***Pageantry's Effect on Self-Esteem***

The final damaging aspect of pageantry that this paper will highlight is the harm that it can do to a girl's self-esteem. It is challenging to separate a child's idea of worth from their outer appearance when they grow up being judged and crowned based on their outer appearance. Now, that is not the only thing that goes into winning a pageant, but it would be ignorant not to admit that it does play a part. Many girls who hang up their heels and retire from the sport experience issues with self-identity. After years of striving and struggling to produce the most perfect and refined versions of themselves, it is unsurprising that many are left wondering who they truly are. Prohaska's (2023) study found that pageant winners partake in consumer capitalism to be molded into versions of their "best selves" (para. 6). This creates the idea that these women are "made" through aesthetic labor into who the crown wants them to be. Dr.

Martina Cartwright (2011) said for Psychology Today,

In my experience as a dietician for high-powered entertainment groups, I found that many of the young women with eating disorders were trained at an early age to value physical perfection, thinness, athletic prowess, and attractiveness. When it comes to performing, education takes a backseat. The performers' bodies are their livelihood and being less-than-perfect might lead to unemployment. (para. 9)

A study called “Beauty is a Beauty Does: Body Image and Self-esteem of Pageant Contestants” sought to evaluate the self-esteem, dieting, and body image of 131 women (Thompson & Hammond, 2003). Self-esteem is defined as, “how we value and perceive ourselves. It is based on our opinions and beliefs about ourselves, which can feel difficult to change. We might also think of this as self-confidence” (*What Is Self-esteem?*, n.d., para. 1). Thompson and Hammond’s (2003) study included former contestants from all over the United States and participated by completing an anonymous survey. The results revealed that over one-fourth of the women had been told or assumed that they had an eating disorder, almost half wished they were thinner, and 57% were currently in the process of losing weight (Thompson & Hammond, 2003). Adolescent girls specifically name media as their motivation for wanting to be thinner (Thompson & Hammond, 2003). The main protagonist in movies is portrayed as thin and beautiful, communicating the message that good things only happen to the beautiful. An interesting connection could be made to the fact that many celebrities who are the ones portraying unrealistic feminine ideals originally got their start on the pageant stage. The study also found that the higher the level of competition that the woman competed in (i.e., from local to international), the higher her self-esteem seemed to be (Thompson & Hammond, 2003). Additionally, the number of times the girl won or placed in the competition did not contribute to an increase in self-esteem (Thompson & Hammond, 2003). There seems to be a connection between pageantry and how women view themselves, but more research needs to be done on how specifically pageant participation influences these factors.

There is no doubt that pageantry can produce leading and successful members of society, but the pressures and trauma that a woman’s involvement in this kind of competition may produce should not be taken lightly. The answer may be in educating contestants on the dangers

of eating disorders, signs of depression, stress, anxiety, substance abuse, and other mental health issues if they choose to compete and how to avoid them. Pageantry has proved that it can be an added benefit to a young girl's life, but it must be closely monitored to ensure that the risks do not outweigh the positives.

### **Social Media's Effect on Young Women**

Social media can be an incredible avenue for connection and outreach with people across the world. In today's pageant climate, it is a normal requirement for titleholders to have separate social media accounts dedicated to documenting their year-long pageant reign. These platforms are meant to catalog their year, connect with other contestants across the country, and promote the pageant system. This section will list research that has been done concerning young women and society. This will give valuable insight into the potential harms that may come with requiring a pageant queen to be on social media for a contractual amount.

The first harm that may come from social media is the effect it can have on a young girl's self-image. A study by Northwestern University found that teens are looking at various types of content as they scroll (Staff, 2022). These posts could be from a friend or family member, an influencer or celebrity, or a target ad meant to sell their product online. When it comes to what the teens are posting themselves, boys and girls tend to lean into two different types of content (Staff, 2022). Boys tend to post pictures or videos that are funny or entertaining. Girls tend to use social media as a means to connect with others (Staff, 2022). A 2018 report from Pew Research cited that girls have noticeably different behaviors when using social media (Staff, 2022). The report noted that girls are much more likely than boys to share on social media about their feelings, personal beliefs, and problems. Natasha Varela, director of child, adolescent, and family services at The Family Institute at Northwestern University said, "A lot of teens use this space to

present themselves how they want to be seen, but there is a pressure for girls to be worried about how others are going to perceive them” (Staff, 2022, para. 12). Researchers who analyzed data on more than 10,000 adolescents concluded that frequent social media usage disproportionately affects teen girls’ mental health more negatively than that of teen boys (Staff, 2022). Now that this paper has established that research does support the fact that social media usage may negatively impact young girls, the next section will dive deeper into what those negative effects may manifest into.

The simple solution to fixing the adverse effects of social media may seem like just telling the teen to log off, but the problem is more deeply rooted than that. Despite being aware of the harmful consequences, many adolescent girls continue to partake in social media because they have an extreme fear of missing out (Staff, 2022). A Harvard review article notes that exposure to videos and photos on social media can contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, serious mental health issues, and suicidal behavior among teen and adolescent girls (*Exploring the Effect of Social Media on Teen Girls’ Mental Health*, 2023). A 2017 study published in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* found that there are two types of reciprocal depressive cycles when it comes to using the platform, Instagram. The first part of the cycle is browsing. Browsing increases the adolescent’s depressed mood. The second part of the cycle is posting which initially creates a depressed mood. The cycle remains: the more you browse, the more depressed you are, the more depressed you are, the more you post (Staff, 2022). In a 2019 cross-sectional study on teen suicide rates from 1975 to 2016, researchers suggested that stress from social media could be a common factor associated with suicide attempts (Staff, 2022). The authors of this commentary go on to mention that young girls in particular are more vulnerable to experiencing cyberbullying. If cyberbullying goes on

unaddressed, the consequences may include self-harm, feelings of hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and the potential for wanting to harm others.

A study from Facebook found that 32% of teenage girls report that Instagram makes them feel worse about their bodies (Garrisonp & Garrisonp, 2023). Varela supports these findings by adding that, “External pressure is emphasized more with girls. There’s an imbalance in the pressure on them to look a certain way” (Staff, 2022, para. 27). Studies from Northwestern University have concluded that a reason for this is that young girls are still developing a sense of self and identity. Dr. Rachel Rodgers at Northeastern University postulates,

You are only consuming pictures, and you are also invited to produce pictures of yourself. Both of those things orient you towards thinking that your appearance is a really important piece of you. It emphasizes that appearance is a really important part of self-worth. (Garrisonp & Garrisonp, 2023, para. 1)

Amanda Raffoul, researcher with STRIPED (Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders), acknowledges, “The more teenage girls are on social media and exposed to image-based social media in particular, the more likely they are to have poor body image” (*Exploring the Effect of Social Media on Teen Girls’ Mental Health*, 2023, para. 1). Raffoul continues to explain that even if teens are aware that the images that they are consuming on TikTok and Instagram are not real, it still promotes unrealistic appearance ideals and can alter their perceptions of self. Experts recommend that the best way for parents to fight against these negative effects is to teach their kids digital literacy from a young age (*Exploring the Effect of Social Media on Teen Girls’ Mental Health*, 2023). This may help young children to understand how social media can impact their self-image, how to process those feelings, and how to step away from social media when needed.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **The Looking-Glass Self**

The theory that defined the course of this research is the looking-glass self. Created by Charles Cooley, the looking-glass self describes the process where people base their sense of self on what they think others believe about them. The theory suggests that people use social interactions as a type of “mirror,” judging their worth, values, and behavior based on how those interactions go (Perception Is Reality: The Looking-Glass Self | Lesley University, n.d.). This theory is different from others because it insinuates that our self-concepts are developed not in solitude but rather in social settings. This suggests that society and individuals are not separate but rather it is two complementary aspects of the same phenomenon. There are only three steps involved in discovering the looking-glass self. The first step states that an individual in a social situation imagines how they appear to others. The second step is that an individual must imagine what someone else is thinking about them. The final step is that the individual develops feelings about and responds to those perceived judgments. These make up the core assumptions that they might have about themselves.

Additional factors that impact the looking-glass self are the context of each interaction and the role of each person involved. Not every person’s opinion carries the same weight. The opinion of a close friend typically means more than that of a stranger. In a study titled, “(I Think) My Mother Thinks I Am, Therefore I Am. The Looking-glass Self in Maltreated Children and Adolescents”, researchers looked at the relationship between child and parent. Previous research suggests that close relationships are more important in the formation of an individual’s self-image because those close relations have more of an opportunity to observe the individual regularly (Silva & Calheiros, 2021). Research has also shown how close relationships are likely

to have more information to make accurate appraisals about one's attributes than strangers. This aligns with the fact that individuals are more likely to trust a close confidant's appraisal of them than a stranger. It is important to note that a person's self-image is more malleable in their early life. For example, positive affirmation from teachers, friends, and parents all plays a crucial role in the formation of a healthy self-image (Silva & Calheiros, 2021). Truskett's (2015) study examined the significant human tragedy that potentially befalls those who are bullied and do not receive positive affirmation in their early years. Truskett believed the concept of the looking-glass self theory to be the cornerstone of socialization. In the study, "Bullying and Harassment and 'The Looking-glass Self'", the results suggested that when an individual is bullied or harassed it may cause the individual to believe that they are worthless, incompetent, or indecisive (Truskett, 2015). The final results of the study found that bullying may produce effects on an individual's self-perception that may never be reversed (Truskett, 2015).

