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THERE SHE IS: HOW BEAUTY STANDARDS AFFECT ASIAN AMERICAN BEAUTY
QUEENS

by

Rebecca Chia

B.A., University of Iowa, 2020

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts

School of Sociology
in the Graduate School
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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Rebecca Chia

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

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in the field of Sociology

Approved by:

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Graduate School
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Rebecca Chia, for the Master of Arts degree in Sociology, presented on July 13, 2023, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: THERE SHE IS: BEAUTY STANDARDS AFFECT ASIAN AMERICAN BEAUTY QUEENS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Rachel Bridges Whaley

Beauty pageants were created to celebrate a woman's beauty. However, beauty pageants then and now seem to celebrate Eurocentric beauty standards, and this is apparent in the lack of racial and cultural representation and diversity in premier pageants like Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe. Using in-depth interviews, the author examines how Asian American women who compete in pageants navigate their racial and cultural identities and how they define beauty standards in a white dominated space. This study identifies two significant themes: 1) the Asian women control the narrative around their racial and cultural identities in a space where there is a lack of Asian representation, and 2) beauty standards rooted in Eurocentric beauty impact the way Asian women define beauty. This study explores how race, ethnicity, culture, and gender impact the individual experiences of Asian American beauty queens.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The first modern beauty pageant in the US can be traced back to the 1850s when famous circus showman P.T. Barnum held a beauty contest for young women that attracted thousands of people across the nation to pick the winner (PBS, 2023). Many years later, this beauty contest would evolve into beauty pageants featuring sparkling gowns, glamorous hair and makeup, and a model strut in a swimsuit. Thousands of women compete on stage and vie for titles and opportunities to represent their towns, regions, states, or even nations. There are various types of pageants and pageant systems that operate around the world; some well-known pageants include Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe. For participants, common motivations for competing in pageantry include opportunities for receiving scholarships, showcases for talent, and recognition for the hours, maybe even months, of training and preparation that led them to grace the stage. But to outsiders, pageants are grounds for oppression because they believe pageants objectify and sexualize young women, negatively impact their self-esteem, and create body dissatisfaction and depression (Kelly & Garmon, 2016; Everhart, 2011). Just as the Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe pageants and winners are well-known figures for their glamour and beauty, they are also known to be the target of controversy.

Pageants, especially in America, function as a site of racial and ethnic suppression. Bans kept women of color from competing and while these rules no longer exist, there is a lack of racial diversity amongst pageant winners, especially from the premier pageant systems of Miss America and Miss USA (PBS, 2023). Cheryl Browne from Iowa graced the Miss America stage as their first black contestant in 1970, 49 years after the first Miss America competition. The first black Miss America was crowned in 1984 when Vanessa Williams represented New York (PBS,

2023). The first black Miss USA was crowned in 1990 with Carole Gist who hailed from Michigan and the first woman of color to win Miss Universe was in 1957 with Peru's Gladys Zender. Recently, there has been more diversity in pageantry, with non-white contestants winning crowns and beauty standards changing to be more inclusive of different body types. As of 2021, 81% of Miss USA winners were white, 15% were black, and only 1 Hispanic American and 2 Asian Americans have won Miss USA (Pageant Planet, 2021). There have only been 11 Miss Americas who were black, 3 who were Asian, and 1 who was Hispanic. There have been no plus size or petite size woman who have won Miss America or Miss USA. Are there still ways pageantry falls short of welcoming contestants of all races, ethnicities, sizes, and shapes? I conducted a qualitative study interviewing Asian American pageant competitors and titleholders to evaluate how their racial and cultural identities influence their pageant experiences, including (but not limited to) participation, preparation, and competition, as well as how they navigate Eurocentric beauty standards that have firmly established their foundation on pageantry.

Problem Statement

For pageants based in the US, most of the participants are white women. King-O'Riain (2007) states that both national and global pageants have undertones of Western beauty standards for their competitors and winners which is why one is more likely to see a white woman competing and winning. Given this, it seems that pageants may reproduce white beauty standards and racial and ethnic suppression. However, in recent years, there have been more women of color competing and winning major pageants, for example in 2019, the winners of the five major pageant systems (Miss America, Miss Teen USA, Miss USA, Miss Universe, and Miss World) were black (Yan, 2019). When it comes to American beauty pageants, especially Miss America and Miss USA, there are not many Asian competitors or winners in those pageant systems. In an

activity that is dominated by white women, pageants are bound with beauty standards based on white women. This raises the question of how Asian American competitors navigate those beauty standards during their pageant preparation and competition and how their race and ethnicity impacts their pageant preparation and competition.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how Asian women navigate their racial and cultural identities and Eurocentric beauty standards primarily in US based pageants. In a white-dominated activity like pageantry, people of color are underrepresented among competitors and winners. In addition, for an activity where beauty is factored into the score, it's pertinent to understand how women of color navigate Eurocentric beauty standards that are the foundation of beauty pageants. It is important to note that pageants are open to everybody, that there is no race or ethnic rule that keeps women of color from competing in pageants. There is a rule of eligibility that states the women competing must be citizens of the city, state, or country that they are competing in, implying that anyone of any race or ethnicity is allowed to compete if they can prove their citizenship. But due to the history of pageants being won by white women, Eurocentric and white beauty standards could affect how contestants of color compete.

This study will also explore how Asian women navigate their racial and cultural identities in a space where racial representation is lacking. The topic of Asian representation has gained interest and discussion since the rise of the Stop AAPI Hate movement in response to COVID-19 related xenophobia (Stop AAPI Hate, 2023). When a contestant is crowned as the winner, they not only become a representative for their city, state, or country, they represent the organization or system in which they won their title. In American pageants, it seems difficult for an Asian contestant, or any contestant of color, to feel she is being represented well if the winner does not

look like her. In a space where there are not many Asian people, let alone people of color, this study will explore how Asian women navigate their experiences and racial identity in a white-dominated space like beauty pageants.

Research Questions

This study aims to investigate how white beauty standards affect the experiences of Asian American women who compete in US based pageants as well as how those women feel about their own racial and ethnic identity during their pageant participation, preparation, and competition through these research questions:

1. How do Asian American women navigate their racial and cultural identities when competing in a pageant?
2. How do Eurocentric beauty standards affect how Asian American women perceive their own beauty when competing in a pageant?

Significance

A study on race and ethnicity in pageantry is significant in understanding the cultural meanings behind pageantry, the cultural meanings behind beauty, and the experiences of Asian women. The study of cultural sociology makes meanings of cultural productions, objects, texts, and symbols that may contain meanings of social inequality and conflict that society overlooks as a normal, natural event (Spillman, 2020). Examples of seemingly neutral events that have inequality embedded into them include the hiring process when applying for a new job or aging (Spillman, 2020; Rivera, 2016; Abramson, 2015). The process of competing in a pageant, from practicing in tall heels to being crowned with an extravagant tiara, is a cultural production chock full of symbolism that society may see as a normal part of the competition. Among cultural sociology, different theoretical approaches can be used to help uncover the hidden inequalities

within mundane events. When it comes to pageantry, sociologists may reveal the cultural meanings that contestants go through to define, change, and present their identities (King-O’Riain, 2007). This study will elaborate on how Asian women navigate meanings of beauty in a space that is predominately white. In pageantry, contestants do gender to present themselves as the next winner to the judges, audience members, and even to themselves. Since US pageants are not that diverse and rooted in Eurocentric beauty standards, it leaves one to wonder how Asian American women who are not represented on US pageant stages present their race and gender when competing. This study will contribute to a lack of literature on the embodiment of gender with an intersectional lens.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background of Pageants

Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe are the most well-known pageants to the public. Commonly mistaken for one another, there are distinct differences between the pageant systems. Miss America began in 1921 as a national competition for women ages 18-28. While still a pageant, Miss America considers themselves a scholarship organization, offering millions of dollars in scholarships as one of the largest scholarship providers to young women in the US (Miss America, 2023). To qualify for Miss America, a contestant must win a local title that represents her city, county, or region, which advances her to the state competition. Winners of the state competitions come from the 50 states plus DC to compete for the national title of Miss America. Miss America contestants compete in evening gown, interview, talent, activewear, and on stage question. Unlike Miss USA, Miss America requires contestants to compete in talent. In 2018, Miss America removed the swimsuit competition as a way to progress towards body inclusivity. As of 2023, Miss America introduced an activewear competition to replace the swimsuit portion and shifted to focus on health and wellness (McGraw, 2023). Miss America does have a teen division called Miss America's Teen that features the same competitions for the teen contestants and offers scholarships.

