

# **Televised Child Pageants: Negative Psychological Effects, Millions of Viewers**

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## **Abstract**

Child Beauty Pageants (CBP) have been of particular interest in the media over the last decade as more and more of these CBP have become televised. The controversy concerning these pageants focuses on possible negative psychological effects it could have on the girls, such as body dissatisfaction (Wonderlich et al., 2005). The two most common complaints about child pageants specifically are that they are encouraging the girls to be sexualized for the public and they are essentially a form of child abuse (Wolfe, 2012; Cartwright, 2012). Despite the many problems that the anti-pageant position brings up, televised pageants still bring in millions of viewers each year.

This study is designed to look at why individuals choose to watch televised beauty pageants and how this may influence their attitudes about the pageants, with a particular focus on televised CBP. Participants from the Salisbury University's Psychology Courses were asked to indicate if they had seen any of the televised programs related to CBP, including with or without enhancements such as make-up and costumes (Glitz versus Natural Pageants). If they had seen the shows, participants were then asked questions that looked at motivating factors for watching these programs. Of the 143 participants, 103 (72%) had seen the show *Toddlers & Tiaras*. This group of individuals reported less positive attitudes towards contestants in Adult Pageants and Natural CBP compared to Glitz CBP. However they were more likely to agree the mothers were living their dreams through their children in the Glitz CBP.

## Introduction

Atlantic City, New Jersey is home to many things, including the famous Miss America Pageant. On September 7, 1921 Margaret Gorman became the first Miss America to reign (Watson & Martin, 2001). It was not until 1954 the pageant was televised for people all over the country to see (Watson & Martin, 2001). This brought a lot of popularity to the pageant along with a lot of controversy. During America's Sexual Revolution many individuals protested the pageants saying they were "degrading to women" (Watson & Martin, 2001, p.111). Ideas and protests like the ones that occurred during the Sexual Revolution can still be found today, though some are directed towards a different kind of pageant. In the 1960's child beauty pageants made their debut and have since been bringing in their own scrutiny (Cartwright, 2012). Protests for these kinds of pageants were first introduced to the mass media with the death of Jon Benet Ramsey.

Jon Benet Ramsey was murdered in December 1996, at the age of six, and was found in her home the day after Christmas (Schwartzman, 1996). The story of her death traveled all over the country. People were outraged about the child's murder, but the more they saw her on their television screens the more upset they became about something else. Jon Benet Ramsey had participated in child glitz beauty pageants and the footage of her pageants was being played on television screens all across America. The public found themselves watching a six-year-old scantily clad, strutting across a stage (Kibbey, 2000). Ramsey's footage caused uproar with the public who felt they were watching something that bordered on child pornography (Kibbey, 2000). Speculation that child glitz beauty pageants are "too sexy" or "pornography" was renewed more recently with the popularity of television shows like *Toddlers & Tiaras*.

Tamer (2011, p.85) opens one of her articles by describing a female who is on a stage wearing fake eyelashes, nails, teeth, and hair while being coached to “shake that bootie.” Her detailed scenario could lead readers to believe Tamer (2011) is describing a stripper, but in fact she is describing a six-year-old pageant contestant. Multiple girls like the one Tamer (2011) describes can be seen on shows like *Toddlers & Tiaras*, *Little Miss Perfect*, or *Painted Babies*. All of these types of shows share the same kind of contestant and the same kind of controversy. Just like with Jon Benet Ramsey the public is concerned these girls are being displayed “as sex objects on stage” (Wolfe, 2012, p.439). Cases like Jon Benet Ramsey and shows like *Toddlers & Tiaras* cause some to be concerned about two major problems: the girls are being sexualized and the pageants may lead to child abuse.

Girls who participate in glitz beauty pageants may carry negative psychological affects with them years after they are done with pageants. Wonderlich, Ackard, and Henderson (2005) gathered information from 11 women (mean age = 20 years) who had participated in pageants when they were younger. Compared to a control group of women who had not participated in pageants when they were younger, the beauty pageant group had higher rates of body dissatisfaction, interpersonal distrust, and impulse regulation problems. Even those these women were no longer participating in pageants they were still carrying the psychological scars that came from participating in them when they were children. Treating young girls as though they are mini-adults in these pageants can lead to immediate and long-term negative psychological effects.

### **General Media Exposure Theories**

When individuals sit down to watch television they are choosing the show they are watching for a reason. The Uses and Gratification Theory (Rubin, 2002) theorizes that

individuals make choices about their media in order to fulfill a particular need they have. They are not just watching certain programs for the sake of watching them, necessarily. There is something in a particular program that is satisfying a psychological need for the viewer. Using this theory it could be hypothesized the viewers who are watching the televised beauty pageants are watching them to fulfill a personal need. This study will look to see if any of the five factors from Arnett's (1995) research concerning media use – entertainment, identity formation, sensation seeking, coping, and cultural identification - influence viewers' decisions to watch televised beauty pageants. In addition at looking at individuals' motives to watch these types of programs it this study will also examine if an individual's personality influences their choice to watch these shows.