This is all colored by the individual's value system (Perception Is Reality: The Looking-Glass Self | Lesley University, n.d.). Ultimately, this process speaks to people's need for alignment. Individuals seek out consistency between their internal and external worlds (Perception Is Reality: The Looking-Glass Self | Lesley University, n.d.). We strive, adjust, and then skew our perceptions so that we can get back to having equilibrium in our lives. Social media has made this theory infinitely more complex, allowing individuals to connect with people all over the world like never before. The result of this exposure has created a plethora of new "mirrors" through which people can now view themselves. This has created new questions about how people can develop a sense of self (Perception Is Reality: The Looking-Glass Self | Lesley University, n.d.).

The term “cyber” self has been coined and it describes the version that people choose to present of themselves online (Perception Is Reality: The Looking-Glass Self | Lesley University, n.d.). There may also be different variations of the cyber self. One version may be professional on websites like LinkedIn, artistic on Pinterest, political on Twitter, or casual on Instagram. The cyber self may interact with others, receive social opinions, and transform themselves to fit into social conformities. This speaks to the cyber self’s ability to be much more malleable than a person’s actual self (Perception Is Reality: The Looking-Glass Self | Lesley University, n.d.). In reality, the cyber self may be vastly different from the individual’s actual self. All of the different aspects of the cyber self can create a host of psychological issues and concerns (Perception Is Reality: The Looking-Glass Self | Lesley University, n.d.). People may feel a sense of urgency to want to stay in who they’ve created themselves to be in cyberspaces rather than face who they are in the outside world. This way of thinking may stunt the growth of their real-world selves and it calls into question whether a person’s identity may be splintered or not (Perception Is Reality: The Looking-Glass Self | Lesley University, n.d.). The younger the social media user is, the more severe the digital impact may be. Some positives can come from a person’s cyber self, such as a new sense of confidence, enhanced creativity, overcoming social obstacles, increased sense of worth, a stronger professional image, and feelings of connection or altruism for “helping others” through their content (Perception Is Reality: The Looking-Glass Self | Lesley University, n.d.). More research still needs to be done on whether social media helps or hinders the self-identity of individuals. Regardless, what is clear is the opinions of others, whether virtual or in real-time, play a significant role in how people view themselves.

### **Gap in Research**



Many researchers have found a link between pageantry and the way it affects a woman's self-esteem. What this research sought to uncover is how the perceptions of others play a role in a pageant girl's sense of self. To win a pageant, it seems as if the contestant must get inside the judge's head and discover what it is that they specifically are looking for. This tactic involves taking on the opinions of others and allowing them to shape their actions. The real question is whether there are any lasting results to come from this process. Do pageant girls spend so much time viewing themselves through the lens of others that it ultimately alters the way they see themselves? More specifically, high-profile winners are subjected to large amounts of media coverage. They are always being interviewed and quoted throughout their reign. Many times, it seems as though they choose to stay in the limelight and capitalize on their titles long after their year as an official titleholder is over. Once the pageant is over and they have won, the question remains if the opinions of others ultimately affect a pageant girl's self-image.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, this literature review sought to expand the reader's knowledge of the history surrounding pageantry, what the current pageant climate looks like, and society's perceptions of pageantry. This paper took a deeper dive into the glitz and glam of the pageant world, looking past what lies below the shallow surface to uncover why so many women continue to compete time and time again. This paper also provided examples of success stories that have come from pageantry and highlighted the well-accomplished women who are making their mark in every corner of the world. This literature review also pulled back the curtain of the dark side that comes with being in the spotlight, revealing the lasting impacts that pageants may have on a woman's mind. Finally, this paper researched the main communication theory that was used to complete the research for this study.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

#### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to analyze how the opinions of others affect the self-image of women who have competed in pageantry. This chapter explains the methods that will be used in completing this study, the overall research design, the role of the researcher, trustworthiness, setting, and participants, ethical considerations, and procedures, and concludes with a summary. The research is studying a niche subgroup, and this chapter will highlight why these particular women were chosen. The entire goal of this project is to see how the opinions of others impact the self-image of pageant women. By the end of this chapter, the reader should have a clear understanding of how this research project was completed.

#### **Research Design**

The research reported here sought to understand the world from these former pageant queens' point of view. As a qualitative study, the data it accumulated was much more than a statistic. According to Tenny et al. (2022),

Qualitative research is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems. Instead of collecting numerical data points or intervening or introducing treatments just like in quantitative research, qualitative research helps generate hypotheses as well as further investigate and understand quantitative data.

Qualitative research gathers participants' experiences, perceptions, and behavior. It answers the hows and whys instead of how many or how much. (para. 1)

The data in this study gave key insights into why the opinions of others shifted these women's views of themselves. Throughout the entirety of their reign, the queens are typically under contract about what they can say, and their social media presence is monitored. This project was

an attempt to give them their voice back while allowing them to reflect on both the good and bad ways that pageantry has impacted them. All of this was done through a narrative text. After asking careful questions, the study was able to tell the story of how these women's view of themselves was altered from the time they stepped on stage to compete for their coveted pageant titles to the time they gave up their crowns.

The primary method of collecting data came from interviews with former pageant queens. The participants of the study each agreed to an arranged time with the researcher for a phone call. During the phone call, the researcher asked a set list of 14 questions to each interviewee. There were some additional questions asked if the researcher was trying to dig deeper or seek clarity into how the opinions of others affected the way the pageant queens viewed themselves. Beyond knowing the research question, the participants were not aware of the specific communication theory being used or what themes the other interviewees had brought up in previous interviews. The researcher ensured that all questions were answered to keep the interviews congruent before ending the phone call.

This research found evidence that the opinions of others play a role in the development of a pageant queen's view of herself. After interviewing the 11 former pageant contestants, it became clear how the opinions communicated both in person and through social media influenced former beauty queens to think differently about themselves post-reign. Chapter II: Literature Review discussed the negative impact that social media is having on young girls today and mentioned that social media is a new aspect of the theory on which this thesis is based. This project provided new academic research in the field of communication by using the looking-glass self theory to analyze how opinions can affect the self-image of a pageant woman.

### **Research Question**

For this qualitative research study, the following research question was proposed:

RQ1: How do the opinions of others affect the self-image of pageant women?

### **Trustworthiness**

This project revolved around women opening up about their potential struggles with self-worth and self-image. Gaining honest and vulnerable answers to the questions that were asked was essential for data collection. Ahmed (2024) elaborates on the pillars of trustworthiness in qualitative research by stating,

Qualitative research explores the intricate details of human behavior, attitudes, and experiences, emphasizing the exploration of nuances and context. Ensuring trustworthiness is crucial in establishing the credibility and reliability of qualitative findings. This includes elements such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. (para. 1)

To collect the necessary responses and data from the participants, 14 pre-planned questions were crafted for each interview. The questions were designed to reflect the three tenets of the looking-glass self theory and create an open-ended conversation. Creating an open-ended conversation was crucial because,

Qualitative research at its core, asks open-ended questions whose answers are not easily put into numbers such as 'how' and 'why'. Due to the open-ended nature of the research questions at hand, qualitative research design is often not linear in the same way quantitative design is. One of the strengths of qualitative research is its ability to explain processes and patterns of human behavior that can be difficult to quantify. Phenomena such as experiences, attitudes, and behaviors can be difficult to accurately capture quantitatively, whereas a qualitative approach allows participants themselves to explain

how, why, or what they were thinking, feeling, and experiencing at a certain time or during an event of interest. (Tenny et al., 2022, para. 2)

This allowed the participants to explain all sides to their answers instead of being forced into only answering yes or no. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, but all participants were given a verbal and written guarantee that they would be kept anonymous throughout this project. This allowed the participants to be as open and as transparent as they would like to be. The end goal of trustworthiness in a qualitative research project is to support the argument that the inquiry's findings are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To guarantee that the data collected was credible, several measures were put in place to create an atmosphere of trustworthiness. The following paragraphs will detail what those measures were.

### **Transferability**

According to Moran (2024), "Transferability in qualitative research is synonymous with generalizability, or external validity, in quantitative research. Transferability is established by providing readers with evidence that the research study's findings could be applicable to other contexts, situations, times, and populations" (Moran, 2024, para. 1). The transferability of this study is relatively high since all participants were public figures with easily accessible contact information. Detailed steps of how this study was accomplished will be provided in the following paragraphs. There, this study will lay out a detailed recollection of how the research question was able to be answered. If other researchers desire to conduct a similar study to determine the same or similar effects, they would be able to do so. This chapter describes the project in clear and vivid detail so that other researchers may use it as a guideline if they wish to conduct their own qualitative study.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

The dependability and confirmability of the data collected are crucial for the results of this study. Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time, whereas confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers (Korstjens, I. & Moser, A., 2018). Part of Chapter III: Methodology's purpose is to showcase how data was collected and analyzed. Additionally, a timeline for when the participants were contacted and then called is provided as well. In Chapter IV: Findings, the data collected from the interviews was analyzed using Creswell's six-step data analysis process. In this chapter, information will be provided about how these interviews were conducted ethically. Finally, to provide context, quotes from the participants will be provided throughout Chapter IV. All of the participants were allowed access to their transcripts to verify the accuracy of the interviews.

