

Beyond the Crown: Exploring Queer Narratives and Transformation in Philippine Beauty Pageants

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ABSTRACT

Philippine beauty pageants, often perceived as solely focused on physical attributes, have evolved into empowering platforms for marginalized queer identities. This study, anchored in Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982), delves into the intricate relationship between beauty pageants and queer representation in the Philippine context. In-depth interviews with queer individuals involved in various pageant roles – candidates, trainers, and spectators – reveal how these events provide a distinct platform for self-expression, societal challenge, and economic empowerment. Their stories highlight the transformative power of pageants in combating discrimination and advancing queer recognition. Pageants are a catalyst for transformation, fostering belonging and pride within the queer community and empowering them to build a collective identity that transcends societal limitations. These events go beyond aesthetics, offering queer individuals the opportunity to showcase their talents, defy societal norms, forward their advocacies, address their struggles, and engage in discourse. This research unveils the crucial role beauty pageants play in shaping and empowering marginalized identities, providing insights into their impact on popular culture. Beauty pageants emerge as transformative and affirmative spaces where queer individuals express themselves and challenge societal views on beauty, gender, and identity.

Keywords: *Philippines, beauty pageant, queer, cultural phenomenon, inclusivity*

Background

The first national beauty pageants emerged after World War I and rapidly gained global popularity. However, beauty pageants did not emerge out of nowhere but were influenced by preceding social and cultural transformations dating back to the mid-19th century. In the United States, beauty contests were rooted in 19th-century cultural revival movements centered around medieval festivals and pageantry. These concepts were then adapted and brought to Europe following the end of World War I (Mihăilă, 2017).

During the 1990s, beauty pageants faced pressure to address and acknowledge the need for greater racial and ethnic diversity. To achieve this, they adopted practices that assimilated differences by enforcing disciplinary measures of femininity rooted in white racial coding. Despite attempts to establish a universal beauty standard for all women, the inclusion of historically excluded women in this standard destabilizes the notion of “beauty” itself. As feminist Teresa de Lauretis suggests in Banet-Weiser (2023, p. 207), beauty, like gender, is not only a product of representation but also exceeds it, carrying the potential to disrupt or unsettle existing representations. While the instability of beauty may pose a potential challenge, it paradoxically provides an opportunity for pageants to respond enthusiastically to the current political and cultural climate that values diverse expressions of womanhood (Banet-Weiser, 2023).

According to King-O’Riain (2008), beauty pageants are intricate cultural institutions that create and consume specific cultural identities. King-O’Riain (2008) identifies three main ways in which beauty pageants shape culture: as oppressive environments, platforms for expressing cultural agency, and arenas for the production of ethnic, gender, cultural, and sexual identities.

Beauty pageants can exhibit oppressive and empowering characteristics, depending on how they are utilized. They function as spaces where commodification and consumption occur in a world increasingly influenced by global markets and media establishments. For King-O’Riain (2008), beauty pageants extend beyond merely evaluating women’s physical appearance and delve into creating and consuming particular cultural identities. In oppressive settings, beauty pageants reinforce conventional gender roles and propagate limited beauty standards that exclude many women.

The experiences of queer and LGBTQ contestants in beauty pageants are a critical area of inquiry due to the unique stressors they face. Meyer (2003) highlights the role of stigma, prejudice, and discrimination in creating a hostile and stressful social environment that contributes to mental health problems. Meyer (2003) outlines various stress processes, including the experience of prejudice events, expectations of rejection, hiding and concealing, internalized

homophobia, and ameliorative coping mechanisms. Due to the various stressors that they face, Frost et al. (2016) emphasized that sexual minorities often rely more heavily on “chosen families” rather than their biological families due to experiences of rejection and lack of support. This reliance on chosen families and affirming environments underscores the importance of exploring the experiences of queer and LGBTQ contestants in beauty pageants, as these competitions can provide a sense of community and belonging that may be lacking in other aspects of their lives.

On the other hand, beauty pageants can also serve as platforms for individuals to assert their cultural agency. Women of color, for instance, have used beauty pageants to challenge beauty stereotypes and assert their cultural identities. Furthermore, beauty pageants can be regarded as “safe spaces” where ethnic, gender, cultural, and sexual identities are produced and represented. They construct and reinforce ideas surrounding womanhood, membership in ethnic minority groups, and LGBTQ community affiliation. In this sense, “safe spaces” provide marginalized communities with a refuge from oppression, a sanctuary from trauma and triggering experiences, and a platform for activism and social change (Campen et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, women are evaluated based on their ability to embody the idealized image of a *Magandang Dilag* (a Filipino poetic term for a beautiful woman) expected of beauty pageant contestants. Within this framework, facial beauty precedes other qualities, followed by physical attractiveness, personality, intelligence, and advocacy.

Recently, there has been a noticeable shift in challenging traditional norms and embracing inclusivity within the realm of beauty pageants. This shift is evident through the updated guidelines implemented by local and international beauty pageants. In the contemporary pageant landscape, inclusivity encompasses more than just physical appearance. It embraces a broader spectrum of body types, complexions, height requirements, age limits, civil statuses, gender identities, sexual orientations, and more.

One notable milestone occurred in 2018 when the Miss America pageant garnered attention for eliminating its swimsuit competition, which had long been criticized for objectifying women and perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards. This decision was perceived as a pivotal move towards redefining the purpose of beauty pageants and prioritizing qualities beyond physical appearance (Bennett, 2018). Another groundbreaking moment occurred in the same year with the participation of Angela Ponce, a transgender woman representing Spain, who became the first openly transgender contestant in the 2018 Miss Universe pageant. While she did not secure the title, her inclusion marked a significant

breakthrough in the history of beauty pageants, challenging the traditional gender boundaries that had prevailed for decades (Lewis, 2018).

Farrales (2019) emphasizes that beauty pageants undergo significant transformations when they move across colonial spaces. An illustrative context is the adaptation of Filipina pageants in Canada, where these events are repurposed to align with white hetero-patriarchal logic and settler colonial narratives of multiculturalism. In this process, the idealized notions of femininity and sexuality for Filipina contestants are shaped by the prevailing representations of Indigenous women's sexuality. Farrales' work underscores the impact of cultural context on reshaping beauty standards and performance expectations. It also sheds light on how such transformations influence the framing of femininity and sexuality, which is highly pertinent to our research problem of understanding the dynamics of Filipino beauty pageants and the sharing of queer stories and experiences.