Based off of previous research in Uses and Gratification it is hypothesized that:

H<sub>1</sub> – Individuals who watch televised beauty pageants or shows about beauty pageants will do so because of the entertainment it provides more than any other factor.

The following research question is also proposed:

RQ<sub>1</sub>- Will individuals that watch televised beauty pageants or shows about beauty pageants be more likely to have positive attitudes towards the beauty pageants shows?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants ( $N = 143$ ) came from Salisbury University's General Psychology courses ( $N = 113$ , 79.0%) and the Psychology and the Law course ( $N = 30$ , 20.9%). Participants were offered an extra-credit option for taking part in this study. Of the participants 105 were female (73.4%) and 37 male (25.9%). Average age of participants was 19.45 years. Majority of participants were

college freshmen ( $N=67$ , 46.9%) and majority of participants identified as Non Latino White ( $N=109$ , 76.2%).

## Measures

**Demographics.** Demographic items assessed sex, age, ethnicity, income, education, marital status, number of children, and current living arrangements.

**Media Exposure.** The first of set of questions in this section were used to assess how familiar participants were with each of the televised beauty pageant programs or shows related to them. This included *Toddlers & Tiaras*, *Painted Babies*, *Little Miss Perfect*, *King of the Crown*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *Living Dolls: The Making of a Child Beauty Queen*, and adult beauty pageants in general (i.e. *Miss America*). If participants indicated they had seen a particular show they were presented with follow-up questions asking about their perception of the theme of the show and what factors influenced them to watch it. The influencing factors provided were the factors from Arnett's (1995) research that were previously mentioned: entertainment, identity formation, sensation seeking, coping, and cultural identification (See Figure 2). *Toddler & Tiaras*, *Honey Boo Boo*, and adult beauty pageants were reported to have the most exposure and are the only three shows reported here (See Figure 1).

**Exposure Scale.** The scale used for survey participants to indicate how familiar they were with each of the programs:

1 – I have never even heard of this show before today

2 – I have heard of this show before, but I have not seen an episode before today.

3 – I have seen part of an episode, but never an entire episode before today.

4 – I have seen one or two episodes of this show at some point in my life before today.

5 – I have seen several episodes of this show at some point in my life before today.

6 – I have seen an entire season of this show, but I have not seen every episode of the series.

7 – I have seen more than an entire season of this show, but I have not seen every episode.

8 – I have seen every episode of the series at least once before today.

9 – I have seen every episode of the series more than once before today.

**Perceptions of Beauty Pageants.** Ten statements designed for this study were given for each of the three categories of “Child Glitz Beauty Pageants,” “Natural Child Beauty Pageants,” and “Adult Pageants.” Participants were asked to rate on a Likert Scale that ranged from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” for each statement (See Table 1).

**Pageant Experience.** Nine questions were used to assess how much experience participants had with pageants, whether or not they were the one who had participated in the pageants. This included personal pageant experience, experience of another individual they knew, and knowledge about Jon Benet Ramsey, a famous child beauty pageant star.

## **Procedures**

Students in the eligible courses for this study received a notification of the opportunity to participate in the study for extra credit. An additional extra credit paper option was offered as alternative for those who did not wish to participate in the study. The notification received by students gave instructions of how to access the online survey which was created using the

Qualtrics program. Before beginning the survey, participants' informed consent was obtained by each participant. Participants were given 2 weeks to complete the survey and to keep confidentiality a separate survey was used to record participants name and course information. After the time period was over each student was emailed Debriefing information.

## **Results**

As seen in Figure 1, females were significantly more likely to watch the three programs *Toddlers & Tiaras*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and adult pageants in general.

Figure 2 shows the correlation between the different media viewing factors (Arnett, 1995) and how much exposure to the three shows survey participants reported having. Entertainment was the only significant factor for correlation with exposure to *Toddlers & Tiaras* ( $p < .001$ ). Entertainment was also the most significant factor for *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* ( $p < .001$ ), along with Sensation Seeking ( $p < .05$ ) and Cultural Identification ( $p < .05$ ). Adult pageants also had Entertainment as the most significant factor for the correlation ( $p < .001$ ), while having Cultural Identification as a significant factor ( $p < .01$ ) as well.

If participants had exposure with one of the three programs they were significantly more likely to have exposure to the other two shows as well (Table 1).