Miss USA began in 1952 as a national competition for women ages 18-28. The winner of Miss USA advances to the international competition of Miss Universe, unlike Miss America, who does not advance. Miss USA contestants compete in evening gown, interview, swimsuit, and on-stage question. To qualify for Miss USA, just like Miss America, a contestant must have a local title that advances her to the state competition. The winners of the state competitions from

the 50 states plus DC compete for the national title of Miss USA. The winner of Miss USA competes with women from 90 other countries for the international title of Miss Universe. Miss USA offers some scholarships to their winners with most of their prize package featuring hair and makeup services, wardrobe, and sometimes a cash prize. As of 2022, Miss USA and Miss Universe announced a new tagline, “Beautifully Confident”, promoting the organization’s goal of instilling confidence in their contestants and titleholders (Miss Universe Organization, 2022). Miss USA also has a teen division called Miss Teen USA where teens compete in evening gown, interview, activewear, and on stage question. Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe were once nationally televised and are now being streamed online.

Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe are not the only pageant systems that exist. There are hundreds of pageant systems in the US that offer different titles, prize packages, and phases of competition. Pageants are categorized into four types: 1) Scholarship pageants which, just like Miss America, offer scholarships as their prize and focus on public-speaking skills and education, 2) Glamour pageants which, just like Miss USA, offer wardrobe and hair and makeup services as their prizes and focus on modeling, 3) Glitz pageants which are commonly geared toward children, offer large cash prizes and large crowns and focus on facial beauty, and 4) Cultural pageants which are usually smaller and based in a local community, could be either public-speaking or modeling focused, and require contestants to fulfill a racial or ethnic qualification. Pageants also tend to include levels of advancement starting with a local or regional competition, a state competition, a national competition, and, if the pageant system is catered globally, an international competition. As mentioned earlier, Miss America is a national competition where contestants must win a local competition to advance to the state competition and then to the national competition. Miss USA is a national competition where contestants must

have a local title to advance to the state competition and then to the national competition. The winner of Miss USA advances to the international competition of Miss Universe, competing with 90 other national winners from across the globe. It is important to note these levels of advancements and different types of pageants are for context however, this study is mainly focused on US based pageants.

Beauty pageants are sites rich with symbolism and filled with cultural meanings that can reveal the processes of collective cultural production (King-O’Riain, 2007). Beauty pageants are an activity exclusively for women, with contestants acting as symbols for how women should walk, talk, act, and dress. The contestant that performs the best is crowned with an extravagant crown and sash. The crown and sash act as symbols for the pageant system the contestant now represents, while the crowning moment is a process that represents the contestant’s beauty being celebrated. The chosen winner serves as the symbolic representation of the collective identity of many groups including the system that organized the pageant, the other contestants, and her city, state, or nation (King-O’Riain, 2007). But becoming a beauty queen does not happen overnight; they are created. Beauty pageants become a space where cultural identity is reproduced, where contestants learn what a winner does and looks like through action and interaction with other contestants. From preparation to competition day, contestants engage in various practices that define and change their cultural identities. These practices include dieting and exercise, spending thousands of dollars on wardrobe, having elaborate hair and makeup, and learning to strut the stage. On top of physical appearance, a contestant must also know how to engage with others, be well-spoken, intelligent, and talented. This can be attained through pageant coaching so she can be trained on how to be a beauty queen from the inside out. In pageantry, judges and audience members alike would call these processes “the total package”, while Banet-Weiser (1999) calls it

“an elaborate balancing act between representing themselves in terms of liberal personhood and individual achievement and participating in a competition dedicated to the display and maintenance of an ideal feminine form” (p. 25). From the preparation to the competition, it is all these processes that require cultural sociological analysis to make meaning of why women compete in pageantry and what it means to society.

Doing Gender in Pageantry

Beauty pageants were created to celebrate the beauty of women, so the gender implications of how a woman should walk, talk, and dress is the foundation of a beauty pageant. Because beauty pageants are sites for cultural identity to be reproduced and where contestants learn how a beauty queen walks, talks, and dresses through social interaction, contestants are doing gender to be perceived as the ideal woman. West and Zimmerman (1987) coined the concept of doing gender, that people do gender like a performance, displaying the gender they want to be perceived as. Gender performance is prevalent in pageantry as it involves certain activities that contestants do to cast expressions of femininity. Doing gender is a result from interacting with others in social situations, but also arguably, from larger experiences of gender socialization throughout life. During interaction, not only are other contestants and pageant queens performing gender, but the contestant will begin to show certain behaviors to perform the gender they believe belongs in the social context. If they cannot satisfy one standard, they try to make up for it by following other standards. If a contestant saw what the previous winner wore, how she spoke, and how she walked, she may want to emulate the behaviors of the previous winner so she could win. If the contestant cannot follow the standard, she may try to compensate in other phases of competition. However, not complying with gender standards leads to consequences and the risk of accountability (Lucal, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987). If a

contestant does not look or perform the way a beauty queen is expected to, she may face consequences including losing the pageant; mental, emotional, and physical pressures; and body-shaming from audience members.

The swimsuit competition in pageants is a place where doing gender is performed. It is expected that all pageant women be tall, thin, not too curvy or too muscular. If she is too curvy, she is overweight, and if she is too muscular, her body looks too masculine. Pageant contestants learn these expectations through other contestants sharing workout routines, judges choosing certain body types into the semifinals, or even audience members commenting on the contestant's body. If a contestant does not do gender correctly, not only is she subjected to losing the pageant, but she is also subjected to the mental, emotional, and physical affects from trying to maintain a certain body type. Lucal (1999) found that when gender is done "incorrectly," others tried to do it correctly for her. When audience members comment on contestants' bodies, they are teaching them something about expected gender and body standards. A study by Wonderlich (2005) shows that women who competed in pageants as children scored higher on body dissatisfaction, interpersonal distrust, and impulse dysregulation compared to non-participants. Studies about the portrayal of women in the media, focusing on the once nationally televised Miss America pageant, discussed how pageant contestants maintained a low body weight and even continued to decrease in size in the following years (Garner et al., 1980; Wiseman et al., 1992).

Another social consequence if gender is not performed correctly is body shaming. The audience's gaze and expectations for what a beauty queen looks like exerts informal social control – through body shaming – that hold contestants accountable to a certain body type. As stated before, it is expected that pageant women fulfill a certain body type and if a contestant

walks the stage not fulfilling that ideal, she is subjected to bullying and body shaming. In the 2014 Miss USA competition, Miss Indiana Mekayla Diehl “shocked” the audience for appearing in a bikini that showcased her curves; Mekayla was a size 4 (Kim, 2014). In the 2016 Miss Universe competition, Miss Canada Siera Bearchell received backlash for appearing in a bikini as a size 6 and called too fat to become Miss Universe (McDermott, 2017). Alicia Machado of Venezuela became the first Miss Universe under Donald Trump’s ownership of the Miss Universe Organization in 1996 (Toobin, 2018). During her reign, she was photographed looking slightly larger than when she was crowned, sparking rumors that her crown would be taken away due to her appearance. On Howard Stern’s radio show, Trump was interviewed stating that Machado was “somebody that likes to eat” and said he would accompany her to the gym to watch her work out (Toobin, 2018). These statements were shown to the public during Trump’s presidential campaign to which he did not apologize for. Body shaming and bullying can also lead to deadly consequences. Comments about Miss USA 2022 Cheslie Kryst’s physical appearance during and after her reign from pageant enthusiasts and the public alike led to her depression and suicide in 2022 (Sheffield, 2022). West and Zimmerman’s (1987) doing gender explains how doing gender is like a performance, where an individual displays the gender they want to be perceived as. Doing gender is learned through interactions with others and if gender is not done as expected, the individual is susceptible to consequences. Doing gender can assist in understanding how a beauty queen’s gender performance has an interactional influence over how Asian women present their gender and beauty in a space where white beauty standards prevail.