### **Setting and Participants**

To qualify for this study, participants needed to have previously held a pageant title. It was necessary to interview women who had won a title as opposed to women who had competed in pageantry but had never held a title. This was decided after looking into the history of pageantry within the United States; it was uncovered that the first Miss America winner, 16-year-old Margaret Gorman, was immediately deemed America's "ideal" (American Experience, 2019, para. 22). While this may have come with an overwhelming amount of pressure to live up to the media's headlines, it may not have compared to the country's disapproval. To accomplish its goal, this study needed to interview previous pageant winners who had gone on to represent their country for an entire year. This would provide the needed amount of time and pressure for the participants to be able to reflect on how the opinions of others shaped their self-image. The age limit to participate in the project was at least 18 years old. While it may seem ideal to

interview younger girls who may still actively be competing, choosing to interview women over the age of 18 was a conscious choice made in hopes that the participants would be able to have the wisdom and maturity to reflect on the ways pageantry both negatively and positively impacted their self-image. Also, the older the girl, the less likely that she would still actively be competing in pageants. This project did not want to interview anyone still actively competing in pageants as they may feel pressured to only speak one-dimensionally about their pageant experience. While there was no age cap, the study also depended on the participants having used social media to promote their pageant titles as that is one of the facets of the communication theory being used in this project. Because the expectation of running a social media platform dedicated to your pageant title has only become relevant in the last 10 years or so, this ended up limiting the age range unintentionally. The women who were interviewed ranged from 18-40 years old. The following screening questions were asked of all participants to ensure they met all guidelines.

- Have you previously held a national pageant title? (Needed to answer “Yes”)
- Were you entrusted with running a social media account for your pageant throughout your pageant reign? (Needed to answer “Yes”)
- Did you make public appearances representing your pageant title? (Needed to answer “Yes”)
- Are you still actively competing in pageants? (Needed to answer “No”)
- Are you over the age of 18? (Needed to answer “Yes”)

When considering how many interviews were necessary to achieve a grounded result, former scholars’ opinions on the matter were considered. According to Dworkin (2012), “An extremely large number of articles, book chapters, and books recommend guidance and suggest

anywhere from 5 to 50 participants as adequate” (para. 5). The goal was to avoid saturation in the data. Saturation can be defined as the point at which data collection no longer provides new or relevant data (Dworkin, 2012). It was decided that this study needed at least 10 interviews to be able to make correlations and derive definitive results.

All 11 interviews used in this study came from the 30 women contacted because of the interviewer’s social media inquiry. The participants were from all over the world. Two participants resided in Tennessee, two were from Pennsylvania, two were from Florida, one was from Mississippi, one was from Alabama, one was from Georgia, another was from, Virginia, and the final participant was from Papua New Guinea. The 11 women who agreed to do the project featured a wide array of opinions, experiences, and insights.

The former pageant queens that participated were random, and solely chosen based on the fact that they were the first to agree. No preference was given to who was chosen. Whoever responded to the email by returning a signed consent form agreeing to be a part of the project and confirming a time to interview became the women that were chosen.

Each participant was asked to participate in a phone call where the researcher asked them the same 14 questions (see Appendix A). All questions had been previously screened and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Because participants were spread out throughout the world, this required the interviews to take place over a phone call, rather than in person. The women participating do not purposefully have anything in common from a geographical context, but rather that they are all former pageant queens. All participants were contacted in February of 2024 and their interviews took place in March of 2024. All interviews were scheduled at the participants' earliest convenience since participating in this project may have become an additional obligation to the busy lives of all interviewees. All 11 interviewees



met the requirements for the study. The interviews were kept confidential. The results of the interviews will be reviewed and then discussed in the subsequent chapters.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Keeping this study ethical was of utmost importance. A common way to describe “ethics” can be “norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior” (Resnik, 2017, para. 1). There are several reasons to adhere to ethical norms in research. The first norm is that it promotes the aims of research such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error (Resnik, 2017). The second norm is that ethical standards promote values that are vital to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness (Resnik, 2017). Ethical norms also hold researchers accountable to the public and they help build public support for research (Resnik, 2017). Finally, ethical norms in research promote a variety of other important moral and social values such as “social responsibility, human rights, animal welfare, compliance with the law, and public health and safety” (Resnik, 2017, para. 1).

Now that it has been established why ethical research practices are essential, this section will detail what ethical procedures were used in this qualitative project and how they were followed. Before conducting the research for this study, approval was received from the IRB to begin. Because the questions did not change from interview to interview, the questions were able to be approved by IRB long before the participants were chosen. This study was highly dependent on the pageant queens agreeing to a 30-minute to hour-long interview. Their participation was greatly appreciated, and all were treated with respect throughout the entirety of the process. The participants all were given truthful information about the study through the initial email, with the consent form attached. The participants were also made aware of the fact that they could ask clarifying questions, as well as were able to withdraw from the study at any

time. There was no deception used in this study, and participants were only provided with truthful information.

Participants were emailed a consent form that included all the relevant information about the study before the interview (see Appendix B). The interviewees were then required to return the form to the researcher before an interview could take place. The consent form included information pertaining to the purpose, risks, and criteria of the research that was taking place. Because the study required the women to be finished competing in pageants and their identities were being kept confidential, the risks of being part of this study were minimal. The participants were reassured through the consent form and on the phone before the interview began, that their names and any identifying information would be redacted from the study. The final measure to maintain a strong standard of protection for the data in this study is that all data was stored on a password-protected computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and any hardcopy records will be destroyed.

## **Procedures**

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative data is gathered predominantly in the form of spoken or written language rather than in the form of numbers (Polkinghorne, 2005). Data collection methods could be in the form of interviews, observations, documents, or artifacts. According to Creswell (2014), “The data collection steps include setting the boundaries for the study, collecting information through unstructured or semi-structured observations and interviews, documents, and visual materials, as well as establishing the protocol for recording information” (p. 3). This research project used interviews with former pageant queens as its method of data collection. This section will inform the reader on how the interview participants were secured so that data could be collected.

Former queens from a variety of pageant systems were contacted with no preference as to who was chosen. To begin, the last 15 Miss Americas, the 15 Miss USAs, and the last 15 Miss Universes were all Googled and compiled into a list. From there, each queen was looked up on Instagram. Because these women are public figures, they all had an email in their Instagram bios as a way to contact them professionally. Additionally, 30 other women who were known by the interviewer to have done a pageant were also contacted. These women were found by scrolling through the interviewer's social media. Any girl who had posted on her social media about participating in a pageant was contacted on that social media site. The direct message sent to the potential participant briefly inquired about their interest in interviewing for a research project. If the girl was interested, her email was gathered, and more information was sent through that medium. The email outlined the purpose of the project, the criteria, the intended outcome, and what they needed to do to participate. Additionally, a consent form was attached. If the participant met all required criteria and returned a signed copy of the consent form, an interview could commence. The email also made the participants aware that the interviews would need to be recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes. Now that the way the data was collected has been described, the next section will reveal how the data was analyzed.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how the opinions of others had an impact on the self-image of pageant women. To accomplish this goal, the recorded interviews needed to be analyzed in a way that could produce scholarly results. According to Polkinghorne (2005), "Production of interview data requires awareness of the complexity of self-reports and the relation between experience and language expression" (para. 1). The raw data came from the 11, hour-long interviews. The interviews were made up of 14 questions that were crafted with

Cooley's (1901) looking-glass self theory in mind (see Appendix A). The main hypothesis of the looking-glass self is that an "individual's self-conceptions result from assimilating the judgments of significant others" (Griffin, 1994, p. 60) Interview questions #1, #4, and #5 were meant to be baseline questions that established what the interviewee's self-image looked like pre-pageantry. Questions #2 and #3 are directly related to tenet one of the looking-glass self. Questions #7, #8, and #11 directly related to tenet two of the looking-glass self. Questions #6, #12, #13, and #14 directly related to tenet three of the looking-glass self. Finally, questions #9 and #10 revolved around social media's impact on the looking-glass self.

The goal of qualitative data analysis is to tell the story of the participants involved. To do that well, specific measures need to be put in place. This project utilized Creswell's six-step data analysis process (2014).

Step 1: Organize and prepare the data for analysis (p. 4). All audio recordings of the interviews were reviewed and transcribed.

Step 2: Read through the data (p. 5). All 11 transcripts were thoroughly read and given the opportunity to reflect on their overall meaning.

Step 3: Start coding all of the data (p. 5). Coding is a process of organizing the data into text segments (Creswell, 2014). The 11 interviews were organized into text segments in accordance with Creswell's process.

Step 4: Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis (p. 5). Codes were generated for the descriptions of the emerging themes. The themes were analyzed and categorized.

Step 5: Advancing how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative (p. 5). The emergent themes were woven into narrative texts so that the findings emerged logically.

Step 6: Interpret the data (p. 5). The area of focus for this study was to understand how the opinions of others impact the self-image of pageant women. The themes that emerged from this study are a product of the healthy tension between the researcher's biases and the interviewee's own opinions.

### **Interviews**

There were several instruments and recording processes used to accomplish this research project. The main instrument that was used was the interviews of the former pageant queens. Qualitative interviewing is a form of interpersonal communication that is both a tool as well as an object of analysis. Most of the content that was analyzed came from the hour-long interview with each candidate.