Another significant milestone was reached in 2021 when Beatrice Luigi Gomez, the first openly queer candidate, was crowned Miss Universe - Philippines. This achievement was a powerful demonstration of the changing dynamics in beauty pageants and the increasing recognition of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations within the industry (General, 2021). Furthermore, in 2023, Michelle Marquez-Dee (MMD), representing Ms. Universe Philippines, openly expressed her pride in being a member of the queer community and identified herself as bisexual, stating, "I definitely identify myself as bisexual. I've identified with that for as long as I can remember. I'm attracted to all forms of beauty, all shapes, and sizes" (Rappler.com, 2023). And during the 2023 Miss Universe coronation in El Salvador, Marina Machete of Portugal emerged as the first transgender contestant to place in the top 20, while the Philippines' openly queer representative, MMD, secured a spot in the top 10.

Parreño (2023) employs an intersectional positioning analysis to scrutinize the attribution of personal and moral attributes to *bakla* (gay), gay men, and transwomen participants in the "Super Sireyna" and "Suffer Sireyna" pageants. This attribution leads to either discrimination in the form of ridicule or recognition and respect. Parreño's analysis vividly illustrates the considerable divide between the *bakla* identity and the identities of gay and transgender individuals, primarily shaped by considerations of embodiment and social class. This divide directly relates to the issue of shared identity among queer individuals within the context of beauty pageants.

Piocos (2022) contends that an examination rooted in queer aesthetics unveils the subversive potential of the documentary film "Sunday Beauty Queen" in challenging the heteropatriarchal framing of care labor among migrant Filipina

domestic workers. The film achieves this by imbuing the workers' bodies with a queer sensibility through pageant aesthetics, disrupting the conventional temporality of transnational care networks. Moreover, it highlights how beauty pageants can queer the labor of care by fostering communities of care among migrant Filipinas.

Picos' work, particularly the analysis of the documentary film and its role in redefining expectations, resonates with how beauty pageants offer safe and supportive spaces for queer self-expression and challenge normative societal constructs. Additionally, Picos' examination and the discussion of YouTube's role in the dissemination of reaction videos underscore the potential of beauty pageants to raise awareness of queer issues and promote acceptance. These platforms and performances play an active role in advancing the politics of queer recognition.

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for LGBTQ youths to connect with their communities and foster a sense of belonging. A growing body of research suggests that social media may positively impact the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ youths through peer connection, identity management, and social support (Berger et al., 2022).

Lorenzana (2022) delves into the circulation of reaction videos created by queer Filipino fans during the Miss Universe pageant, illustrating how these videos evolve from a queer cultural practice into a commodified YouTube genre. The affordances provided by YouTube contribute to popularizing the dramatic emotional performances known as *kabaklaan* (gayness). Furthermore, the platform enables active participation in the politics of queer recognition through user engagement. Lorenzana's research highlights how the reactions of queer fans during the Miss Universe pageant can challenge conventional notions of beauty and gender, underlining the potential for beauty pageants to disrupt established norms.

Overall, previous research demonstrates how pageants provide a stage for the discursive construction of intersecting identities at the nexus of gender, sexuality, race, and class. The performances and meanings transform as pageants circulate transnationally, reflecting changing power relations. The previous discussions enrich the understanding of how beauty pageants in the Philippines can serve as platforms for sharing queer stories, creating a shared queer identity, offering safe spaces for queer expression, challenging traditional notions of beauty and gender, and raising awareness while promoting acceptance within the queer community.

The transformation of beauty pageants, as they become more inclusive of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, signifies a substantial departure

from conventional norms. In this context, it is crucial to delve into the profound implications of this shift, especially in terms of elevating the voices of queer individuals within the realm of beauty pageants. Hence, this research focuses on addressing the following specific questions:

1. How do Philippine beauty pageants provide a platform to share queer stories and experiences?
2. How do beauty pageants create a sense of shared identity among queer people based on the informants' experiences?
3. How do beauty pageants allow queer informants to express their identities in a safe and supportive space?
4. How do beauty pageants challenge traditional notions of beauty and gender?
5. How do beauty pageants raise awareness of queer issues and promote acceptance?

Study Framework

Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982) stands as a significant framework in social psychology, offering insight into the impact of group memberships on an individual's personal identity and intergroup dynamics. This theory encompasses several key concepts, including *social identity*, *social categorization*, and the recognition of *distinct social groups* (i.e., in-group and out-group distinctions). It also addresses the notion of *satisfied social identity* (e.g., group cohesiveness, social influence) and *dissatisfied social identity* (e.g., stereotyping, intergroup conflicts). The study adheres to the following definitions:

Social identity refers to an individual's perception and understanding of themselves based on their group. It shapes their sense of self and can influence their attitudes, behaviors, and interactions with others.

Social categorization involves the cognitive process of classifying individuals based on shared characteristics or attributes. It helps simplify the complex social world by placing people into recognizable categories, facilitating social perception and interaction, and formulating *distinct social groups* (i.e., in-group, out-group).

The *in-group* refers to the specific group or groups that an individual belongs to. It represents the social categories or communities with which they identify and feel a sense of belonging, often leading to stronger solidarity and loyalty. Meanwhile, the *out-group* refers to the groups or categories an individual does not belong to. It encompasses the individuals or communities perceived as distinct from the in-group and may be subject to different treatment or attitudes.

A *satisfied social identity*, manifesting in group cohesiveness and social influence, refers to an individual's positive and gratifying perception of their affiliation with a specific social group. This concept implies that people generally derive feelings of belonging, self-worth, and a favorable self-image from associating with their social groups. When an individual's social identity is content or fulfilled, it signifies that they have a positive view of being part of that group. This contentment often arises from a sense of shared values, norms, and a positive comparison with other social groups. Tajfel and Turner's theory emphasizes the significance of social identity in shaping individuals' self-perception and behaviors within group contexts.

Group cohesiveness describes the degree of unity, attraction, and solidarity among members within a group. It reflects how individuals feel connected to the group, share common goals and values, and support one another. On the other hand, *social influence* is the process through which people are affected by the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others. It encompasses various mechanisms, such as conformity, obedience, and persuasion, which shape individuals' attitudes and actions within social contexts.