Racialized Beauty in Pageantry

Societal beauty standards rooted in whiteness and Eurocentric beauty are often perpetuated by TV shows, advertisements, music videos, fashion trends, and other forms of mass

media and commercial influences (Sekayi, 2003). The Miss America, Miss USA, and the Miss Universe competitions are no exception, as they were once nationally televised and are usually the public's first look at pageantry. These societal beauty standards are based on ideas of whiteness and European ideals including skin color, facial features, and hair (Bryant, 2013; Robinson-Moore, 2008). Black women in particular have been victims to these beauty standards. Robinson-Moore (2008) found that European beauty standards are internalized by the Black community and that darker skinned women experienced feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. Thomas' (2001) study found that Black adolescent females with physical attributes most unlike their white peers were often alienated from social places. Colorism is very much present in the Black community and contributes to European beauty standards. Black women with lighter skin tones were perceived as more attractive and more valued than Black women with darker skin tones (Frisby, 2006; Coard et al., 2001). Beauty standards based on racial identity and skin tone are rooted in a white standard of beauty which has emotionally damaging consequences to Black women (Silvestrini, 2019). Before becoming Miss USA 2016, Deshauna Barber shared that she did not think she could become Miss USA because the last Miss USA to have her same skin tone was in 1993 (Barber, 2017). When Barber won Miss USA, she advanced to the international Miss Universe competition. At Miss Universe, Barber was met with colorism and racism for her skin being too dark compared to her peers and social media images of ideal pageant queens. In 2017 when Barber passed on her title to the next Miss USA, Barber was met with shock from pageant staff, contestants, and audience members when she sported her natural hair at the pageant (Barber, 2017). It is important to note that recent beauty campaigns, Black social media influencers, and even Black beauty queens have combatted these standards and set beauty standards on their own. Being proud of their curvy figures or wearing their hair naturally

are some of the ways that Black women have combated white beauty standards and reclaimed beauty as their own. Hill-Collins (1990) describes this as holding up a metaphorical mirror to one another that “enables us to see and love one another for who we really are, new possibilities for empowerment via deep love” (p. 166). For Black women to recognize beauty within the Black community and within themselves, a new sense of confidence and empowerment can emerge, and that positivity can spread for generations to come. By holding up that mirror for other Black women and for herself, Black women can redefine beauty that includes Black African features being capable of beauty and rewrite controlling images surrounding Black women (Hill-Collins, 1990).

Asian Beauty and Pageantry

Do Asian women engage in the same self-love practices as Black women do when facing European beauty standards? Asian women have a lower sense of self-esteem because Asian women have internalized whiteness and European standards of beauty, though their physical features are far from the standard (Evans & McConnell, 2003). Asian physical features include an epicanthic eye fold, a “flat” and broad nose, and a yellow tone to their skin (Hall, 1995). These features have been associated with “passivity, dullness, a lack of sociability” and foreignness (Kaw, 1993, p. 75). At the same time, the physical features of Asian women have also been sexualized and eroticized by the media and making them targets of sexual violence (Hwang & Parreñas, 2021; Kim 2021). The distinctive physical appearance Asians have is used to lump various Asian ethnic groups into one homogenous group, erasing cultural and ethnic differences (Kim, 2021; Nakamura, 2002). The stereotyping and social stigma Asian women face has led some to alter their physical appearance. Getting double eyelids and a more sculpted nose is a common surgical practice and desire for Asian women to appear more Western (Hall, 1995).

Skin whitening is also a very common practice for Asian women. In Asia, skin whitening is presented in a way that can raise a woman's social standing, reinforcing the norm of whiteness and European beauty standards (Mady et al., 2022). Just like light skinned Black women, light skinned, almost white skinned, Asian women are viewed as having social capital and perceived as more attractive (Mady et al., 2022).

Pyke and Johnson (2003) applied West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of doing gender to how second-generation Asian women do gender across ethnic and mainstream settings and the expectations that went along with it. Their participants described the typical behaviors of Asian women as hyperfeminine and submissive and the behaviors of white women as confident and independent. Asian women would perform specific gendered traits depending on where they were and who they were with; for instance, if they were with family, the women would perform Asian femininity and be quiet and submissive, but if they were out with friends, at school, or in public, the women would perform white femininity and be outspoken and extroverted. The Asian women in the study wanted to break from these behavioral expectations as they continue to compare themselves to white women.

The relationship between race and gender is crucial in understanding how Asian women navigate white beauty standards and beauty pageants. Crenshaw (1991) explains that institutions in American society were created with white women in mind, not all women. Beauty pageants were created to showcase the beauty and talents of white women, in fact, a written rule in the Miss America handbook in the 1930s stated, "contestants must be of good health and of the white race" (PBS, 2023). This racist rule no longer exists, but the ideals of white femininity remain in pageantry. There is a lack of racial representation, diversity, and body inclusivity in beauty pageants, especially in the premier beauty pageants of Miss America, Miss USA, and

Miss Universe. Utilizing Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional lens, this study will examine how Asian women who compete in beauty pageants navigate their racial and cultural identities and define beauty in a space where white beauty standards prevail.

Summary

When it comes to Asian women competing in American pageants, there is little representation. The first Asian to compete at Miss America was in 1948 by Yun Tau Zane from Hawaii, and over fifty years later, the first Asian American crowned Miss America was Angela Perez Baraquio from Hawaii in 2001. In 2014, Nina Davaluri from New York was the first Indian American crowned Miss America and in 2022, Emma Broyles from Alaska was the first Korean American crowned Miss America. In Miss America's over 100 years of existence, only 3 Asian women claimed the national title. For Miss USA, the first Asian woman (also the first person of color to win), Macel Wilson from Hawaii, won Miss USA in 1962. The next Asian woman to win Miss USA was sixty years later, R'Bonney Gabriel from Texas. For Miss Universe, there have been fourteen Asian winners, the first one crowned in 1959 and the latest crowned in 2022. While Asian women have found some success on the international stage, the same cannot be said about the American stage. With the history of beauty pageants, women of color, and beauty standards, using an intersectional lens, my study explored how Asian American women who compete in American beauty pageants navigate their racial and cultural identities in a white space and how they define beauty standards in pageantry.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In this study, I examined how Asian American women who compete in beauty pageants navigate their racial and cultural identities in a white space and how they define and perceive their own beauty when facing white beauty standards. Using a qualitative approach, I analyzed interview data collected from Asian American pageant competitors. I focused on finding themes of participants' experiences with their racial and cultural identities in pageants, how they view beauty, and how they define beauty in a space where white beauty standards are dominant.

I conducted in-depth interviews for my study which included a list of predetermined, open-ended questions about the participant's pageant experiences, their racial and cultural identities, and their opinions on beauty standards in pageantry. I chose to conduct in-depth interviews because it would allow my participants to openly share their personal experiences and stories while also diving deeper into the research topic (Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). My qualitative methods use the grounded theory approach in that my data came from the analysis of my participants' responses (Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Recruitment

To participate, the women needed to meet the following criteria: 1) identity as Asian/Asian American, 2) be between the ages of 18 and 28, and 3) have competed in a pageant within the last 12 months. I did not ask but assumed that all participants identified as female and were from the US based on rules of eligibility for most US pageant systems that require contestants to be female and be a US citizen. Participants' region of residence was recorded for demographic purposes. The specific ages of 18-28 were selected because that is the age range for the Miss category in most pageant systems. A total of 11 interviews were done.