While these women had different backgrounds and grew up in different parts of the world, what united them was the fact that they had all previously held a national pageant title for their country. Once they won their respective national pageants, they were then given the responsibility of reigning for a year before passing the title on to the next winner. One contributing factor that may have had an impact on the former queen's outlook on pageantry is the year she reigned. Social media has infiltrated every area of our lives today, but the same cannot be said for 50 years ago as social media did not exist then (Hines, 2022). Pageant queens in the past may not have had to deal with the same media pressure that pageant queens today do. Regardless of the year they reigned, each participant was asked the same 14 questions that had been approved by IRB (see Appendix A). The questions were designed to reflect the three

tenants of the communication theory, the looking-glass self. The questions centered around what pressures they may felt during their reign, the positive effects they gained from pageantry, how the media portrayed them, and how their self-worth has been impacted before, during, and after their reign. Since the interviews took place over a phone call, each interview was recorded and transcribed through a Teams recording of the call. After the interviews were transcribed, all participants were made aware that they could have access to their transcripts if they wished to personally verify them. The recordings of the phone calls and transcripts are stored in a file on a password-protected computer only available to the team who conducted this research project.

### **The Interviewer as the Instrument**

A second instrument used in this project was the interviewer herself. The phrase *researcher-as-instrument* correlates to how the researcher is an active respondent in the research process (Pezalla et al., 2012). The influence that the researcher may impose on the findings cannot be ignored. “It is through the researcher’s facilitative interaction that a conversational space is created – that is, an arena where respondents feel safe to share stories on their experiences and life” (Pezalla et al., 2012, para. 4). Pezalla et al. (2012) agree in their findings that researchers are indeed “instruments” in qualitative interview research (para. 43). For this study because the researcher is the instrument in a semi-structured qualitative interview setting, unique researcher characteristics have the potential to influence the collection of empirical materials. The following paragraph will describe how the researcher for this project has a personal connection to pageantry and where that may influence results.

The author began competing in pageants at the age of four years old and would go on to have a career in pageantry for the next 17 years. The author would go on to represent multiple states across America as well as winning nationally. Pageantry provided the author with

scholarships, travel opportunities, and the ability to use the crown as a microphone for advocacy issues. Throughout that career, the author has seen how pageantry has been both a positive and negative influence in her life.

Now, having been separated from competing in pageantry for several years, the author has been able to reflect on how holding a pageant title affected her self-image. After winning a pageant title, the author was subjected to the opinions of others all year long about whether she was “worthy enough” in other people’s eyes. The author may have convinced the judges onstage that she was worthy of representing the organization, but that was only the beginning. It was family, close friends, directors, classmates, and fellow pageant girls that ultimately shaped the author’s self-image and feelings toward pageantry. Looking back on her pageant career is done so with much love and nostalgia, but the author is also able to see beyond the sparkly crowns to the potential pitfalls of pageantry.

### **Summary**

To summarize the previous explanation, this chapter walks the reader through the methodology of this qualitative study. The research question remains: “How have the opinions of others impacted the self-image of pageant women?” This chapter has explained the general perspective, the context of the study, the trustworthiness of the study, the ethical concerns, the participants, the instruments that were used, the procedures, and how the data was analyzed. The next chapter will present the results obtained through this method of research.

## **Chapter IV: Findings**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this fourth chapter is to present the findings of this qualitative research concerning how the opinions of others affect the formation of a pageant queen's self-image. The methodology for this study was outlined in Chapter III. Chapter IV: Findings will show how that methodology was brought to life. Topics in this chapter include a description of the participants, codes, and themes development, and finally, the results of the research questions. A summary will be included at the end to round out Chapter IV.

### **Participants**

Eleven participants took part in this study. Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older. As described in Chapter III: Methodology, this stipulation was put in place because the older the participant, the less likely she would be to still be competing in pageantry. This project required the former queen to reflect on her time in pageantry and how it ultimately shaped who she is today. It was important to the study for participants to have the maturity and wisdom necessary to analyze how pageantry influenced their self-image both for good and bad. Additionally, participants were required to no longer be actively holding a title or competing. This was a requirement made in an attempt to remove bias. It may be easy for participants to look at their circumstances through rose-colored glasses while they are still in the thick of their pageant career. Participants were also required to have held a pageant title nationally. This leaned into previous literature that states that pageant queens become symbols of society (American Experience, 2019). The final necessary aspect was that all participants needed to run a social media account for their pageant system. This allowed for an evaluation to be made on how the perceptions of people online compared to the opinions of people in person, and if they held



equal weight in shaping the self-image of the beauty queen. To protect all participants, their identity was kept confidential.

### **Research Question**

For this qualitative research study, the following research question was proposed:

RQ1: How have the opinions of others impacted the self-image of pageant women?

### **Codes and Theme Development**

The purpose of this qualitative research project was to analyze how the opinions of others impact the self-image of pageant women. Opinions were then examined and made known by the pageant queens both on social media and in person. There were 11 participants involved in this research study, all of whom participated in a 14-question phone interview. The questions, previously approved by IRB, were formed around Cooley's looking-glass self theory. This theory suggests that the process of forming a self-image through the lens of other people occurs in three steps. The 14 questions used in this interview either correlated to those three steps or asked about social media's impact on their self-image. All official questions asked can be found in Appendix A. Questions 1, 4, and 5 were designed to create a baseline for the interview. Here is where the outside opinions that shaped the self-image of these pageant queens were discovered. Questions 2 and 3 addressed the first part of Cooley's (1902) theory, we imagine how we must appear to others. Questions 7, 8, and 11 correlated to the second tenet of the theory, we imagine the judgment of that appearance. Questions 6, 12, 13, and 14 sought to answer the final tenet of the theory which is that we develop a sense of self through the judgments of others. Finally, questions 9 and 10 were created as clarity questions surrounding the connection the beauty queens have with social media.

From the interview transcripts, the participants' anonymous answers were collected and became the data for this study. From this data, subject matters that made recurring appearances became apparent and were established as codes and themes.

### **Coding**

Phone interviews were the main instrument used to collect data and form an understanding of how the pageant queens' self-images had been shaped by the opinions communicated to them by those in their social sphere. As previously explained in Chapter 3, all questions asked in the interviews reflected Cooley's (1902) looking-glass self theory. All interviews were transcribed, read, and analyzed using Creswell's (2014) six-step process to locate themes among the 11 participants' answers. Once themes were established within the interviews, codes naturally emerged. The codes will be discussed below with a narrative text weaving the interviews together. Table 1 will present all the questions asked in the study and the number/percentages of how each participant answered the question. The answers from the interviews informed the themes that will be used in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Creswell's (2014) analysis yielded five themes, and 18 codes emerged from the themes. Table 1 provides a list of all the questions that were asked and how the participants answered. Table 2 provides a list of what those external influences are, presenting them as themes. The themes that were created revolve around whose opinion had the greatest impact on the 11 pageant queens that were interviewed. Specific influencers and expectations were created as codes. The individual themes will be found in Tables 3-7.

### **Table 1**

*Questions that were asked in the interview and their answers*

Question	Answer	Appearances across all data sets
1. What did your self-image look like before you were crowned?	Positive Negative Neutral	4 (36%) 5 (45%) 2 (18%)
2. When you competed, did you ever change a part of yourself because you thought the judges might respond more favorably to you that way?	Yes No	7 (64%) 4 (36%)
3. Did you ever assume to know what other people were thinking about you?	Yes No	10 (91%) 1 (9%)
4. Who were the most influential voices in your life over the course of your pageant reign?	Family Friends Board/Director Judges Coaches Sister Queens Strangers	7 (64%) 1 (9%) 4 (36%) 1 (9%) 2 (18%) 2 (18%) 1 (9%)
5. Who were you most concerned with pleasing over the course of your reign?	Family Friends Herself Board/Director Social media	2 (18%) 1 (9%) 5 (45%) 4 (36%) 1 (9%)
6. Was there ever a time during your reign that the opinion of another affected the way that you viewed yourself?	Yes No	10 (91%) 1 (9%)
7. Was there ever a time during your reign when someone	Yes No	9 (82%) 2 (18%)

blatantly made you feel bad about yourself?		
8. Did gaining the pageant social media platform affect your actions or the way that you presented yourself online?	Yes No	9 (82%) 2 (18%)
9. Would you say that your cyber self as your pageant self was completely congruent with who you were in person?	Yes No	8 (73%) 3 (27%)
10. Would you say you felt more of a connection with your audience through your online platform or through your pageant appearances?	In-person Online	9 (82%) 2 (18%)
11. Were there any assumptions made about you by the media over the course of your reign?	Yes No	6 (55%) 5 (45%)
12. Did the opinions of those people on social media ever affect the way that you viewed yourself?	Yes No	3 (27%) 8 (73%)
13. Did you ever feel like you didn't deserve the title because of the opinion of someone else?	Yes No	3 (27%) 8 (73%)
14. After giving up the title, what were the lasting effects that the job had on your self-esteem?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Felt empowered</li> <li>• Grew in confidence</li> <li>• Felt positive about herself</li> <li>• Learned how to network</li> </ul>	2 (18%) 3 (27%) 3 (27%) 2 (18%)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A struggle to find a new identity and purpose beyond the pageant title</li> </ul>	3 (27%)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An understanding to not let the opinions of others define you</li> </ul>	1 (9%)

The next table shown below is the Frequency of Coded and Themes table. This table was developed to show the rate of recurrence of the codes throughout participants' responses during data collection. Each theme relates to a different outside source that a participant named as an influencing factor in her life throughout her reign.