Overall, those who had seen more of any one of the three programs were more likely to have more favorable attitudes towards pageants, offering insight to this study's research question

## **Discussion**

Overall, the results found in this study supported the Uses and Gratification theory. Considering these types of programs generally have female participants, displaying stereotypical female behaviors it makes sense their main audience is female.

The hypothesis that entertainment would be a more substantial factor when watching televised beauty pageant programs or related programming is supported. Despite the negative psychological effects the pageant participants are possibly undergoing, there is an entertainment element that is keeping the viewer ratings high.

The correlation between more favorable attitudes and more program exposure also makes sense in that individuals who watch the programs would want to justify their watching by perceiving the pageants as less harmful (RQ<sub>2</sub>).

It is unclear why some individuals felt stronger about certain attitudes for one type of beauty pageant, but not the others.

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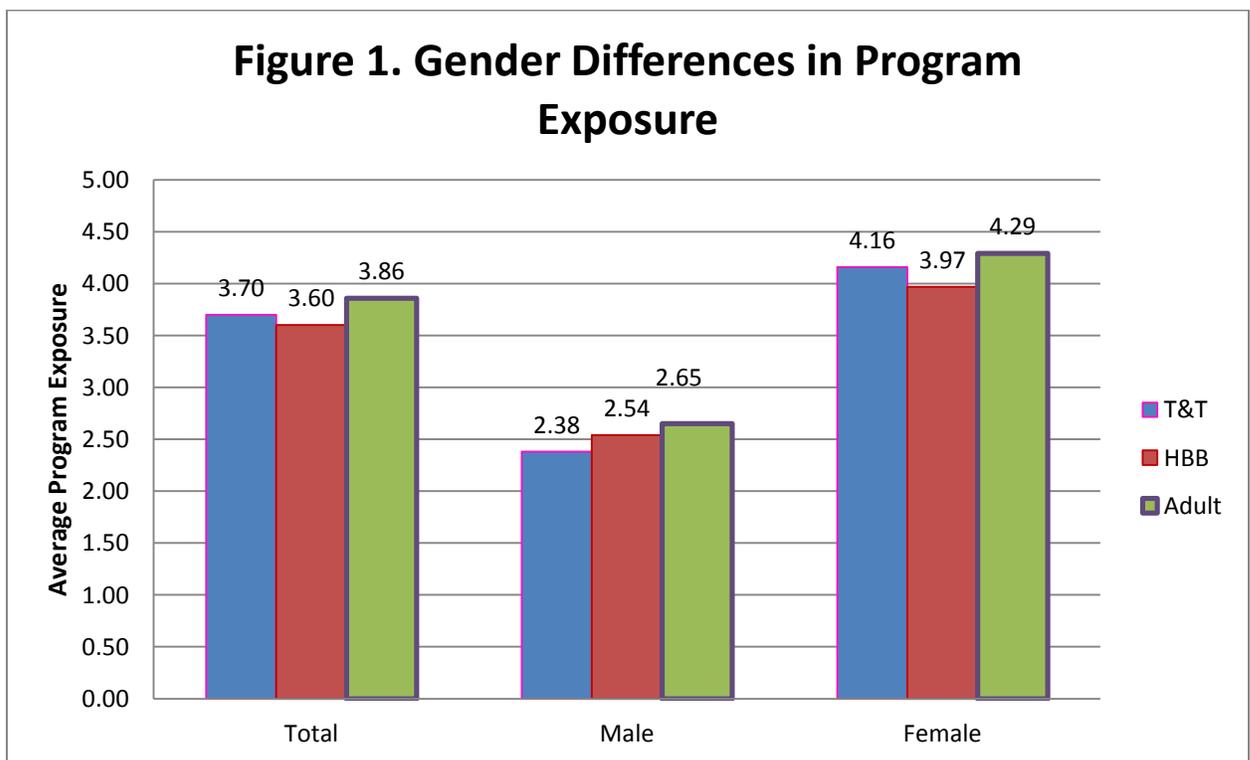
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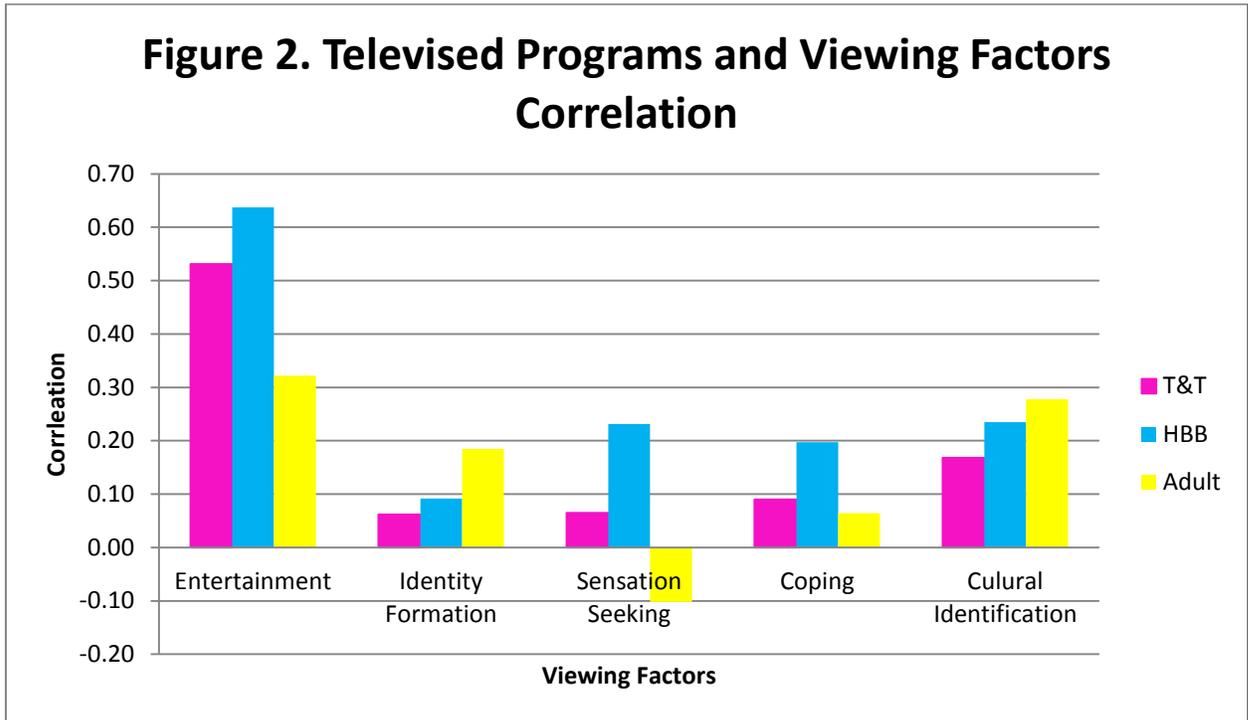
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doi:10.1080/10640260590932896