Recruitment of participants was conducted through an IRB-approved flier and social media post posted on my personal social media accounts including Facebook and Instagram (see Appendix A). Through my personal involvement in pageantry, I follow many pageant personalities, and many follow me back so I knew that sharing the recruitment post on my social media would garner some views and shares. My accounts and posts were made public so that everyone could view and share them and did not need to add me or follow me to see the posts. The social media post included the criteria for participation and my email and telephone contact information as well the additional contact option of private messaging on Facebook or Instagram. The consent form and the factsheet needed to be signed, filled out, and sent back to me before scheduling the interview (see Appendix B). I did not plan for follow up interviews because I wanted participants to reflect on their pageant experiences in the moment of the interview and not be influenced into thinking about beauty standards and/or race and ethnicity at their next pageant before or after the interview. To increase my sample, I used snowball sampling with participants (Goodman, 1961). After completing each interview, I asked participants if they could send my flyer and social media post to other Asian pageant competitors between the ages of 18-28 that they thought would be interested in participating in the study.

My total sample for this study was 11. I suspected that finding participants would be difficult due to the low percentage of people of color, especially Asians, in pageantry (Pageant Planet, 2021) and my suspicions came to fruition. I reposted my flyer on my social media platforms many times, asked my participants if they could share my flyer, and even direct messaged my flyer to some Asian pageant queens I came across on social media. With no more incoming participants and analyzing the data I did have, I decided to stop recruiting because saturation occurred. While my sample size is small, I believe the data collected is adequate for

my study. Following Malterud et al.'s (2015) assessment on small sample sizes in qualitative studies, the following characteristics allowed for adequate information power or data saturation: the focused aim of my study on experiences of Asian American pageant competitors, sample specificity for a specific group, and quality of dialogue where sufficient information was shared. Data saturation can also be achieved from small sample sizes if no new ideas emerge from additional interviews and if themes repeat themselves throughout interviews (Young & Casey, 2018, Hagaman & Wutich, 2016, Francis et al., 2010). Following this previous literature, I believe that I reached data saturation and my sample size gave me adequate results.

Sample Description

Before beginning interviews, I obtained demographic information from each participant via the factsheet (see Table 1). All eleven participants identified as Asian American with varying ethnicities including three Filipino, four Chinese, two Korean, one Taiwanese, and one Malaysian. Three of the participants identified as racially and ethnically mixed, but the Asian ethnicity they listed was used for sample description. States of residence were not used to protect participants, but their region of residence was obtained. Following a US region map (National Geographic, 2023), states were divided into five regions: West, Southwest, Midwest, Southeast, and Northeast. Seven participants were from the West, two from the Midwest, one from the Southeast, one from the Northeast, and no one from the Southwest. The average age of the sample was 23, with the youngest participant being 18 and the eldest participant being 27. The average number of titles won was 4 titles, with the least being 1 title and the most being 12 titles. The average number of years active in pageantry was 8 years, with the least being 1 year and the most being 19 years.

Table 1. Description of Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Region of Residence	Ethnicity	Number of titles won	Years active since first pageant
Blair	26	West	Taiwanese	5	11
Courtney	25	West	Filipino	1	2
Isla	21	Midwest	Filipino	5	15
Edeline	23	West	Chinese	4	4
Lacey	18	West	Chinese	2	6
Fallon	23	West	Filipino	3	12
Janessa	19	West	Malaysian	2	3
Ashlyn	27	Southeast	Chinese	12	19
Hadley	23	Midwest	Korean	1	1
Delia	24	West	Chinese	2	8
Kathleen	19	Northeast	Korean	4	6

Procedures

Interviews were conducted over Zoom so I could meet with participants virtually from all around the US. Interviews were scheduled at times that were convenient for the participants. Zoom also features an option to record the meeting. The recorded meeting was automatically saved into an audio file and a video file. Per the consent form, only audio was used for the study, so the video file was deleted. The audio and transcription files were stored in a password protected computer that only I had access to.

Interviews were on average 60 minutes long. I asked participants questions that were divided into three general categories: 1) questions about their individual pageant experiences such as how they got started in pageants, 2) questions about beauty standards in pageantry to understand how participants define and navigate white beauty standards, and 3) questions about

race and ethnicity in pageantry to learn about the participant's racial and cultural identities, (see Appendix C). I began the interview asking general questions about their pageant experiences to get to know the participant better and create a comfortable, conversational environment. To highlight the variety of involvement within the participants, participants were asked the number of titles they have won and how many years they have been competing since their first pageant up to the date of their interview.

Coding and Analysis

Data were collected through the factsheet and individual in-depth interviews. Before scheduling their interviews, participants returned the factsheet that included questions about their age, state of residence, when and what was their first pageant, and when and what was their last pageant. Interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word's transcription feature. This feature converts speech to text with each speaker individually separated to show a conversation. After the initial transcription, I listened to each interview while reading the transcript that Microsoft Word converted to ensure accuracy. After the transcribing process, I employed a process of hand coding to analyze the data carefully. I used codes and a codebook to organize all the responses, sort similar content into categories, and analyze major themes from those categories (Silverman, 2019, Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I coded the data following the three general categories mentioned earlier including individual pageant experiences, thoughts on beauty standards in pageants, and race and ethnicity in pageants. From these codes, I focused on emergent themes across these categories that could answer my research questions. As a result, I found that my participants actively expressed their racial and cultural identities while competing, but they also have had their definitions of beauty altered due to white beauty standards. These themes will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Positionality of the Researcher

The subject of this study is one that is very specific and relatable to me. I acknowledge my position not only as an Asian woman, but as an Asian woman who competes in pageantry. I believe that my position gave a sense of comfort to the participants, as they were speaking to someone who looks like them and could relate to their pageant experiences in terms of the terminology they use, the systems they mention, and things they referenced. My position did not influence the results of this study seeing as the study is exploring the individual experiences of the participants.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This study aimed to evaluate how Asian American women who competed in American beauty pageants navigated their racial and cultural identities in a white space, how they defined beauty, and challenged beauty standards. Through in-depth interviews, I identified trends in how Asian American women navigated their identities and how they experienced beauty standards while competing in beauty pageants. Through an analysis of these findings, I identified two major themes: (1) the Asian women took control of their racial and cultural identities by using it to their advantage when they competed, and (2) beauty pageant standards rooted in Eurocentric beauty affected how Asian women experienced beauty. I also identified a subtheme among my participants who were racially mixed.

Why Pageants?

At the beginning of each interview, I asked my participants questions about how they got started in pageants. With the reputation that pageantry has, it left me to wonder why and how women get involved. Most of the participants said they received a letter in the mail from the pageant system inviting them to compete. Some participants have always wanted to do a pageant, especially after watching Miss America or Miss USA on TV, and the invitation was their ticket to competing. Few participants had other reasons for why they started in pageantry. Blair, a Taiwanese competitor of 11 years, said she got started in pageants as an extra-curricular activity for her college applications to stand out. Courtney, a Filipina competitor of 2 years, said her mom did it growing up and wanted her to try it. Ashlyn, a Chinese competitor of 19 years, said her parents put her in pageants to push her out of her comfort zone. I asked my participants why they kept doing pageants even if they do not win. Most of my participants shared the similar

answer of having gained confidence and a sense of self-growth through competing. Isla, a Filipino competitor of 15 years, said she gained so much confidence in herself and as she got older, pageantry helped her in her career:

“My parents saw such growth in me... I wasn’t as shy, I was more outgoing like, I had so much more confidence with just 1 pageant under my belt. Now that I’m older, I keep competing because it really helps me with the career I want to go into.”

Similarly, Lacey, a Chinese competitor of 6 years, shared that not only did she develop more self-confidence, but she also met new people and learned new skills that would benefit her in the future:

“I didn’t realize how much confidence I was gaining from it, how many skills I was gonna learn, how empowered I would feel, or I didn’t realize how incredible of people I would meet that would really continue to inspire and motivate me. I think those connections that I have made have been the most valuable part of pageantry for me.”