**Table 2**

*Frequency of Codes and Themes Table*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Appearances across all data sets</b>
Family	Family	10
	Mom	31
	Dad	4
Director	Director	47
	Board	5
	Committee	12
Coaches	Coaches	20
	Chaperone	5
Pageant Girls	Sister Queens	14
	Fellow contestants	11
Pageant Industry	Appearances	20
	Social Media	111

	Judges	39
	Role Model	4
	Representative	9
	Happy	9
	Perfect	16

### Theme Development

Five themes became apparent after applying Creswell's (2014) analysis process. This research project answered the question of how the opinion of others affects a beauty queen's self-image. To answer that question, "others" needed to be clearly defined. Questions asked in the interviews made it apparent the five recurring themes were Family, Director, Coaches, Fellow Pageant Girls, and the Pageant Industry as a whole. These five themes were identified as the people who were the most influential in the lives of the pageant queens.

#### *Theme 1: Family*

Family was a significant influence that was repeatedly mentioned throughout the interview process. Several participant quotes that emphasize this theme are listed in Table 3 below. Codes within this theme have been split up into family, mom, and dad.

**Table 3**

#### *Codes and Themes Related to Family*

Themes	Codes	Participant's Quotes
Family	Family	"You are going to hear a lot of good and you are going to hear a lot of bad. If they are not a close family or friend member, I do not listen to either."
	Family	"I felt like I was like carrying the family on my back."

	Mom	“Girls are coming up to me because you have to be a role model for them. Mom has always instilled that into us”
	Mom	“I give my mom so much weight over what she thinks about something and if I disappoint her.”
	Mom	“The pageant mom duo like, sometimes it can get a little toxic.”
	Dad	“He [dad] would always remind me of what is important and to always be true to myself.”
	Dad	“He [dad] was one of the voices that kept me grounded.”

When looking to see whose opinions matter most to a pageant queen, it was not surprising to see that family scored high on the list. Interviewees 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, and 11 all name a parent as an influential voice in their life that they sought to please. The chapter will provide a narrative text as more evidence that pageant queens have opinions and expectations coming at them from multiple avenues. Interviewee #6 was quoted saying,

I think that it is really important to have people that have been a part of your life the entire time, you know, whether it is a family member or a close friend or like a pageant coach, that you’ve had from the beginning, whoever it may be. (personal communication, March 2024)

This quote emphasizes the importance of allowing only the people closest to you to have a say in who you are. Interviewee #6 goes on to explain that people who join your journey later in life will struggle to understand the whole process that has led up to where you are now. Interviewee #1 supports this by providing one of the best pieces of advice she was given at the start of her

reign. She was told, “You are going to hear a lot of good and you are going to hear a lot of bad. If they are not a close family or friend member, do not listen to either” (personal communication, March 2024). Both Interviewee #6 and Interviewee #5 name a parental figure as the person they trusted to keep them grounded and remind them of who they truly are. Interviewee #5 states, “He [dad] would always remind me of what is important and to always be true to myself, even though, like, I would go and spend time with the elite people in elite groups” (personal communication, March 2023).

Interviewee #11 articulates that the reason her mom had such an influence on her was because she traveled everywhere with her during her reign. This constant support system created a close relationship between the mom and daughter pair that resulted in a relationship where Interviewee #11’s mom’s opinion influenced her daughter’s actions on social media. Interviewee #11’s mom thought that a swimsuit picture that her daughter had posted on social media was not congruent with what a national queen should post. As a result of this opinion, Interviewee #11 took the photo down. Similarly, Interview #8’s social media presence has been impacted by her mother’s opinion since she was first allowed to have a social media account. Interviewee #8 was referring to her mother when she said, “Girls are coming up to me because you have to be a role model for them. Mom has always instilled that into us as soon as we got social media” (personal communication, March 2024).

While there was significant data found that highlighted the positive impact a parent’s perception can have on a pageant girl, adverse effects were found as well. Interviewees 1, 3, and 9 all cited that the pressure they felt from their parents was crushing at times. Interview #1’s mother was a former Miss America. Pressure to live up to the same level of talent and success as her mother made her feel terrified to disappoint her mom. Both interviews #3 and #9



acknowledge the time, money, and sacrifice their family members made to see them onstage.

Interviewee #3 reports,

In ways, I felt like I was like carrying the family on my back. But I do not know how to explain it. So, they all just kind of depended on me for, I do not know, they were expecting this of me and so it just felt like a lot of pressure and a lot of money being invested in it and I didn't want to waste anybody's energy, money or time. (personal communication, March 2024)

Interviewee #9 said something similar. She said she was terrified of failing in her family's eyes because she knew what they had given up for her to win the crown and travel all year long. "I knew the people in my life who had to kind of keep some of my plates spinning when I was gone on the road and a lot of them sacrificed" (Interviewee #9, personal communication, March 2024).

Interviewee #3 rounds this section out by naming her relationship as toxic with her mother at some points during pageant competition week. She stated, "There are definitely times where I would be like I just need you to be my cheerleader, not my coach" (personal communication, March 2024). This rounds out the final example that a parent's opinion can have on a pageant queen.

### ***Theme 2: Directors***

The next significant influence that the interviewees mentioned throughout the interview process was the directors. Several participant quotes that emphasize this theme are listed in Table 4 below. Codes within this theme have been split up into director, board, and committee. All these positions are the same within pageantry, the title just changes from system to system.

#### **Table 4**

*Codes and Themes Related to Directors*

Themes	Codes	Participant's Quotes
Director	Director	"Directors can love you the day that you are crowned and then two months into your reign, you do one thing they do not like, they can change on you very quickly."
	Director	"She [the director] was so empowering in everything that I did relating to pageantry, starting when I met her, and then onward."
	Director	"It is easy to push yourself to be burnt out because all you hear all year long from directors and friends and future contestants and the people around you is that you have to be a good title holder."
	Board	"My local board was very liberal, and we had completely different religious beliefs and so honestly, I had gotten a lot of like, I do not want to say bullying, but like definitely criticism from them for them for being a Christian."
	Board	"My board was a very influential voice because like I am representing them."
	Committee	"By the end, I always wanted the speech to impress the communications person on the committee."

Participants 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 11 all named a former pageant director as an influential voice in their life or someone they were seeking to please throughout their reign. The titles "director," "board," and "committee" can all be used interchangeably. Participants 4, 7, and 8 all recounted positive effects that came from their relationship with their director. Interview #4

claimed her director as a “second mother” (personal communication, March 2024). She said that the way her director pushed her to pursue her goals both in and outside of pageantry was a major stepping-stone towards success in her later life. Interviewee #8 only had glowing remarks for her previous director, claiming she was “phenomenal” to her (personal communication, March 2024). The final positive example of how a director can influence a pageant queen’s self-image comes from Interviewee #7. She is cited as saying that her directors have “empowered” her in everything she is done relating to pageantry ever since she was crowned (personal communication, March 2024).

Participants 1, 2, 5, 9, and 10 all provided examples of the negative effects that the opinions of directors can produce on the titleholders’ lives. Interviewee #10 stated, “Every system wants something different, so directors will be there to tell you what to change, what not to change” (personal communication, March 2024). Interviewee #1 provided a prime example of how she temporarily changed herself to fit what the directors were hoping to see. When came to competing, Interviewee #1 faced something akin to bullying because she had different political and religious beliefs than her board. This caused her to shy away from voicing her true opinions and being as tame as possible when she competed in the system her first year.

Participant 5 was required to run every speech she gave over the course of her reign through her committee. One of her responsibilities for the pageant was to use her platform to acquire funding from local organizations. This caused her to feel tremendous pressure to perform and seek the approval of her committee. Interview #9 listed burnout as a result of the expectations placed on her by her directors. She said, “It is easy to push yourself to be burnt out because all you hear all year long from directors and friends and future contestants and the people around you is that you have to be a good title holder” (personal communication, March

2024). Interviewee #10's insight expounds upon what a director may mean when they say they want you to be a "good titleholder." This participant was asked who had the most influence on her throughout her reign and she said,

My directors, there's always a push, especially in one of the systems that I won, they want a girl that's beautiful and that's always on top of her game and is always presented and ready and not ever showing a moment of weakness. (Interviewee #10, personal communication, March 2024)

All of these expectations and opinions shaped the way these pageant queens viewed themselves and what it would look like to have a successful year, even if that meant striving for something unattainable. The section provided examples of how these pageant queens had changed their actions and persona in response to what a director thought they should do.

### ***Theme 3: Coaches***

Coaches were found to play an incredibly influential role in the development of a pageant queen's self-image. Several participant quotes that emphasize this theme are listed in Table 5 below. Codes within this theme have been split up into coaches and chaperones.

**Table 5**

#### *Codes and Themes Related to Coaches*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Participant's Quotes</b>
Coaches	Coaches	"He [the coach] said, 'Have you looked at your legs today because I do not think I'd be eating rolls.'"
	Coaches	"I just wore what my coaches told me to wear."
	Chaperones	"She [the chaperone] set my mind straight the whole year."