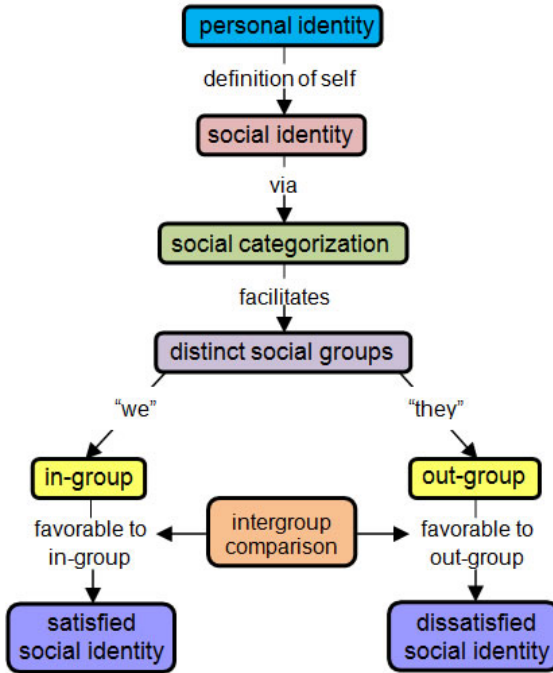
A *dissatisfied social identity* (i.e., stereotyping, intergroup conflict) refers to a situation where an individual's association with a specific social group, like a racial or gender group, leads to negative or unsatisfactory experiences. This dissatisfaction typically arises when the person perceives that their group faces disadvantages or discrimination compared to other groups. The concept of a dissatisfied social identity explores how group memberships and perceptions of relative group status can impact an individual's self-concept and actions. It is often associated with the idea that individuals may improve their group's standing or advocate for social change to address the sources of dissatisfaction related to their social identity.

Stereotyping involves forming generalizations or assumptions about individuals based on their membership in a particular social group. Stereotypes often oversimplify and exaggerate characteristics, leading to biased judgments and expectations toward members of that group.

Intergroup conflict refers to the tensions, disagreements, or hostilities between two or more distinct groups. It can stem from various factors, including competition for resources, differences in beliefs or values, and perceived threats or prejudices.

Figure 1

Social Identity Theory Model (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Adapted from Age-of-the-Sage (n.d)



In essence, Social Identification theory suggests that individuals are more likely to identify with a group (i.e., social identity) when they perceive a shared identity with its members. Beauty pageants provide a space for queer individuals to celebrate their differences and foster a sense of shared identity (i.e., in-group social group). Moreover, when individuals feel safe and supported, they are more likely to express their identities authentically, and beauty pageants can offer this environment by focusing on a wider sense of beauty rather than physical appearance. By featuring contestants who challenge traditional beauty and gender norms, beauty pageants can further encourage a reevaluation of these norms. Additionally, beauty pageants can raise awareness of queer issues and promote acceptance by providing a platform for queer individuals to share their stories and experiences, addressing homophobia and discrimination (i.e., stereotyping, intergroup conflict).

Ultimately, beauty pageants can serve as a platform for queer individuals to share or relate their stories, connecting with others who have had similar experiences (i.e., satisfied social identity). The present study explored the

multifaceted nature of beauty pageants, which simultaneously reinforce and challenge traditional beauty and gender norms. Hence, this study contributes significantly to scholarly discussions by providing a critical and inclusive perspective on beauty pageants, often viewed as symbols of national pride in the Philippine landscape.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study had a specific focus on examining the experiences of three queer individuals who engaged with Philippine beauty pageants in different roles: as a candidate, a trainer, and a spectator. While these experiences may offer insights with potential relevance in other contexts, it is essential to recognize that this qualitative research generates findings that are not generalizable and inherently subjective. The researcher acknowledges these limitations, which, in turn, open doors for future research and the fine-tuning of the study's conclusions:

Self-reporting and response bias. The study likely relied on participant self-reporting, which introduces the potential for response bias. Participants may have provided socially desirable responses or may have been influenced by their personal biases. Additionally, relying on participants' memories and perceptions of their experiences in beauty pageants can introduce inaccuracies and subjectivity.

Potential for researcher bias. As a beauty pageant insider, the researcher's background, beliefs, and perspectives may have influenced the study design, data collection, and interpretation of results. Unconscious biases or preconceived notions about the significance of beauty pageants could have inadvertently influenced the findings. Future studies should consider employing multiple researchers or involving researchers with diverse perspectives to mitigate this limitation.

Time constraints and longitudinal effects. The study may have been limited by time constraints, preventing a thorough examination of the long-term effects of beauty pageant participation on queer individuals' empowerment and self-exploration. Longitudinal studies that follow participants over an extended period would provide valuable insights into the sustainability and lasting impact of beauty pageant experiences on queer individuals' lives.

Ethical considerations. The study may have encountered ethical challenges related to the sensitive nature of the topic, such as obtaining informed consent, protecting participants' identities and privacy, and mitigating potential harm or distress that could arise from discussing traumatic experiences. Ensuring the ethical conduct of research should always be a priority, and future researchers should address any ethical concerns and adhere to established guidelines.

Methodology

The Methodology section of this research paper provides insight into how the study explored the connection between the queer community and beauty pageants. Employing qualitative research methodology, the research conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals from the queer community participating in various roles within the pageant industry. This section explains the rationale for selecting this research method, outlines the process of selecting participants, and underscores the interview approach’s importance for authentic and insightful data collection. Through the application of this methodology, the study uncovered the experiences and viewpoints of queer individuals engaged in beauty pageants, thereby enhancing our understanding of the dynamics within this distinct cultural phenomenon.

Participant Selection

The researcher extended interview invitations through email and Facebook Messenger, and three individuals agreed to participate as research informants in response to these invitations. Participants were inquired about their self-identifications as community members to ensure a respectful representation of the queer community within the research (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1.
Informants’ Responses to the Question “How do you identify yourself?”

Informant	Responses
Krai	“I identify as bisexual, actually, so I can still go [with] both [pronouns].”
Rhea	“I consider myself a gay. But sometimes I cross-dress.”
Kendra	“My gender identity, I belong to the transgender community. So, for my preferred pronoun, I would appreciate [it] if I [could] be called “she” or “her.”

Krai, a Convergent Media college student, previously held the title of Mr. Nursing at a university in Metro Manila, where his victory opened doors for him to lead and champion a mental health-focused project. He imparts his expertise by coaching aspiring beauty pageant contestants, specifically honing their question-and-answer skills for local and international competitions, such as Binibining Pilipinas and Miss Universe Philippines.