In addition to boosting her confidence, Kathleen, a Korean competitor of 6 years, spoke of how pageants are addicting, and how she used them to challenge herself:

“I continue to participate mainly because I like myself the best when I’m working towards something, I find that I feel the best when I’m preparing for a pageant just because you’re in such a great space... you’re in this place where you’re thinking very positively, you’re working towards a goal, and that feeling is very addicting. I feel like that’s what keeps me coming back because I love that feeling of hope for a new goal, a new challenge that you’re preparing for so that really puts me in a good place.”

Taking Control

In a space where there is a lack of racial diversity, especially Asian representation, it

could be difficult to feel a sense of belonging. Coupled with the racial and gendered expectations of Asian women, Asian American women could feel out of place in pageantry. My participants expressed this sense of uneasiness at first but learned how to control the narrative surrounding their racial and cultural identities. By taking control, my participants learned how to use their identities in a positive manner to stand out from the competition. When it came to on stage competition, participants expressed how they were usually the only, if not one of two, Asian contestants in the whole pageant. Being a minority in a pageant was intimidating at first, but the competitors learned to use it to their advantage. Isla explained how being the only Asian contestant in the whole pageant was useful to her: “I don’t let [being the only Asian contestant] get to my head, I use that to my advantage. I don’t use that to feel uncomfortable, I use that to stand out and use it to my advantage.” Isla expressed how she did not let being a minority deter or intimidate her when she competed. Isla says she did this by talking about her Asian identity during competition and opting for hairstyles, makeup looks, and wardrobe that highlighted her Asian features. Blair explained that she took control of her racial and cultural identity by using it as her “marketing strategy”:

“I’m kind of the ideal image for systems advertising, inclusion, and diversity being a person coming from two different worlds but living in one... as an individual who is coming from both worlds, that was something I’m able to get the system to not only advertise for diversity, but also help them to kind of reach out with possibly growing the system internationally even further.”

Blair was aware of the lack of Asian representation in pageantry so she openly spoke about her racial and cultural identities as an Asian American to appeal and market to other women of color who may have felt similarly underrepresented. Kathleen explained to me that she openly talked

about racial and cultural identities in pageantry because she was proud of who she was:

“I was able to share aspects of my culture with so many people and share my story and how I culturally reconnected when I went to Korea and my experience being bilingual and things like that so when I look at it from like, an overall point of view, I’m still so happy that I was able to share that with people.”

Kathleen added that not only did she talk about her race and culture with the judges, but she also talked about it with her fellow contestants who asked her about her race. My participants also took control of their racial and cultural identities through their wardrobe and appearance. Both Blair and Kathleen talked about wearing their hair natural, which meant pin straight, compared to the curled pageant hair. Courtney said she sourced all her wardrobe from Filipino designers so she could wear her cultural garb with pride.

My participants also took control of their racial and cultural identities by competing in international and cultural pageants. While all participants were from the US, some had competed internationally, and one had competed in a cultural pageant for titles representing their heritage. Ashlyn competed internationally and explained it as:

“I was very fortunate through pageantry that I was competing in international pageants. I either represented my mom’s hometown [in an Asian country] ... or the USA and got to travel the world for free and it was amazing... it was a blessing for me, because then I could do more pageants.”

Ashlyn added that her and her mom are very close, so she was honored to represent her heritage on an international level. Delia, also a Chinese competitor who had been competing for 8 years, competed at an international pageant representing her birth country which also gave her an opportunity to share her adoption story:

“I was able to represent China at a pageant system and that was really fun for me, just because, you know, that kind of lead into, like, in my interview, it led to questions about like why I was representing China.”

While the focus of this study is not on international pageants, the international experiences that my participants spoke about were important to them. Both Ashlyn and Delia were proud to represent their heritage and family origins, an experience that differs from competing in US based pageants. Edeline, a Chinese competitor of 4 years, competed in cultural pageants where all the women in the competition were Asian. Being racially and ethnically mixed, Edeline shared that she enjoyed cultural pageants because it helped her connect with her Asian identity: “There was a point in my life where I wanted to connect more with that so that’s why I chose [the cultural pageant] because I wanted to connect with my Chinese side.” Edeline is both Chinese and white and chose to compete in cultural pageants to learn more about her Chinese heritage and connect with the Chinese community in her hometown. Ashlyn, Delia, and Edeline took control of the narrative surrounding their racial and cultural identities by proudly representing their heritage. They also used this time as an opportunity to share their Asian experiences in a positive manner.

Finally, a few participants shared a similar sentiment when it came to taking control of their racial and cultural identities in pageantry, and that was just being physically present. They said that being present was enough for them to know they were making a difference when it comes to diversity and Asian representation. Janessa, a Malaysian competitor of 3 years, was aware of the lack of Asian representation in pageantry, but her win in the pageant system she was competing in was a moment that empowered her:

“I feel like there are not a lot of Asian Americans competing and like, not many Asian

Americans win pageant systems, so to be able to like, win a title like I won my state title and I'm an Asian American... that's pretty cool to me."

Courtney shared a similar answer about how being present as the only Asian competitor in the whole pageant was empowering to her: "I think me being there is already challenging that standard or the stereotype in general, so my presence is something that I can do to make a difference."

The competitors in my study explained how they took control of their racial and cultural identities and used in positive ways when they competed. They took pride in their race and culture in a space mainly comprised of white competitors. These findings suggested that people of color, in this case Asian American women, navigated their racial and cultural identities in a positive manner where they could control the narrative surrounding their race and ethnicity.

Defining Beauty

As mentioned earlier, the toxic diet and beauty standards that the well-known pageant systems have caused have set the standard for what an acceptable queen looks like. Through an analysis of the interviews, my participants described the ideal beauty pageant queen as tall, blonde, white, skinny, and model-like. This caused my participants to alter their definitions of beauty and affected whether they considered themselves beautiful. While all my participants expressed pride in their racial and cultural identities, they shared some insecurities they have faced when competing. Many of my participants shared that getting their hair and makeup done for a pageant was where they begin to question their beauty. It is common for pageant competitors to hire a hair and makeup artist to do their hair and makeup, so they look their best for the competition. Isla explained to me that hair and makeup was essential when competing, but she found that the hair and makeup artists she used had only done hair and makeup for white

women:

“Hair and makeup is a part of pageants, I feel like you see a lot of the same hair and the same makeup. Some girls like, use the same makeup artist and I feel like it looks the same which no shame to them I just like, I don’t want to look like another person if that makes sense. [They’re] carbon copy girls who like, all look the same. Like the same body, same hair, same makeup, it really doesn’t help that that’s the image that’s being presented.”

Isla is saying here that because hair and makeup artists had only done hair and makeup on white women, they were taking the same hairstyles and makeup looks on different people, creating copies of one another. She said that since every girl essentially looked the same, and that look was white beauty, it did not help the image of pageantry to be presented as only white and Eurocentric. Kathleen spoke of a personal story about getting hair and makeup done for a pageant and how her experience led her to question her beauty, heavily impacting her confidence:

“I paid for the service that was recommended by everyone. They’re just renowned in pageantry, and I looked so bad like, they didn’t know how to do makeup on my eye shape. It wasn’t complimentary for the undertones of my skin. It looked really bad... after that experience, I pretty much never got my hair and makeup done again. When you go in the hair and makeup room, everyone leaves looking flawless. They look amazing when they leave and it’s kind of like, why don’t I look like that or why don’t I feel like that when I’m leaving? Like why? How come only I, every time I pay the same amount of money, I go in showing them the same picture [and] I just look like a clown.”