	Chaperones	“Yeah, they [the chaperones] told me not to use like vocabulary that I normally use. And so, that was one thing I had to change.”
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This section will provide examples from participants 3, 5, 6, and 9 on how opinions from their pageant coaches affected their actions and self-image. Interview #3 recounted how she was told throughout her pageant career that she looked older than her age. Coaches told her that she needed to look younger if she ever hoped to have a shot at winning a title in her age division. For years, she was advised by coaches to wear ball gowns instead of slim mermaid dresses. She was told to part her hair on the side instead of the middle. These changes were all enforced on her, so that she could try to look more youthful. Even though she hated that this youthful look didn't portray who she truly was, she listened to the opinions of her coaches for years before deciding to do things her way.

Interviewee #5 recalls how her coach/chaperone was a wonderful woman who “set her mind straight the whole year” (personal communication, March 2024). While she had a fondness for her chaperone, Interviewee #5 also talked about how she was asked to “dumb down” her vocabulary so that the general population of Papua New Guinea (her home country) could readily understand what she was saying (personal communication, March 2024). Additionally, her chaperone put her through a weeklong makeover, in preparation for nationals. Interviewee #5 said she walked away feeling like that encounter was “uncomfortable,” “embarrassing,” and “demeaning” (personal communication, March 2024).

The final instance that will be mentioned comes from Participant 6's interview. Interviewee #6 recounts a time she was traveling to an event and had not had the opportunity to eat much that day. That night, she got dinner with a coach she had been working with for the

previous 3 years. As she was eating a piece of bread, her coach remarked, “Have you looked at your legs today I do not think I’d be eating rolls”. Interviewee #6 postulates that most of the coaches she had worked with in the past were wonderful, but that one little comment about her legs still sticks with her to this day. She goes on to say,

So, it is something that definitely sucks, and I remember going to compete for Miss Mississippi USA that year I clearly ended up winning and my legs were fine, but I just could not shake that my legs were like not good enough and it was just the craziest thing that one person’s opinion did that and truly what’s actually crazy is I’ve never thought badly about my life my whole life honestly. (personal communication, March 2024)

Interviewee #6 ends her story by proposing that this is an occurrence that happens to a lot of pageant girls. They get hyper-fixated on one comment and allow that opinion to rock their world (personal communication, March 2024).

#### ***Theme 4: Fellow Pageant Girls***

Fellow pageant titleholders and contestants are the next influence that was repeatedly mentioned throughout the interview process. Several participant quotes that emphasize this are listed in Table 6 below. Codes within this theme have been split up into contestants and sister queens. Typically, pageants have multiple age divisions. Girls that win the same title, in the same year, for the same system, call each other “sister queens.”

**Table 6**

#### *Codes and Themes Related to Fellow Pageant Girls*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Participant’s Quotes</b>
Fellow Pageant Girls	Contestants	“I was comparing myself to the other girls that I was competing with like I didn't

		think like I was good enough.”
	Contestants	“And then being able to have such like a great year and my sister Queens like we are just such like wonderful people like we all got along.”
	Sister queens	“And then being able to have such like a great year and my sister Queens like we are just such like wonderful people like we all got along.”
	Sister queens	“I feel like my sister queen, [name redacted], was really influential to me.”
	Sister queens	“There were many, even parents of my sister queens that told me that, you are too young for that, sweetie.”

Examples from Participants 1, 3, 8, and 11 all affirm that the girls they competed with or held a title with all boosted their self-image. Interviewee #1’s mom was a former Miss America. When Interviewee #1 went to compete for Miss America herself, she found that the other competitors didn’t know who her mom was and truly wanted to get to know her for her. This reaffirmed Interviewee #1’s self-confidence and reminded her that she truly had worked hard to compete on the Miss America stage all on her own. Interviewees 3, 4, 8, and 11 specifically named their sister queens as being “amazing,” “inspiring,” “encouraging,” “uplifting,” and “wonderful” (personal communication, 2024). They all walked away claiming they were better people for having reigned alongside their sister queens.

Interviewee #2 talked in her interview about how pageant queens constantly compare themselves to other titleholders. She goes on to ascertain that pageantry is very much a “mental game” (personal communication, March 2024). She believes that false opinions, “...can really mentally distort your thinking of pageantry and yourself, and it can put you in a very negative

place” (personal communication, March 2024). Interviewee #10 recalls how she was told all year long that she was too young and too immature to hold her title. While she feels pride that she was able to hold the title well, the implication that she was too young created the notion that she didn’t deserve the title in the first place (personal communication, March 2024). Interviewee #10 reported something similar,

Throughout my reign, absolutely, there were many girls who didn't think that I deserved my title. Who thought that it should have gone to somebody older, more experienced, more mature, prettier, taller, shorter, or anything? There's always going to be people who do not think you deserve what you have, and there's always going to be people who think negatively about you and that absolutely affects you. It makes you think that you do not deserve your title, that you do not deserve to be here. It gives you really bad imposter syndrome. It is a vicious cycle and then you are not able to give your best to the organization. You are able to be the best queen that you can be the best leader, the best representative of the organization, because you are doubting yourself and you cannot believe in yourself. (personal communication, March 2024)

Interviewee #4 rounds this section out by also identifying imposter syndrome as a symptom of feeling like she was not worthy of the title, compared to the girls she was competing alongside.

### ***Theme 5: The Pageant Industry***

The final significant influence that was repeatedly mentioned throughout the interview process is the expectations in the pageant industry as a whole. Several participant quotes that emphasize this are listed in Table 7 below. Codes within this theme have been split up into appearances, social media, judges, role models, representatives, happy, and perfect.

### **Table 7**



*Codes and Themes Related to the Pageant Industry*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Participant's Quotes</b>
The Pageant Industry	Appearances	"A lot of people look up to you at appearances."
	Appearances	"We always talked about appearances and the crown being our microphone, but it was the truth."
	Social Media	"There's a lot of pressure to say the good things on social media."
	Social Media	"It does mess you up a bit, especially on social media."
	Judges	"You are competing against yourself and your best self, and how the judges score you in that moment."
	Judges	"Pageantry is a sport where you are judged. You are being judged on a subjective nature."
	Judges	"I wanted to walk away and be like, no, I did that the way I wanted to. And if the judges didn't like that, I am ok with it."
	Role Model	"You are a role model and you have to put a smile on your face and act like everything's ok."
	Role Model	"Girls are coming up to me because you have to be a role model for them."
	Representatives	"You are expected as an image representative of the system."
	Representative	"I wanted to be the most, like, best representative, you know, at that time."
	Happy	"And with pageant girls like, I feel like we all try to present that were, like, happy and our lives are great"

	Happy	“A part of it was that like as a national title holder, you had to seem kind of perfect and cheerful all the time.”
	Perfect	“a perfect patty pageant girl”
	Perfect	“I think especially pageant title holders have pressure to be perfect all the time.”

One avenue of promoting the pageant title is through appearances. Appearances could range from volunteering to sitting in a parade, to speaking at a school. The main purpose of them is to promote the title and use its platform for good. Interviewee #1 reflects on how pageant appearances made her feel by saying, “Miss Virginia does a school tour throughout the year. We go to like 70 schools, and I am getting to connect with kids and even teachers. It was rewarding, and it felt so personable” (personal communication, March 2024). Pageant queens are typically required to do a set number of appearances per month, regardless of what may be going on in the queen’s life that doesn’t involve pageantry. Interviewee #9 struggled with the expectations that appearance placed on her throughout her reign. She explains further by saying,

Being a good titleholder really was defined by what you did and how much you did, whether that was measured by how many appearances you did, how many miles you traveled, how many community service hours you did. There was always this expectation of greatness, and it was never defined. It was always this, never-ending ceiling, and no matter how many things you did or how much you did during the year, the ceiling kept getting bigger and bigger, because if you did a lot, the expectation just kept growing that you were going to do more, more and more. You do not get the opportunities for that in traditional settings, but a lot of people look up to you at appearances. We always talked about appearances and the crown being our microphone, but it was the truth. People

wanted to listen to what you had to say because you had that sparkly crown on your head, and while that crown might get people to walk over to you, what you say after somebody walks over to you, that is where you have an impact. (personal communication, March 2024)

This quote perfectly illustrates the power of the crown while also acknowledging the personal strain that comes along with it.

Another expectation that is externally placed on women by that pageant world is that they must be positive representatives of their organization. Interviewee #11 felt that being her most authentic version of herself resulted in her ability to be the best representative for the title she was holding at the time. Interviewee #10 explains that it is not only expected from pageant systems to have their image representatives speak only positively of the organization, but they are also normally contractually obligated to do so (personal communication, March 2024).

When a queen is not viewed as a good representative by her organization, the results can be devastating. Interviewee #10 recounts a time when she accidentally didn't hold the door open for someone behind her. That person called the national director and labeled Interview #10 as rude and a bad representative of the organization. This one person's opinion of her caused Interviewee #10 to reexamine her entire years' worth of work in a new negative light. This caused her to hyper-fixate on every small interaction to the point where she felt like she was "losing her mind" (personal communication, March 2024). She ends by saying, "To this day, I still have a hard time letting it go, and that was six years ago. I still have a hard time being like I did a great job" (Interviewee #10, personal communication, March 2024).