Rhea, a recent college graduate, is a pageant enthusiast. She diligently follows the social media profiles of numerous beauty queens. She regularly attends live beauty contests, including events like Binibining Pilipinas at the Araneta Coliseum, in addition to tuning in through various media platforms like

television and social media. Rhea shares these passions with her friends and her mother.

Kendra, a Convergent Media college student working in the BPO industry, was initially just an observer and follower of various pageants and beauty queens on social media. Her involvement in the world of pageantry took a turn when she seized an opportunity to participate as a contestant in a pageant specifically organized for the queer community. Despite her direct engagement with pageantry, she continues to attend beauty pageants as an observer and online supporter during fan votes.

Data Collection

This study adopted a qualitative research approach and utilized an interview guide (See Table 2) for semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted to collect data from individuals within the queer community who have engaged with beauty pageants in different roles: (1) as a pageant candidate, (2) as a trainer for the image, projection, speech, and *pasarela* or catwalk skills for both male and female contestants, and (3) as an enthusiastic pageant fan or spectator. The research recognizes the significance of the beauty pageant industry as a form of communal identity, underscoring the importance of including diverse participants from the queer community.

The semi-structured interview format served as a framework for the discussions, with the researcher adopting a relaxed and informal approach during the interviews. This approach was designed to capture the genuine recollections and experiences of the participants regarding their involvement in beauty pageants. By employing a casual style and using Filipino as appropriate, the researcher created a comfortable and open environment that encouraged the informants to share their thoughts and memories freely.

Table 2.

Interview Questions

Research Sub-problem	Corresponding Interview Question(s)
1. How do Philippine beauty pageants provide a platform to share queer stories and experiences?	a. Can you recall a negative experience about being a member of the queer community? b. How do beauty pageants help you heal from your experiences of trauma? c. How do you find resilience and strength in beauty pageants?

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Research Sub-problem	Corresponding Interview Question(s)
2. How do beauty pageants create a sense of shared identity among queer people based on the informants' experiences?	How did participating in a beauty pageant help you to celebrate yourself and feel more connected to the queer community?
3. How do beauty pageants allow queer informants to express their identities in a safe and supportive space?	How have beauty pageants helped you to feel more confident and comfortable with your queer identity?
4. How do beauty pageants challenge traditional notions of beauty and gender?	In what way do you think your participation in beauty pageants challenged traditional notions of beauty and gender?
5. How do beauty pageants raise awareness of queer issues and promote acceptance?	Do you think beauty pageants helped raise awareness of queer issues and promote acceptance of queer people?

Note: The interview questions were mostly asked in Filipino.

Data Analysis

The data collected for this study were analyzed within the framework of Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982). An analytical method known as axial coding, a qualitative research technique, was employed to facilitate this analysis. Axial coding involves identifying connections between concepts and categories, contributing to the structured organization of data, and enhancing overall comprehension. Throughout the axial coding process, the researcher systematically reviewed the interview transcripts to identify relevant codes (as displayed in Table 3). These codes were subsequently given broader labels, aligning with the sub-problems identified in the study. This categorization process enabled the grouping of codes into larger categories and subcategories.

Table 3.

Axial Coding Guide

Research Sub-problems	Relevant Codes
1. How do Philippine beauty pageants provide a platform to share queer stories and experiences?	Beauty pageants as hope and validation, emotional support; acceptance
2. How do beauty pageants create a sense of shared identity among queer people based on the informants' experiences?	Beauty pageants as a community of shared identities and experiences; community-building

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Research Sub-problems	Relevant Codes
3. How do beauty pageants allow queer informants to express their identities in a safe and supportive space?	Beauty pageants as a safe space for authenticity; expression; self-exploration; personal growth
4. How do beauty pageants challenge traditional notions of beauty and gender?	Beauty pageants as a platform for changing the narrative, challenging norms and stereotypes
5. How do beauty pageants raise awareness of queer issues and promote acceptance?	Beauty pageants as advocacy; activism; social change; education; awareness

Note: The researcher designed this guide and assigned relevant codes.

Results and Discussion

This section offers a glimpse into the participants' views and encounters with Philippine beauty pageants, exploring them as (1) platforms for sharing queer narratives, (2) catalysts for forging a shared or collective queer identity, (3) spaces where queer identities can express their identities in a safe and supportive space, (4) arenas challenging conventional beauty and gender notions, and (5) stages for raising awareness of queer concerns and fostering acceptance.

The themes assigned to each subsection stem from the research questions' contexts. The informants' responses are examined for their alignment with the relevant thematic subsection, facilitating structured data analysis.

Beauty Pageants as a Platform for Sharing Queer Narratives

Within the realm of beauty pageants, the notion of self-expression transcends the glitz and glamour typically associated with these events. This section delves into the profound role that beauty pageants play as platforms for the select LGBTQ+ community members to share their narratives and experiences. Beyond the sequins and spotlights, these pageants become a stage for queer individuals to articulate their unique stories, struggles, and triumphs. By doing so, they not only challenge conventional beauty norms but also foster a deeper understanding of the diverse and complex lives of those within the LGBTQ+ community. This theme invites us to explore how beauty pageants serve as powerful vehicles for amplifying queer voices, providing a space where personal journeys are celebrated and narratives of resilience and identity are embraced.

Krai shared his experience in beauty pageants, highlighting his advocacy and the power of amplifying marginalized voices. "Even though [I am like this]... I can still use my voice to amplify the voiceless... [I will be their way]." Winning the

Mr. Nursing title helped Krai advance the causes that mattered to him, including mental health awareness. Winning the pageant boosted his confidence, found emotional support in his role as the titleholder, and allowed him to inspire others, emphasizing the inclusive nature of beauty pageants for queer individuals. “I love what I’m doing. I love the platform that was given to me. So, it made me more confident to give hope to others, not only just for myself but for others as well.” He believes beauty pageants can change the world by giving a voice to minority groups and fostering representation and empowerment.

For Krai, beauty pageants are viewed as meaningful because they see themselves being represented in a woman’s persona, even if some may dismiss the pageants’ significance.