Kathleen ended her story with telling me how she believed it was the hair and makeup artist’s

job to know how to do all faces and all types of hair. This was an experience that her friends of color related with as well. This experience implied that beauty pageant standards and beauty standards only cater to white women and did not consider other skin colors, tones, or hair textures. Delia shared with me that when she was getting her hair and makeup done, she had to instruct the artist as to which products and colors they could and could not use on her. While she allowed the artist to be creative, she was aware that the products and colors they used were only for white women and did not compliment her appearance at all. It is so well-known that beauty pageant standards are rooted in white that it prevented my participants from trying premier pageants like Miss America or Miss USA because they feared that their Asian appearance would not be accepted. Edeline told me how she only did cultural pageants because she was scared of Eurocentric beauty standards, especially after hearing the experiences of her Asian friends competing:

“I think a big reason I’ve actually never done any other systems besides the cultural systems is because I am terrified of those beauty standards. I hear about them through my friends who do go through those systems and their experience and like, how hard that is on their emotional well-being and like, I don’t know if I have the capacity to deal with that... especially for Asians, I feel like the beauty standards right now tend to be very Caucasian, very American girl.”

Edeline was aware that beauty pageant standards were rooted in white beauty. She went on to add how Asian beauty and Asian features were usually not celebrated in traditional pageants (i.e.: Miss America and Miss USA):

“It’s not like monolids or wider faces or a flatter nose... things I see in my Asian peers that are beautiful, and they look amazing, but they go through these systems [Miss

America and Miss USA] and they're not appreciated for those even if they are presenting themselves so well."

Beauty pageant standards also included physical body standards which created unrealistic expectations towards women's bodies. Courtney shared with me that when she was in grade school, she heard from her peers that Miss USA queens were always tall and skinny, already planting the idea that Courtney did not fit the ideal body type. This experience also implied that beauty pageant standards were so well known that people who did not compete knew about them. She also added that before she started competing, she enjoyed staying fit by weightlifting; but when she started competing, she had to stop because her body did not fit the ideal body type:

"I did think that I needed to lose some weight. I also was told that I needed to stop lifting weights and needed to slim down in the hip and leg section so that was a little disheartening to hear."

Fallon, a Filipino competitor of 12 years, shared with me a time when she overheard contestants talking about what they ate for the day which shocked her:

"They're talking about how they've only eaten like this or this during their day and it's like 3 o'clock in the afternoon and they say they've only had like an iced coffee and a salad, and I'm like please tell me you're going to eat more than that."

Fallon suggested that the contestants she overheard were speaking so casually about not eating much for the day. Though she assumed they were joking, she was still concerned. Beauty pageant standards of having and maintaining an ideal body type (i.e., thin and lacking curves and muscle definition) was so well-known that contestants spoke about it openly and casually.

Ashlyn, having competed at a Miss USA pageant before, shared with me how her first year in the Miss USA system led to unhealthy eating habits:

“I’m pretty sure I had some sort of eating disorder or anorexia... I kept saying I wasn’t enough and honestly, I looked back at the pictures, and I was like, I think I was too skinny and that’s another problem too. You’re too skinny, you’re too fat, you’re too this, you’re too that, and you’re never just good the way you are because not just in pageantry, but in society.”

Hadley, a Korean competitor of 1 year, had competed in the Miss America system. Hadley spoke about a time when a pageant served salads to the contestants as their meal:

“Girls at the state level [would get sponsored meals], they were only given salads. They were only given vegetables, things that wouldn’t make them bloat because they had to walk on stage and perform in a swimsuit and nobody wanted to be bloated.”

Unrealistic body image from beauty pageant standards caused some of my participants to question their body image. The interviewees revealed that the standard surrounding the ideal body type in pageantry affected all women.

When it came to race and gender, the Asian women in my study expressed feeling insecure about being Asian and competing in pageants where there was a lack of diversity. This feeling was only shared by those who competed in Miss USA. Ashlyn shared a personal story of how she always wanted to be Miss USA when she was younger but was too scared to start in the system due to the expectation that only white women won:

“I was very scared for a long time to compete in it and I do even remember when I was a teenager... one of the dress designers [I was working with] asked me, why don’t you do [Miss Teen USA] and I told her, Chinese girls never made [the semifinals] or an Asian girl has never even won the pageant and still hasn’t. There’s almost like an intimidation factor when you go into it.”

Ashlyn was aware of the lack of Asian representation in the Miss USA system which kept her from trying to enter the system at a young age. She faced her fear when she was older and competed in the Miss USA system as a miss contestant. Ashlyn never won a title in the Miss USA system and aged out. She ended her story by telling me she loved her experience with Miss USA while at the same time, she regretted joining in the first place.

Lacey shared the same experience as Ashlyn being too scared to try Miss USA because of their focus on beauty. But when she learned of Miss USA's new tagline, Lacey was inspired to join. Though Miss USA was pushing a more inclusive agenda, Lacey still felt she had to look like the traditional Miss USA contestant in order to do well so she started dieting and working out. Lacey noticed how the contestants who did place in the semifinals and eventually won did not look like her despite the inclusion that inspired her to join in the first place:

“When I went and competed, I found that I did not have the same experience and that the beauty standard that they held when I competed was very much as what it used to be, and I think it became very clear when I saw the girls who were making the semifinals versus the girls who did not.”

Lacey added that her experience at Miss USA was her least favorite pageant experience in her pageant career because it made her question her appearance as an Asian woman:

“For Asian women, it can be really difficult to see themselves as beautiful when they've never seen someone who looks like that be called beautiful.”

Again, while my participants were proud of their racial and cultural identities, beauty standards in pageantry that were deeply rooted in white beauty created a negative mindset in these Asian women. These findings suggest that the white beauty standards in pageantry impact how Asian American women view and define their beauty.

Being Mixed-Race in Pageants

Three of my participants identified as being racially and ethnically mixed: Isla, Edeline, and Fallon. Just like the other participants, the three women were proud to be Asian but spoke of interesting experiences that the single race participants could not relate to. The three women shared similar experiences when it came to feeling out of place. They spoke about having some difficulties with relating to certain Asian experiences leaving them to question which racial category they belonged to. Isla, who is Filipino and white, spoke about how she enjoys having two different cultures and that it is something she enjoys talking about in pageants and in her daily life. However, when asked if she would want to compete in a pageant if there were more Asian contestants, she said she would not want to participate:

“If it was all Asians or Asian Americans, I’m not fully Asian so I would feel out of place... I always get comments like, oh you don’t look Asian because there’s such an image that’s in our society of what an Asian should like. So honestly, probably no, I’d feel like it would put me at a disadvantage and feel insecure in my culture since there’s this other half of me that isn’t like them.”

Isla is proud of her heritage, but it seems that in a competition environment, if she was being compared with other Asian American women, she would feel out of place. She speaks of an image that society has about what an Asian person looks like. Isla has white-presenting features and because of that, she has been questioned if she really is Asian. She also feels that because she is only half Asian that she cannot relate with people who are fully Asian. If given the opportunity to compete in a pageant with more Asian competitors, Isla would turn down the offer because she feels that she could not measure up with other Asian women.

Fallon, who is Filipino and white, shared with me a personal thought she had about her

biracial identity when she was at pageants:

“That’s something that I feel like I’ve personally thought about or encountered because of the fact I am mixed. Something with being half white and half Asian, it’s always kind of left this weird feeling of not fully white, I’m not fully Asian, where exactly is my place? Am I with the white [friend] group? Am I with the Asian [friend] group if there is [one]? And then by that point I just kind of feel awkward so then I usually just introduce myself to whatever group seems like they’re going to be more welcoming.”

Fallon often worried about where she belonged. She feared that friend groups would not accept her because of her mixed identity. When she does meet someone who is biracial like her, she is excited to have someone to relate to:

“It’s really nice to meet someone who is, I guess half and half because we kind of have similar experiences of not feeling like we fully belonged with one group or another.”