Similar to being a strong representative of your organization, Participants 2 and 8 both listed being a role model to other young girls as a common expectation in the pageant world.

When talking about being a role model, both participants mentioned that beauty queens must maintain this happy and professional persona regardless of what is happening to them internally.

The next external opinion that is normal to encounter in the pageant world is social media. A requirement for this study was that the participant needed to have run a pageant social media account while they were holding a title. This section will address recurring expectations placed on pageant queens to be happy all of the time and to be perfect.

Participants 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, and 11 all agree that there is an unspoken expectation created by the pageant world that beauty queens need to continually portray a look of happiness and perfection. When asked if she was ever expected to be a perpetually happy queen, Interviewee #11 said,

I suppose there would be. I guess it was never like actually brought up to me. I do not think it was ever anything that was like spoken to me like you have to act a certain way or have to do XY and Z. I think it was kind of mostly internalized. (personal communication, March 2024)

Interviewee #4 believed that pageant systems are not the problem, but it is the pageant world in general that demands its participants to be perfect all of the time. Interviewee #10 supports what Interview #4 proposed by saying,

I think I mean, when you look at the pageant industry in general, it is pretty glitz and glam. Nobody wanted people to know that the titleholder struggled. Nobody wanted people to realize that title holders often face mental health issues, or they face burnout, or they face stress, or what a wild concept- they are still human and things happen, right? (personal communication, March 2024)

The lasting effects that the pressures of perfection may induce are comparison and an unrealistic view of what real life is like. Interviewee #10 brings up a fascinating point regarding this phenomenon. She stated that, if a pageant queen is only allowed to post the good things happening in her life, then to social media followers following her journey online it will seem as though her life became picture perfect, once she achieved the coveted crown. This can cause girls to idolize the title, believing that all their problems will go away if only they could win.

This final paragraph will address the last opinion that has been normalized in pageant culture: the judges. Participants 1, 2, 7, and 9 all comment on the judge's role in pageantry and how it affected them. Interviewee #7 perfectly demonstrates the looking-glass self theory with the example she provided in her interview. She imagines how she appears to the judges, and believes they think positively of her, and as a result, this gives her a boosted sense of confidence as she goes about the competition. Participants 1, 2, and 9 all remark on the fickle and subjective nature of pageants. They all recognized that they signed up to be judged and only one girl was going to win at the end of the day. If the judges do not choose them as the winner, none reported having any lasting negative results from not winning the crown.

### **Summary**

In Chapter IV: Findings, the results of this study were explored and illustrated in detail. The chapter began by reiterating the requirements necessary for an individual to be eligible to be a participant in this study. Next, this chapter revealed how the 11 interviews were coded and themed. Codes and themes were then presented using an inductive analysis. The themes revolved around external opinions that have influenced the actions and self-image of pageant women. Tables were created to quickly highlight participants' corresponding quotes from the interviews

that supported the themes. After each table, a narrative explanation was provided that weaved the participants' interviews together. A summary was used as a capstone to Chapter IV: Findings.

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to analyze how the opinions of others ultimately affect the self-image of pageant queens. Eleven phone interviews were utilized as the method for data collection within this study. The interviews gave insight into what external voices played the biggest roles in shaping how a beauty queen ultimately feels about herself long after she leaves the competition stage. The process of this research included a deep dive into the current academic literature topics such as the history of pageantry, the positive and negative effects that have come from pageantry, and the looking-glass self theory. Following the review of the literature, an overview of the qualitative methodology for this is provided. This chapter included topics such as data collection, data analysis, participant requirements, and how those participants were contacted. Next, a chapter was dedicated to the presentation of the findings of this study. The findings were themed and coded to show what five external sources had the biggest impact on a pageant queen's self-image. Codes and quotes from the participants broke the themes down and made the study come alive. This allowed for the pageant queens to have a voice and be connected by their commonalities. This final chapter of the study includes a discussion of the results, several implications, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

As previously mentioned in Chapter I: Introduction, and many other areas throughout this thesis, the purpose of this study was to determine what effects on self-image came from external opinions directed towards women who grew up in pageantry. Thus, the following research question was developed to fulfill the purpose and guide the research of this study:

RQ1: How do the opinions of others have an impact on the self-image of pageant women?

Based on the data presented in Chapter IV: Findings, the conclusion to this research question can be answered as follows: The external opinions communicated to pageant participants are extensive, but the most impactful opinions concerning the formation of self-image came from people closest to the pageant queens.

Pageant queens were a fascinating subject matter. It was made possible to view their life experience through the lens of Cooley's (1902) looking-glass-self theory. Empowered, important, encouraged, uplifted, undeserving, terrified, and embarrassed were words all used to describe the effect that another's opinion had the way pageant queen viewed herself. Feelings of burnout, guilt, hyper-fixation, and an unrealistic expectation to be always perfect also came from the opinions of others. These women electively decide to sign up and be scored by pageant judges. Going into this project, it could have been assumed that the opinions of the judges would play a larger role in the formation of the queen's self-image. Instead, when the judges were mentioned by the participants in the interview transcripts, it was with the acknowledgment that pageants are incredibly subjective, and they know going into the competitions that the judges will either like them or not. Three out of the 11 interviewees (or 27%) all mention that pageantry is a subjective sport. Not being "chosen" by the judges or winning a title never came up as a reason that would produce a damaging effect on the self-image of a pageant queen. When the pageant queen stepped off stage, that is where the true influential judgment began.

The queen's inner circle was named as the most powerful voice in her life. This inner circle constituted the queen's family, friends, fellow contestants, sister queens, coaches, and directors. Family was an influential opinion named by 64% of the interviewees. Directors were



an influential opinion named by 55% of the interviewees. Coaches were an influential opinion named by 36% of the interviewees. Fellow Pageant Girls was an influential opinion named by 36% of the interviewees. Finally, aspects within The Pageant Industry were influential opinions named by 73% of the interviewees. These are all people who had the opportunity to know the pageant queen well and spend a significant amount of time with her. Silva & Calheiros' (2021) research supports this by finding that not all opinions carry the same weight. They found that the opinion of a friend typically meant more to an individual than the opinion of a stranger. If the opinion of the judge is unfavorable toward a pageant girl, she can dismiss it as having a bad interview or not enough time on stage to truly show them who she is. If a close confidant has an unfavorable opinion of her, the results of this study found that those opinions can stay with her for years after it has been said to her. While this is also true of positive comments, data in this study revealed that one negative comment can completely derail a person's thoughts and feelings about themselves.

This study also found that expectations communicated consciously or subconsciously by the pageant community to its queens that they can only present their "best" selves at all times may produce negative effects. 55% of the participants agreed that there is an unspoken expectation created by the pageant world that beauty queens need to continually portray a look of happiness and perfection. It was also mentioned by multiple people in the interviews that pageant queens are meant to be positive representatives of their systems and role models to other young girls. These girls recognized the responsibility they were given and cherished the platform the pageant provided. Several participants mentioned that when they gave up the crown, they were worried if they'd ever do anything as important again. The issue became prevalent when multiple interviewees mentioned that they felt as if they had to be perfect at all times and were not

allowed to show the world if they were having a hard day. From an outside perspective, it seems to a viewer that pageant queens have perfect lives and the crown solved all of their problems. From an internal perspective, this expectation of perfection creates crushing social pressure, feelings of unworthiness, and the formation of imposter syndrome in the pageant. Two participants named former Miss USA, Chelsie Kryst's suicide as something they could relate to. Both interviewees pondered if Chelsie had felt the same weight of expectation by people in the pageant world to hide their feelings and go on as if nothing was ever wrong and if that crushing climate contributed to her decision to commit suicide.

A finding that was of note for this study but was not one of the inherent intentions for this study, was how the pageant queens could consciously say that the opinions of others do not affect them while simultaneously providing stories and examples that prove the exact opposite was true. It was necessary to dig deeper several times to uncover the truth behind what each participant was saying. A reason that they may have wanted to immediately deny that someone else had an impact on the formation of their self-image could be that they were only viewing that impact in a negative light. While some opinions did aid in the creation of negative feelings about oneself in pageant women, the opposite was true too. The opinions of others also made the queens feel competent, confident, valued, important, and purposeful. More research needs to be done on how the subconscious plays a part in revealing the truth about how the opinions of others may shape the formation of a person's self-image.

### **Implications**

The implications for this study are a product of its research question: How do the opinions of others have an impact on the self-image of pageant women? The following sections

portray the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications that were found due to the analysis that was conducted throughout this study.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Both Chapter I: Introduction and Chapter II: Literature Review explained that the communication theory, the looking-glass-self, is the strategy that would inform the research in this project. This theory was created by sociologist Charles Cooley in 1902, originally created for the field of psychology. Scholars have since applied it to the field of communication, specifically in the meaning-making realm (Griffin, 1994). This was especially helpful as Chapter II: Literature previously informed the reader about how a pageant queen has become a symbol in society that extends far beyond herself (American Experience, 2019). In this study, the project sought to understand how the opinions of others affect the self-image of pageant queens. All external factors mentioned were investigated using questions formulated through the scope of the looking-glass self theory. The participants took part in hour-long interviews where they answered 14 questions per-approved by IRB. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, ensuring that all participants' information remained confidential. The interviewed were then analyzed using Creswell's (2014) six-step analysis process where specific themes and codes emerged to create the findings of this study. These interviews allowed for others to see the pageant world from their perspective and understand whose opinions contributed the most to the formation of their self-image, as revealed in Chapter IV: Findings.