**Figure 2. Televised Programs and Viewing Factors Correlation**



**Table 1. Correlations between media exposure and attitudes**

<i>N</i> = 143		<i>Toddlers &amp; Tiaras</i>	<i>Honey Boo Boo</i>	Adult Pageants
<b>Shows</b>				
<i>Toddlers &amp; Tiaras</i>		--	.687***	.375***
<i>Honey Boo Boo</i>		.687***	--	.352***
Adult Pageants		.375***	.352***	--
<b>Attitudes</b>				
Pageants sexualize its participants for the audience.	Child Glitz	.105	.084	.135
	Child Natural	-.280***	-.218**	-.256**
	Adult	-.037	.014	.031
Pageants are a form of abuse.	Child Glitz	-.137	-.063	-.124
	Child Natural	-.274***	-.170*	-.296***
	Adult	-.199*	-.158	-.146
Pageants teach its participants important values (i.e. good sportsmanship)	Child Glitz	-.147	-.157	-.022
	Child Natural	.119	.070	.100
	Adult	.002	-.026	.130
Pageants tend to be an overall positive experience for its participants.	Child Glitz	.022	-.123	.050
	Child Natural	.072	.064	.193*
	Adult	.142	.006	.196*
There should be age restrictions on pageants.	Child Glitz	-.086	.078	-.051
	Child Natural	-.222**	-.110	-.294***
	Adult	-.216**	-.217**	-.194*

Mothers of participants are trying to live out their dreams through their daughters.	Child Glitz	.221**	.219**	.148
	Child Natural	.091	.138	-.061
	Adult	-.084	-.018	-.164
Pageants should be banned in the United States.	Child Glitz	-.278***	-.191*	-.212*
	Child Natural	-.268***	-.275***	-.287***
	Adult	-.201*	-.173*	-.241**
Televised pageants are exploiting its participants.	Child Glitz	-.035	-.096	-.069
	Child Natural	-.181*	-.230**	-.265***
	Adult	-.277***	-.287***	-.163
Pedophiles/sexual predators use televised pageants for their own pleasure.	Child Glitz	-.053	-.046	.060
	Child Natural	-.019	-.042	-.034
	Adult	-.069	-.047	-.002
There is nothing wrong with televised beauty pageants.	Child Glitz	.084	.001	-.032
	Child Natural	.147	.097	.180*
	Adult	.166*	.105	.216**