Fallon did not think people took her racial identity into account when they met her for the first time, it was her personal struggle with where she belonged that made it difficult for her to make friends. But questioning her belonging does not stop there. Fallon described herself to me as having facial features that could pass as looking Asian or white. She shared with me a comment someone made about her appearance when she was getting her pictures taken for her next pageant:

“He specifically said that he was going to do my makeup that specifically accentuated my Asian features, so that in my photos I came off as... more Asian in my headshots because he said that playing the Asian card is a lot more helpful because of the fact I look mixed.”

She added that the hair and makeup artist said to her that it was better to look more Asian in pageants so she could stand out more. It seems that people have already made the decision for

Fallon of which racial group she belonged to. For pageants, it was better for Fallon to present herself as more Asian even though Fallon herself does not see herself as just Asian.

Edeline, who is Chinese and white, competed in cultural pageants where all the contestants were Asian. Edeline is aware that she has more white-presenting features so when she attended cultural pageants, she felt out of place:

“I have a lot of imposter syndrome going through these cultural pageants... sometimes I feel like I’m not Asian enough even though I understand completely and have a lot of Asian American experiences. I know my privilege presenting as white, I don’t have as many experiences of face to face... racial comments but I do get a lot of different unique ones.”

Edeline is aware that she could never relate to the racial disadvantages of being Asian because she is white presenting. While she can relate to some Asian American experiences, she felt that was still not enough to compare with her other Asian peers. Edeline also shared a moment when her racial identities were pointed out at a pageant; the pageant was being livestreamed and comments about her mixed appearance were being made:

“I’ve had such imposter syndrome that I wasn’t Chinese enough, I didn’t look Chinese enough, my Chinese wasn’t very good and there were comments of like, she’s pretty but this is a pageant for Chinese girls, what is she doing here?”

She added that she was also being accused of cultural appropriation because she wore traditional Chinese garments at the pageant. Edeline ended her story by telling me how tiring it is to constantly validate her racial and cultural identities in pageants and in her daily life:

“I think being mixed I have to explain that so much and sometimes it’s exhausting having to explain and validate my own narrative... I have to explain how I also understand the

Asian American narrative and how my mom immigrated here, and I get it, I have those struggles too.”

The mixed race participants had different experiences than the single race participants. The three women struggled with feeling out of place when it came to which racial group they belonged to. This did negatively impact their experience at pageants. The three women are very proud to be Asian, but the feelings of where they belonged still lingered.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This study evaluated how Asian American women who compete in US based pageants navigate their racial and cultural identities when competing as well as how they define beauty in spaces dominated by white beauty standards. Beauty pageants were created to celebrate women's beauty, but pageants then and now seem to celebrate Eurocentric beauty, and this is apparent in the lack of racial and cultural representation and diversity in premier pageants like Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe. Through in-depth interviews I identified two significant themes within my sample: 1) the Asian women took control of the narrative surrounding their racial and cultural identities in a space that is lacking Asian representation, and 2) beauty standards rooted in Eurocentric beauty impact the way Asian women define beauty. The racialized and gendered experiences of Asian American women is important in understanding how these themes affect how Asian women navigate their racial identities and beauty.

The participants in my sample took pride in being Asian. They were all aware of the lack of Asian representation and diversity in pageantry and were driven to change that. They do not let being the minority intimidate them when the competition is predominately white women, instead they took control of the narrative surrounding their racial and cultural identities and expressed it in a positive way. They spoke about their culture in and out of competition, they incorporated cultural elements into their wardrobe, and they even represented their heritage at pageants. The Asian women took control of their racial and cultural identities and used it to their advantage to stick out from the competition. Instead of being afraid about being the only Asian in the pageant, the women in my study took that opportunity to express their Asian pride knowing that their presence as the only Asian contestant was enough to change the narrative

about racial diversity in pageantry. This is similar to what Lucal (1999) said about how one's existence can make an impact for future generations. Lucal was aware that her masculine gender expression as a cisgender woman likely had little effect on strangers who assumed her gender due to her appearance and never bothered to learn who Lucal was; but she did suggest that the confusion her appearance caused did affect her students, who are learning that gender is a social product. Knowing that their presence on stage is making an impact, the women in my study are dismantling what society expects a beauty queen to look like.

However, in a competitive environment, while the Asian women expressed pride in their identities, they had moments of low self-esteem when faced with white beauty standards. Following literature on gender performance (West & Zimmerman, 1987), the competitors in my study do gender by exuding Eurocentric femininity and learned these behaviors through interacting with other pageant competitors. The Asian women tried their best to perform gender and beauty as expected by audience members, judges, and other pageant contestants, but failed to do so. This resulted in bad hair and makeup looks, negative body images, and a fear to try new pageants. Because beauty pageant standards were designed to cater white women, Asian American women had a difficult time practicing these standards. In their attempts to do gender correctly, gendered body image and racialized beauty standards made it difficult for my participants to maintain their confidence and achieve success in pageantry.

This study utilized an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1991) to understand how Asian American women experience race, ethnicity, and beauty standards in an activity that was designed to cater to white women and their beauty. This study explored how white beauty standards affected how Asian American women who competed in pageants perceive beauty, as well as how those women felt about their own racial and cultural identities during their pageant

participation, preparation, and competition, Results showed that the Asian women took pride in their racial and cultural identities. Even if they were the minority, the Asian women openly spoke about their race and culture. They do so not only as a strategy to stand out from their competition, but as a way to inspire other Asian girls and women to be proud of their race and ethnicity. Instead of internalizing behavioral expectations of Asian women being submissive and quiet or accepting portrayals of Asian women being seen as foreign or sexualized, the participants in my study expressed their racial and cultural identities in their own way. They spoke about their heritage with the judges during competition and even with other contestants after competition. They incorporated Asian elements into their wardrobe and presented themselves as Asian wearing their natural hair and makeup that complimented their complexion. The participants took immense pride in their heritage and championed racial diversity in pageantry. Just like how Hill-Collins (1990) suggested a metaphorical mirror of self-love for Black women to love and appreciate their beauty amongst a world of white beauty, Asian American women are beginning to develop their own mirror of self-love too.

Strengths and Limitations

My qualitative methodology was a strength in my study. While I was actively aware of my positionality as the researcher in this study, my knowledge on pageantry and being an Asian American woman made the participants more comfortable with speaking with me which made the in-depth interviews more affective in answering my research questions. Using social media platforms to share my recruitment flyer became an effective form of recruitment as it allowed me to reach many more people who were either interested in participating or knew someone who would be interested.

A limitation with my study would be the small sample. Because pageantry had a lack of

Asian competitors and winners, I expected it would be difficult to find Asian American pageant women. The analysis would have been stronger with more participants but as mentioned before, I still believe I reached saturation in my data due to the reoccurring themes across all my participants. I would have also liked to have a more ethnically diverse sample as most of my participants were Chinese and Filipino. It would be interesting to see if different Asian ethnicities viewed beauty or their cultural identities differently. Finally, while my interview guide was designed with open-ended questions and organized to directly address the research questions, I believe including more questions on individualized pageant experiences may help explore how they feel about the impact major pageant systems like Miss America and Miss USA have had on pageantry, and how they feel about Eastern beauty standards and how that compares to Western beauty standards. I believe that adding these interview questions will further address my research questions.

Future Research

Future research on the cultural processes of beauty pageants is needed. Studying pageantry can help in understanding the racial and gender inequalities embedded in the realm of beauty. This study could be replicated to study Black pageant women, Hispanic pageant women, or designed to compare the experiences between them and White pageant women. This study could also be replicated to include participant observation by watching a pageant to evaluate gendered pageant behaviors at work. Pageants are livestreamed online or happen live in theatres or convention centers, so it would be easy observe a pageant. If allowed observations on informal social control and interactions could be made during pageant rehearsals or the hair and makeup room. Being able to observe pageant competitors at the start of their competition week to the final night could yield interesting observations and a timeline of how a contestant prepares

to compete. This study could also be done with younger contestants, like the teen contestants in Miss Teen USA, to evaluate if younger women experience race, ethnicity, and beauty differently from the Miss aged contestants in my study. Since this study only focused on US-based pageants, examining gender and race in international beauty pageants could also be an area of research. The concept of beauty and being beautiful holds gendered and racialized meanings and studying pageantry can be one way of understanding beauty and beauty standards in society.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Flyer

Southern Illinois University - Carbondale
Sociology Department



ASIAN BEAUTY QUEENS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH

We are looking for Asian and Asian American pageant competitors and titleholders to share your personal experiences of competing in pageantry. Participation will involve a 60 minute one-time interview about the influence race and ethnicity has on your experiences in pageantry.