### ***Empirical Implications***

Chapter I: Introduction briefly touched on the gap in existing research pertaining to how external opinions play a direct role in the formation of a beauty queen's self-image. There has been a significant amount of research associated with how pageant queens are societal symbols,

how pageantry promotes the thin ideal, and the positive effects that come as a result of pageantry involvement. Other studies have looked at the evolution of pageantry and whether it will be able to survive in today's modern climate. This study is beneficial to research in field of communication, specifically interpersonal and intrapersonal communication, bringing more awareness to the power of words and the impact they can have on another's self-image.

### ***Practical Implications***

The implications of this study will vary depending on its reader. The application of results of this study can be applied to virtually all people as everyone's concept of self is developed through interactions with other people. The results of this study provide insight for individuals into who in their lives might contribute the most to the positive/negative formation of their self-image. This study will also help the reader become aware of the power that their own words and expectations may hold over other people. As discussed in Chapter II: Literature Review, Silva & Calheiros' (2021) study confirmed that people believe and trust opinions that those closest to them may have about their sense of self because they have ample opportunity to spend time with them and know them deeply. This study is an important reminder for the reader to take stock of who is closest to them and analyze the way their words impact how they feel about themselves.

Another practical application of this study refers to the world of social media. These pageant queens are regular girls who face the same struggles and insecurities on social media as other girls her age. As previously mentioned in Chapter II, research has found that even if teens are aware that the images that they are consuming on TikTok and Instagram are not real, they still promote unrealistic appearance ideals and can alter their perceptions of self (*Exploring the Effect of Social Media on Teen Girls' Mental Health*, 2023). This research study highlighted the

ways that pageant queens are expected to promote unrealistic and unattainable ideals of happiness and perfection on social media. The finding of this study revealed how dangerous those expectations are not only for pageant women but for young girls in general.

### **Limitations**

All research comes with a set of limitations and this project was no different. Limitations are “those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretation of the findings from your research” (Price & Murnan, 2004, p. 66). This research utilized a qualitative methodology, using phone interviews as the main method for data collection. In total 11 participants were garnered to partake in this study. While this was enough to create a case study and find similarities among stories, more participants may have yielded a strong correlation or provided more variety to the study. This would have ultimately created more concrete empirical evidence and more trustworthy results. Low participation is the first limitation of the study.

The second limitation of this study was time. Because the interviews involved former pageant queens from all over the United States, the interviews were not able to take place in person. The interviews were limited to happening over the phone with a cap of one hour. If the interviews could have been longer than perhaps more empirical evidence could have been collected that would have impacted the results of this study.

The third limitation of the study was participant commitment. While many former pageant queens initially committed to doing the study, when it came time to set an interview, they could not commit. This could be because of the time commitment that this study required as they were asked to set aside one hour of their time to complete the phone interview. Another reason for the non-commitment could be because the interview questions addressed a personal

matter and they did not want to be recorded saying anything vulnerable, even if they study was promised to be kept confidential.

### **Delimitations**

This next section will cover the delimitations of the study. Delimitations are boundaries put into place for who can be included in the study and who must be excluded in the study (*Scope and Delimitations in Research / AJE*, n.d.). This helps narrow down the research and make it more manageable to achieve the research goal. The screening questions asked of all participants were:

- Have you previously held a national pageant title? (Needed to answer “Yes”)
- Were you entrusted with running a social media account for your pageant over the course of your pageant reign? (Needed to answer “Yes”)
- Did you make public appearances representing your pageant title? (Needed to answer “Yes”)
- Are you still actively competing in pageants? (Needed to answer “No”)
- Are you over the age of 18? (Needed to answer “Yes”)

The first delimitation of the study would be recruitment. Because the participants needed to match very specific requirements, it limited the field of candidates that could be contacted. The participants needed to have previously held a national title, have run a social media account for their pageant system, made a public appearance with their title, not be actively still involved in pageantry, and be over the age of 18. All of these characteristics combined limited the field of who could interview for this project. The specific requirements may also affect how transferable this study would be if another researcher tried to replicate it.

The second delimitation of the study was that the women being interviewed were not actively competing in pageantry. This was a purposeful choice to try and remove some bias from participants, this may have hindered the study if they could not precisely remember how pageantry affected them because it had been years since they held their title.

The third delimitation was age. The participants were all required to be over the age of 18. This was an attempt to garner mature and self-reflective answers from the participants. However, this didn't allow the study to involve a younger perspective from pageant girls. This younger perspective could have given insight into how the opinions of others were shaping their self-images at a very malleable age. Additionally, because the study required queens to have used social media during their pageant reign, this also eliminated former pageant queens over the rough age of 40. An older women's perspective could have given insight into how pageantry has evolved over the decades and if the opinions of others still have an impact on them today.

### **Future Research**

The research conducted in this study helped to provide a path forward for future research in the field of communication to contribute to the body of literature that is relevant to these topics. The first avenue for future research would be to do a project on the individual influences that this study found to affect the formation of a pageant queen's self-image. The influences were family, coaches, directors, other pageant girls, and the pageant industry. An entire study could be done on how family alone or the coached alone influence the way that people think about themselves.

Future research could explore how the conscious mind does not want to acknowledge how other people's opinions have an impact on our own self-image, and yet these interactions with others are so foundational to our sense of self that the subconscious mind cannot help but

pay tribute to them. A two-part study could take place. The first part could record and analyze if the participant denies the involvement that other people have in the formation of their sense of self, but then later accidentally contradict this. The second half of the study could revolve around confronting the participants with their contradictions and see if they alter their original opinions.

Another study could be done that specifically revolves around how pageant girls both use and are used by social media. This study touched on social media's influence over pageant queens, but it was not the main focus of the study. With so much research being poured into the ways that social media is molding young minds, this project would be in significant need.

This study did not inquire about the pageant queen's religious beliefs but that could also be an area for future study. Religious beliefs may have a significant impact on one's self esteem, potentially even beyond that of a the beauty queen's inner circle.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to analyze how the opinions of others impact a pageant queen's self-image. This thesis began by providing an introduction, including a background of relevant topics, proving the significance of this particular research, and defining the research question that guided this research process. Chapter II revolved around providing a thorough overview of the current relevant body of scholarly literature. Chapter III: Methodology outlined the structure in which this project would be accomplished. The data for the study came from 11 phone interviews that lasted up to an hour. The 14 questions asked were created from the three tenets of the looking-glass self theory (Cooley, 1902). The data was then able to be coded and analyzed which resulted in the following themes becoming apparent: Family, Director, Coaches, Fellow Pageant Girls, and the Pageant Industry as a whole.



An analysis of these themes and quotes from the participants showed concrete evidence of how the external opinions of others either positively or negatively shaped the formation of a pageant queen's self-image. This study also yielded practical implications for individuals who are actively involved in social media or for individuals who want a deeper understanding of how their close circle of confidants may be impacting the way they view themselves. The empirical implications of this study further advance the current body of literature in the field of communication. Recommendations for future research were provided based on findings that came up in this study that were not anticipated. The results of this study answered the research question by specifically showing that external opinions communicated to pageant participants are extensive, but the most impactful opinions, concerning the formation of self-image, came from people closest to the pageant queens. These findings underscore the tremendous power of words and the impact that they can have on our own lives and in the lives of those we interact with.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. What did your self-image look like before you were crowned?
2. When you competed, did you ever changed a part of yourself because you thought the judges might respond more favorably to you that way?
3. Did you ever assume to know what other people were thinking about you?
4. Who were the most influential voices in your life over the course of your pageant reign?
5. Who were you most concerned with pleasing over the course of your reign?
6. Was there ever a time during your reign that the opinion of another affected the way that you viewed yourself?
7. Was there ever a time during your reign that someone blatantly made you feel bad about yourself?
8. Did gaining the pageant social media platform effect your actions or the way that you presented yourself online?
9. Would you say that your cyber self as your pageant self was completely congruent with who you were in person?
10. Would you say you felt more of a connection with your audience through your online platform or through your pageant appearances?
11. Were there any assumptions made about you by the media over the course of your reign?
12. Did the opinions of those people on social media ever effect the way that you viewed yourself?
13. Did you ever feel like you didn't deserve the title because of an opinion of someone else?
14. After giving up the title, what were the lasting effects that the job had on your self-esteem?

## Appendix B

### Information Sheet

**Title of the Project:** Beyond the Crown: A Qualitative Research Study on Pageant Women and the Looking-Glass Self

**Principal Investigator:** Laurel Stiekes, Graduate Student, School of Communication & the Arts, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a woman 18 years of age or older, have held a national pageant title, and have previously run a social media account for their pageant system. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to examine how the opinions of others has an impact on the self-image of pageant women.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an hour-long online interview through the use of Microsoft Teams. The videos will be recorded so that the audios can be transcribed for data purposes.
2. Review your interview transcripts for accuracy.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include further current literature in the field of communication surrounding how the perception of people's opinions may have a direct correlation to the formation of a person's self-image.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic data will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for 3 years and then deleted. The researcher will only have access to these recordings.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Laurel Stiekes. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Cecil Kramer, at [REDACTED].

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*