... [M]ay connection na nagaganap, na hindi man nakikita ng iba, pero within us [LGBT members], personally, may nakikita kaming connection towards that specific person or that specific candidate.... I see myself in her *kasi ganito [r]in ‘yung napagdaanan niya... May representation na nagaganap, na parang same ‘yung pinagdadaanan niya, same ‘yung pinagdadaanan ko. Kung ano ‘yung story na sasabihin niya is ‘yun din ‘yung napagdaanan ko... Hindi man alam nung girl na ‘yun... may nirerepresent siyang isang minority group... ayun na ‘yung nagiging pathway nung group na ‘yun to be heard.*

[... (There is) a connection that takes place even if others don’t see it. But within us (LGBT members), personally, we see a connection towards that specific person or candidate.... I see myself in her because this is what she went through... There is a representation going on as if what she is going through is the same as what I am going through. The story she is going to tell is the same thing I went through... That girl didn’t even know... [but] she was representing a minority group... that becomes the way for that group to be heard.]

Rhea expressed how watching and supporting beauty pageants brings enjoyment and serves as a temporary escape, “*naenjoy namin for a while yung panonood*” (we enjoy watching it even temporarily). It allows her to engage with friends, creating a joyful and nostalgic experience. She finds solace in nostalgia by revisiting past pageants and recalling memorable moments, contributing to her emotional well-being. She stated, “*Nakakausap mo ‘yung mga circle of friends mo [about pageants], masaya kayo, masarap balikan*” (You talk to your circle of friends [about pageants], you’re happy, it feels nice to reminisce). Additionally, Rhea

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mentioned that beauty pageants provide valuable insights into specific social issues like mental health and advocate addressing related issues. This knowledge helps them to navigate their journeys and find strength in the face of adversity.

Kendra expressed her initial insecurities about her body and appearance. But she eventually realized she was no different from others who also felt insecure about something. Despite fearing criticism, Kendra discovered a lack of negative comments or hate directed towards her upon joining beauty pageants and expressed that “it’s just a matter of confidence.” Her pageant experience boosts her confidence and helps her overcome her insecurities. She realized that her perceived flaws were not as significant as they thought, emphasizing the importance of self-confidence. By participating in beauty pageants, individuals like Kendra find acceptance and validation, challenging their self-doubt and embracing their unique qualities.

While Kendra may not have encountered deep-seated reasons for participating in beauty pageants, she acknowledged that others have different motivations. Some individuals join pageants as a source of income and financial support, particularly those without stable jobs or challenging circumstances. They rely on pageants to cover their expenses and bills. These individuals often hail from various regions, including distant provinces, demonstrating the widespread impact of beauty pageants as a means of economic freedom and empowerment.

May mga sumasali talaga na ‘yun na ‘yung source of income nila, wala silang trabaho. So, the only way for them to support ‘yung needs nila, ‘yung mga expenses nila, ‘yung bills, is joining beauty pageants. Actually, parang all over Metro- outside Metro Manila, kahit malalayong probinsya sinasalihan... ‘yun ‘yung pinanghuhugutan.

[There are people who actually join pageants because that is their only source of income; they don’t have a [formal] job. So, the only way for them to support their needs, their expenses, and their bills is by joining beauty pageants. Actually, it’s like [they are] all over Metro- outside Metro Manila. They even go to distant provinces to get involved... (because) that’s where they draw their income from.]

In terms of resilience and strength displayed by pageant contestants, Kendra highlights personal struggles faced by contestants beyond physical challenges. Some candidates face difficulties in gaining acceptance from their families, experiencing rejection and lack of support.

... *Sa* community, we have brothers and sisters *na nagsa*-struggle every day, like acceptance from the family. Sometimes *kasi*, they're into pageants *pero hindi natin alam* 'yung nangyayari [*sa*] lugar nila, *sa bahay* nila, *na hindi naman* sila accepted *sa* family.

[... In the [queer] community, we have brothers and sisters who struggle every day, like [in terms of earning] acceptance from their families. [While we know] they're into pageants, we don't [really] know what's going on [in] their place, in their house, or if their families accept them as they are.]

Despite these circumstances, they choose to participate, driven by a sense of determination and the need for financial stability. The contestants navigate through issues such as physical and mental abuse, strained relationships, and emotional turmoil. In one instance,

Nandun 'yung physical or mental abuse, *kasi* 'yung iba diyan tumatakas pa sa magulang. May mga ganyan na po na story eh, hindi sinusupportahan ng magulang, especially nung tatay. So, syempre, 'yung mental health naapektuhan. [*Tapos*] tatalakan pa, 'yung mga ganon.

[There is physical or mental abuse because others are still running away from their parents [due to not being accepted]. There are already stories like that [where] parents don't support [them], especially the father. So, of course, mental health is affected. [Then] they also receive upsetting remarks.]

Queer candidates demonstrate remarkable resilience by continuing their pageant journey despite these adversities. The contestants' ability to prioritize their personal growth and professional commitments, even when facing personal hardships, showcases their strength and determination.

Kendra also acknowledged instances where contestants push through despite not feeling well, maintaining professionalism and commitment to their roles. Despite illness (e.g., "*nilalagnat*" (feverish), etc.) or emotional challenges (e.g., brokenhearted), candidates persevere and uphold their responsibilities, often achieving success despite their difficult circumstances. These examples serve as reminders of the resilience and determination needed to overcome obstacles and fulfill commitments.

Beauty pageants serve as cathartic journeys for queer individuals, providing hope, validation, and acceptance. They amplify marginalized voices, promote resilience and personal growth, and empower contestants to overcome obstacles. Beauty pageants become powerful platforms for self-expression and

empowerment within the queer community, going beyond labels and showcasing untold stories.

Krai's emphasis on amplifying marginalized voices and advancing causes (i.e., mental health awareness) important to them demonstrates the process of social identification. By participating in beauty pageants, they connect with others who share similar experiences and concerns, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity. This aligns with the proposition that individuals seek to identify with groups that enhance their self-esteem and allow social validation.

Rhea's enjoyment and emotional well-being derived from watching and supporting beauty pageants can be linked to the social identification process. They find solace and joy in engaging with friends and revisiting memorable moments, strengthening their connection to the beauty pageant community. This aligns with the argument that individuals seek positive social identities that enhance their well-being and emotional satisfaction.

Kendra's journey of gaining confidence and overcoming insecurities through beauty pageants also reflects the social identification process. By participating in beauty pageants, they find acceptance, validation, and a sense of belonging within the queer community. This aligns with the idea that individuals seek to identify with groups that provide a positive social identity and help address personal insecurities.