Requirements:

- ~ Identify as AAPI
- ~ Between the ages of 18-28
- ~ Have competed in a pageant in the last 12 months

If interested, please contact us through the information below:

*rebecca.chia@siu.edu
(319) 573-9734
rwhaley@siu.edu
(618) 453-7631*

APPENDIX B**Factsheet & Consent Form****Fact Sheet for a Study on Asian American Beauty Queens
(Interview Participants)**

Date: _____ Interview # to be filled by researcher: _____

Demographic Information:

Age: _____

State of Residency: _____

Race/Ethnicity: _____

When did you compete in your first pageant? _____

How old were you when you competed in your first pageant?: _____

What pageant system did you start with?: _____

How long have you been competing since the first pageant? _____

How many pageant systems have you competed in since the first pageant?: _____

How many titles have you won?: _____ Do you currently hold a title?: _____

When was your last pageant? _____

What pageant system was the last pageant you competed in?: _____

Consent Form

My name is Rebecca Chia. I am a graduate student at the School of Anthropology, Political Science, & Sociology at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

I am asking you to participate in my research study. The purpose of my study is to evaluate how race and ethnicity influence the individual experiences of Asian American pageant competitors in the United States.

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to participate in the study, it will take approximately 60 minutes of your time. I will ask a series of interview questions and will offer you an opportunity to share your personal experiences and stories involving your time in pageantry. I am requesting your participation in this project because you have been or are currently involved in pageants and are between the ages of 18-28.

There is no penalty for not participating or for withdrawing from the study. If you want to withdraw, you can do so at any time during the interview, or you can contact me via email afterward. Any information submitted prior to your withdrawal will be discarded.

Interviews will be conducted over Zoom and your responses will be recorded for accuracy; however, the video recording will be deleted and only the audio will be used. If you choose not to have your responses recorded, I will take notes during the interview to capture what you say to the best of my ability. These recordings will be transcribed and kept for a minimum of 3 years after the completion of the study on a password protected computer that only I will have access to. Afterward, these recordings will be destroyed, and any retained data will be de-identified. All your responses will be kept confidential within reasonable limits. I will take all reasonable steps to protect your identity including using pseudonyms, but states of residency will be used.

Questions may be skipped if you choose not to answer. Anticipated risk involves the emotional distress that you may experience if we end up discussing any experiences of racism you have had while in pageantry. There are no personal anticipated benefits to this study, although it can help to understand more generally the influence race and ethnicity has on Asian Americans' experiences in pageantry and other similar extra-curricular activities.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me via email at rebecca.chia@siu.edu or my advisor Dr. Rachel Whaley, Associate Professor of Sociology at SIU, via email at rwhaley@siu.edu or by phone at (618) 453-7631.

Please address the statement below and by emailing this form back to me implies your consent to participate in the study. I will then contact you to set up an interview date.

"I have read the information above and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity and know my responses will be tape recorded. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers. I realize that I may withdraw without any prejudice at any time."

"I agree _____ I disagree _____ to have my responses audio/video recorded."

"I agree _____ I disagree _____ that Rebecca Chia may quote me directly, but anonymously/with a pseudonym in their paper"

Typed Signature: _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Institutional Review Board. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the committee chairperson, Office of Research Compliance, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901. Phone: (618)453-4534. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

Interview Guide

There She Is: How Beauty Pageant Standards Affect Asian American Beauty Queens

This is an open-ended interview. There is no right or wrong answer to any of these questions. You will not be judged for your answers. Only I will have access to this interview and no one else. Please do not use any names or any identifying information of anyone you talk about. Remember that at any time, you may skip questions and/or withdraw from this interview at any time.

Section A. Pageant Related

To start, I would like to ask you some questions about how you got started in pageants and why you still compete in pageants today.

1. On your facesheet you mentioned you competed in _____ as your first pageant, why did you choose that pageant system to start with?
2. Can you tell me a bit about what that first pageant weekend was like (if you remember).
3. What did you win from that first pageant?
4. On your facesheet you mentioned you competed in _____ as your last pageant, why did you choose that pageant system to compete in last?
5. What was that last pageant weekend like (if you remember)? How did it compare to earlier pageants?
6. Can you walk me through your pageant preparation? Consider the last pageant, for example. What did you do to prepare?
7. Can you tell me about the outcome of the last pageant? What did you win?
 - a. If they did win the overall title, go to Section B
 - b. If they did not win, proceed to the next question.
8. What would you change about your performance from your last pageant that you plan to apply for your next pageant?
9. How would you explain how you first came to compete in pageants and why you continue to participate?

Section B. For Current Reigning Winners

I would like to ask you questions about your reign as a titleholder.

1. What are some responsibilities that the pageant system expects you to fulfill as queen?
2. What are some things that you hope to accomplish or fulfill as queen?
3. Do you get to advance to a national or international competition?
 - a. If they already advanced, tell me what that pageant weekend was like (if you remember).
 - b. If they have yet to advance, what would you change about your performance from your last pageant that you plan to apply for this next pageant?

Section C. Beauty Standards

I would like to ask you questions about what you think about current beauty standards for girls and women, especially in pageants. Again, I remind you to not use any names or any identifying information of anyone you talk about.

1. What are some current beauty pageant standards that you have encountered?

- a. Can you give me an example or tell me about a time when these beauty standards were particularly clear?
2. What do you think about these beauty pageant standards?
3. How did you learn about these beauty standards?
4. How do your fellow contestants follow these beauty standards?
5. When you are competing in a pageant, how do you find yourself following those standards?
6. When you are competing in a pageant, how do you sometimes challenge those standards?
7. How do you think these standards have changed over time?
 - a. Can you give an example?

Section E. Race & Ethnicity

I would like to ask you questions about your race and ethnicity and how these have influenced the ways you compete in pageants.

1. Can you tell me a bit about what the pageants you participate in look like, in terms of the race and ethnicity of contestants?
2. I'm interested in what pageants generally look like to you in terms of racial and ethnic representation. Can you tell me about what you noticed about race when you are competing at a pageant? How did it shape your experiences at pageants?
3. How does your race/ethnicity as _____ impact your pageant experience?
4. What about the racial makeup of those who aren't contestants such as the judges and outgoing queens? Do you think this matters? Do you think this affects pageant outcomes?
5. Has anyone pointed out your race/ethnicity at a pageant? Whether in passing or during competition? What happened? How did you feel about that moment?
6. Thinking back to your last pageant weekend, how do you think your ethnicity as _____ shaped how you prepare for pageants?
 - a. Can you give me some examples?
7. Thinking back to your last pageant, how do you think your ethnicity as _____ shaped the way you present yourself when you compete?
8. Thinking back to current beauty pageant standards, does someone of Asian descent follow those beauty standards? Why or why not?
9. Would you be more likely to compete in pageant if you knew there were more Asians or Asian Americans competing? Why or why not?
10. Would you be more likely to compete in a pageant if you knew the previous winner or winners were of Asian descent? Why or why not?
11. Would pageantry as a whole benefit from having more Asian contestants and winners? Why or why not?

Do you know anyone between the ages of 18 and 28 who competed in a pageant in the US in the last year and identifies as Asian or Asian American? If so, could you pass my contact information on to them, and they can contact me if they are interested in participating.

VITA

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Bachelor of Arts, Criminology, Sociology, December 2020

Research Paper Title:

There She Is: How Beauty Standards Affect Asian American Beauty Queens

Major Professor: Dr. Rachel Bridges Whaley