Beauty pageants, often perceived as solely glamorous events, extend far beyond their conventional portrayal to serve as powerful platforms for sharing queer narratives, fostering inclusivity, and providing spaces for personal growth, resilience, and empowerment within the LGBTQ+ community (King-O'Riain, 2008; Lorenzana, 2022; Parreño, 2023; Picos, 2022). This transformative power is evident in the experiences of Krai, Rhea, and Kendra, whose journeys highlight the multifaceted roles beauty pageants play in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Krai's experience underscores the ability of beauty pageants to amplify marginalized voices within the queer community. His advocacy for mental health awareness and the utilization of his title to advance causes align with the literature's recognition of beauty pageants as platforms for expressing cultural agency and addressing societal issues (King-O'Riain, 2008). This amplification of marginalized voices is further supported by Krai's recognition of representation within beauty pageants, reflecting the literature's acknowledgment of pageants as spaces where individuals find connections, see themselves being represented, and foster a sense of belonging (Parreño, 2023). The concept of representation, as Krai exemplifies, becomes a powerful pathway for minority groups, including the LGBTQ+ community, to be heard and gain visibility.

Beauty pageants also serve as joyous and nostalgic experiences, as evidenced by Rhea's enjoyment of these events and the emotional well-being she derives from watching and supporting them. This aligns with the literature's acknowledgment of beauty pageants as spaces that evoke positive emotions and connections (King-O'Riain, 2008). Rhea's revisiting of past pageants and the creation of a joyful space through engagement with friends further highlight the cultural identity aspects that beauty pageants can foster.

Moreover, beauty pageants provide spaces for personal growth, resilience, and empowerment, as exemplified by Kendra's journey of gaining confidence and overcoming insecurities through her participation. This aligns with the literature's recognition of pageants as spaces for self-validation and acceptance (Picos, 2022). The transformational impact on Kendra's self-esteem and the emphasis on the importance of self-confidence underscore the broader understanding that beauty pageants challenge normative societal constructs and promote self-acceptance (Lorenzana, 2022).

In the context of Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982), the experiences shared by Krai, Rhea, and Kendra in beauty pageants agree with the idea that individuals develop a sense of identity and belonging through their participation in social groups. Beauty pageants serve as a platform where queer individuals develop a sense of identity as part of a larger community and express their unique experiences and perspectives. Their engagement in beauty pageants aligns with the theory's proposition that individuals seek positive social identities that enhance well-being, foster a sense of belonging and solidarity, and allow for social validation. Beauty pageants, in this context, become spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals can find acceptance, affirmation, and a sense of community, contributing to their overall well-being, personal growth, and identity development.

Beauty Pageants as a Catalyst for Forging a Shared or Collective Queer Identity

This section explores how participation in pageants fosters a sense of unity and belonging within the queer community, offering a platform for individuals to express and celebrate their diverse identities in a public and affirming context. It delves into the experiences and perspectives of queer individuals who view beauty pageants not merely as competitions but as transformative events that contribute to a collective identity while challenging traditional notions of beauty and gender. By examining the narratives and insights of those who have actively engaged in this facet of pageantry, the discussion sheds light on the profound impact these competitions have in shaping and strengthening the shared identity of queer individuals.

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Krai discussed the inclusivity of the beauty pageant community, where queer individuals can freely express themselves and engage in open conversations. While some members may not feel comfortable speaking up at the moment, others are vocal about their experiences and opinions, often using social media as a platform to be heard. It is acknowledged that not everyone in the queer community is ready or able to speak up due to judgment, especially since “the Philippines [is] a very conservative country [that is not yet open to accommodate] this kind of community and entertainers.” However, the power of social media allows for the expression of thoughts and opinions, even though some individuals may face criticism and hesitation because of their posts.

Krai emphasized that queer individuals can better understand and relate to each other’s struggles as they have gone through similar challenges. “It takes one [similar experience] to know [what] one [is going through]... *alam nila kung ano ‘yung pinagdadaanan nung kapwa nila ka-community* (they know what their fellow queer is going through).” While allies may be supportive, there are times when they cannot fully comprehend the discussions and experiences of the queer community.

The candidates in beauty pageants are generally open and accepting of the queer community. Krai mentioned specific candidates (e.g., Trisha Martinez and Gianna Llanes from Binibining Pilipinas) who have garnered support from both straight and queer fans.

Krai mentioned that even if a candidate may not explicitly support the LGBTQ+ community, their performance and ability to bring pride to the country are still valuable.

Kung hindi man siya support sa LGBT, basta magaling yung sagot niya [sa Q&A], and I know na she can bring pride to the country, so what [if she doesn’t support the LGBT]?

[Even if she doesn’t support the LGBT, as long as her answer [in the Q&A] is good, and I know she can bring pride to the country, so what (if she doesn’t support the LGBT)?]

However, there are instances when derogatory terms like “*Bakmog*” (*Baklang Hamog*) or “gay fog” (in English) are used to label a minority of queer fans within the beauty pageant community, showing an intergroup conflict within the queer community. These individuals tend to give unreasonable and unfair criticisms and find faults in everything, including the pageant candidates, which has led to the term becoming derogatory. Despite this, it is recognized that their (*Bakmogs*) constant need to speak up, even though it may seem “pointless,” comes from a place of having their own perspectives.

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Beauty pageants serve as a community or a “chosen family” (Frost et al., 2016), fostering a shared identity among queer individuals. In and out of the pageantry, Krai regards the queer community as his “genuine family” that makes him feel more loved and accepted than his biological family. This community is where members can find understanding, support, and pride in their shared journey. As Krai metaphorically describes, “[The queer] community brings a lot of pride in me.”

Rhea discussed her early interest in beauty pageants, often bonding with family members while watching Miss Universe in her childhood. “Naging *bonding din namin ni Mama dati nung bata pa ako, ‘pag nanonood kami [ng] beauty pageant ‘pag umaga’* (Mama and I used to bond when I was young, when we [occasionally] watched [a] beauty pageant in the morning). This early exposure cultivated a fascination with pageants and formed a foundation for their passion and support. Rhea also expressed how beauty pageants have contributed to the LGBT community, as many supporters of pageant contestants are also members of the LGBT and queer community. She emphasized pageants’ significant role in connecting and uniting individuals within this community. The connection to pageants goes beyond mere admiration; it becomes a form of identification and an alter ego for Rhea. She playfully takes on the personas of her favorite contestants, emphasizing a strong connection and shared experience.

Beauty pageants also provide a platform for self-expression and empowerment for Rhea. She mentioned how the contestants’ fashion choices, interview or question-and-answer responses, and overall presence inspire them and allow them to connect on a personal level. The impact of these pageant experiences is profound and symbolic, as it helps them express their own identities and find inspiration in the journey of the contestants.

‘Yung mga kandidata na pinapanood natin, napakalaki ng impact nila para samin, lalo na yung kung paano sila manamit, kung paano sila sumagot, naitinspire kami, parang kami rin nakaka-connect sa kanila.

[The candidates we watch have a huge impact on us. We get inspired, especially by the way they dress and the way they answer [in interviews and the Q&A portion]. It’s like we can connect with them, too.]

Binibining Pilipinas and Miss Universe are specifically mentioned as significant pageants that hold a special place in Rhea’s life. These pageants are eagerly anticipated, similar to how fans anticipate sporting events such as the NBA or boxing matches. “*Sa mga lalaki, NBA, boxing... sa’tin Miss Universe na!*” (For men, it’s NBA, boxing... For us, it’s Miss Universe!). The prospect of bringing

home a crown becomes a source of excitement and pride for the community. She added, “*Talagang kaabang-abang; talagang ayun ‘yung gustong gusto ng karamihan... na talagang may iuwing korona*” (It’s the most awaited; it’s really what majority want... to really witness the candidate bring home a crown).

Kendra expressed her deep interest and investment in beauty pageants, “I think *lagpas pa sa 100 percent yung interest ko*” (I think my interest in pageants goes beyond 100%), dedicating significant time watching various pageants, following contestants on social media, and actively participating in online campaigns and online voting “even for less popular or less familiar pageants.” She feels a strong connection to pageants as Filipinos, as it is a significant cultural phenomenon in the country.

Since Filipino *nga diba, noh, talagang* very huge *satin yung* pageant... *Isa ako sa milyon-milyong Pilipino na talagang* into beauty pageant. [However], feeling *ko hindi pa* enough *yung* knowledge *ko*, I need a lot of practice *pa* before joining... feeling *ko ang taba-taba ko, kasi syempre* body shaming, very *ano ‘yun sa Philippines... Iniisip ko ‘yung* fans, *saan ako kukuha ng susupport sakin, ‘yung mga susuotin, kailangan ako magpractice ng pagsasalita. Q&A, yun talaga yung pinaka... pinaka-nagda-doubt ako, ‘yung Q&A* part.

[Since it’s a Filipino pop culture, where the pageant phenomenon is really huge... I can say I am one of the millions of Filipinos who are really into beauty pageants. (However), I feel that my knowledge (about beauty pageants) is not sufficient; I need a lot of practice before joining... I feel that I am fat because, of course, body shaming has been normalized in the Philippines... I am thinking about the fans, where I will get someone to support me, those to wear, I need to practice speaking. Q&A, that’s really my most doubted part (as an aspiring candidate).]

Despite initial hesitations and doubts about her own abilities, Kendra eventually decided to enter pageantry as a candidate. “*Inisip ko na lang, hindi ko siya matututunan if hindi ko ita-try*” (I just thought, I won’t be able to learn from it if I won’t try). She went through a process of preparation, including practicing her speaking skills and staying updated on current events to be prepared for the question-and-answer portion.

Backstage, she experienced the chaotic and glamorous nature of pageants, with constant retouching and time pressure.

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Nung na-experience ko na siya, sobrang saya pala na nakakakaba. Grabe 'yung pawis... 'Yung hindi ka makakakain... 'yun kasi pipiliin mong hindi kumain kasi kinakabahan ka. Parang water-water ka lang... Hindi mo na nga actually mararamdaman yung gutom eh.

[When I experienced [joining a beauty pageant], it was so much fun and, at the same time, nerve-wracking. I sweat a lot. I can't even eat... that's because you choose not to eat for being so nervous. You just drink water... You won't actually feel hungry anymore.]

Despite the challenges, she found the pageant experience fulfilling, especially when her friends and family supported her. Being a part of the LGBTQ+ community, Kendra appreciates having people who take pageants seriously and understand their significance to the queer community.

Regardless kung manalo ka or not, if nandun yung friends mo or 'yung family mo, sobrang saya nun kasi... alam naman natin kapag member ka ng community ng LGBT, parang sometimes 'pag pageant pinagtatawanan lang or hindi naman siniseryoso.

[Win or lose, you'll still feel ecstatic, especially if your friends and family are there (to support you). Sometimes, we (queer) feel like we are taken less seriously in pageants if people find out we are a member of the LGBT community.]

Engaging in beauty pageants has not only been a platform for her personal growth but has also facilitated a deeper connection with the broader queer community beyond her usual social circle. Through participation, she has forged meaningful friendships and expanded her social network by actively engaging in group chats where experiences are shared and discussions unfold. Over time, the individuals she encountered in the realm of beauty pageants evolved into lasting friendships. Many of these connections are fellow members of the LGBT community who contribute to the pageantry world in diverse roles, such as handlers, fashion stylists, and makeup artists.

The camaraderie within this community extends beyond the stage, as these newfound friends have played a crucial role in providing support, not only emotionally but also in alleviating some of the financial challenges associated with participating in pageants. The bonds formed within the pageant community have significantly enhanced her overall journey, offering a profound sense of belonging and contributing to a more enriched tapestry of experiences.

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Beauty pageants create a sense of shared identity among queer individuals by fostering a community that shares a deep interest in pageantry. Through her pageant involvement, Kendra formed connections, gained support, and expanded her network within the queer community. The experience of participating in pageants, both on and off stage, is seen as fulfilling and joyful, especially when surrounded by friends and family who understand and appreciate the significance of pageantry.

Krai, Rhea, and Kendra highlight the role of beauty pageants in fostering a sense of shared identity and community among queer individuals. The beauty pageant community provides a platform for open discussions and expressing thoughts and experiences. Queer individuals can freely express themselves and engage in conversations, finding understanding and support within the community. Social media plays a significant role in allowing individuals to voice their opinions and connect with others, even though they may face criticism and hesitation.

Krai's experience underscores the inclusivity of the beauty pageant community, resonating with the literature's recognition of pageants as spaces that foster a sense of unity and belonging within the queer community (King-O'Riain, 2008). Beauty pageants provide a haven for queer individuals to freely express themselves, engage in open conversations, and challenge societal norms, contributing to the formation of a collective identity.

Krai's acknowledgment of social media as a powerful tool for expressing thoughts and opinions, despite potential criticism, aligns with the literature's exploration of digital spaces as empowering platforms for marginalized voices within the LGBTQ+ community (Berger et al., 2022). The use of social media to connect with like-minded individuals reinforces the notion that these platforms contribute to the visibility and expression of diverse queer experiences.

Beauty pageants, often perceived as mere entertainment events, transcend their conventional portrayal to serve as powerful platforms for shaping a shared or collective queer identity. Krai's emphasis on the shared understanding among queer individuals, stating that it takes one similar experience to comprehend another's struggles, aligns with the Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982). The beauty pageant community becomes a space where individuals with similar experiences can find understanding, support, and a shared sense of identity, reinforcing the theory's proposition that individuals seek positive social identities that enhance well-being and provide social validation.

Krai's mention of candidates like Trisha Martinez and Gianna Llanes garnering support from both straight and queer fans supports the literature's recognition of beauty pageants as spaces generally accepting of the queer

community (King-O’Riain, 2008). This acceptance, even if not explicitly supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, contributes to a sense of validation and pride within the queer community.

The acknowledgment of derogatory terms like *Bakmog* within the queer community reflects the literature’s exploration of intergroup conflicts and challenges faced by marginalized subgroups within larger LGBTQ+ communities (Meyer, 2003). The presence of conflicts highlights the diversity of perspectives and experiences within the queer community, emphasizing that unity is not without its internal challenges.

The description of the beauty pageant community as a “genuine family” by Krai aligns with the literature’s recognition of “chosen families” and communities as crucial sources of support and affirmation for LGBTQ+ individuals (Frost et al., 2016). The connections formed within the pageant community extend beyond the stage, providing emotional and even financial support contributing to a profound sense of belonging.

Rhea’s discussion of beauty pageants as a significant cultural phenomenon in the Philippines resonates with the literature’s recognition of pageantry as a cultural expression that shapes societal perceptions and ideals (King-O’Riain, 2008) and an emblem of nostalgia. The anticipation, excitement, and pride associated with pageants contribute to their cultural significance within the queer community.

Rhea’s experience of finding inspiration in the contestants’ fashion choices, interview and Q&A responses, and overall presence aligns with the literature’s inquiry of beauty pageants as platforms for self-expression and empowerment (Picos, 2022). The impact of pageant experiences on personal identity and inspiration mirrors the broader understanding that beauty pageants challenge societal norms and provide avenues for individual expression.

Kendra’s journey of participating in beauty pageants and the subsequent sense of fulfillment, connection, and identity formation align with the Social Identification Theory. Through her involvement, Kendra forms meaningful connections, gains support, and expands her social network within the queer community. The camaraderie and support within the pageant community enhance her sense of belonging, illustrating the theory’s proposition that individuals derive a sense of identity and belonging from groups they identify with.

Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982) proposes that individuals derive a sense of identity and belonging from groups they identify with. In this case, the beauty pageant community serves as a group where queer individuals can find acceptance and validation. Participating in pageants

or supporting contestants strengthens their sense of identity as part of this community. The shared experiences and struggles within the queer community further enhance their connection and understanding of one another, which allies may not fully comprehend.

The beauty pageant community generally accepts queer individuals, and pageant contestants often garner support from straight and queer fans. This acceptance, regardless of explicit support for the LGBTQ+ community, contributes to the sense of validation and pride within the queer community. However, there are instances of derogatory terms (i.e., *Bakmog*) being used to label certain pageant fans within the queer community. Despite this, their need to express their perspectives arises from their unique experiences.

Beauty pageants provide a platform for self-expression, empowerment, and inspiration. Individuals feel inspired by the contestants' fashion choices, interview and Q&A responses, and overall presence, connecting with them on a personal level. The anticipation and excitement surrounding pageants, such as Binibining Pilipinas and Miss Universe, create a sense of pride within the community. Pageants become a cultural phenomenon, serving as a source of inspiration, identity, connection, and nostalgia for queer individuals.

Beauty Pageants as a Space to Express Queer Identities in a Safe and Supportive Space

Beauty pageants transcend their conventional roles, becoming sanctuaries of self-expression and self-discovery for queer participants. In this context, participants are provided a unique platform to unveil their true selves, free from judgment and prejudice, fostering a sense of security and support. This section delves into the profound impact of beauty pageants in providing a safe and encouraging environment for queer individuals to articulate their identities, challenging societal norms, and redefining conventional notions of beauty and gender.

Krai, who participated in the collegial Mr. Nursing pageant, emphasized the imperative of establishing safe spaces in the Philippines where LGBTQ+ individuals can openly and freely express themselves without encountering barriers or challenges.

If we have more safe spaces here in the Philippines... *hindi na mahihirapan* 'yung LGBT in order for them to say what's inside their mind. *Pero* as of the moment, *medyo* 50/50 *pa talaga* [*yung opportunities for them*].

[If only we had more safe spaces in the Philippines... the LGBT community wouldn't have limitations in expressing their

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minds. However, as of the moment, the opportunities for the LGBT [to speak up and express themselves] are still 50/50.]

Krai acknowledged the difficulties associated with responding to questions related to the queer community in a manner that genuinely respects their experiences. This often leads both queer and non-queer participants to offer cautious and carefully crafted responses. Despite this, beauty pageants hold the potential to serve as safe and supportive havens for queer individuals to express their identities authentically. However, there remains an opportunity for enhancement in fostering more inclusive environments within these pageant settings.

Rhea expressed how beauty pageants have played a pivotal role in her journey of self-discovery, contributing significantly to her understanding and embrace of her identity.

Sobrang laki din ng naitulong ng pageant sakin, parang mas nakilala ko 'yung pagkatao ko ngayon. Parang ayon 'yung bumuo ng pagiging babae ko. Ay!! Babae... Hahaha!

[The pageant helped me a lot. It seems like I got to know my personality better now. It seems to be the way to build my womanhood. Oh!! Woman... Hahaha!]

Rhea has long harbored a desire to engage in beauty pageants, foreseeing them as platforms for personal growth and self-exploration since her senior high school years. Despite not pursuing this path earlier, she maintains an open attitude, expressing a willingness to embrace the opportunity if luck happens to lead her there. Furthermore, Rhea underscores the significance of fostering a more positive environment within pageants by advocating for the reduction of bashing and harsh criticism and discouraging unfair practices. She emphasizes the importance of being open or maintaining openness to diverse opinions in this competitive arena.

Kendra emphasized the role of beauty pageants in celebrating her identity and bolstering her confidence. She highlighted the transformative influence of makeup, citing comments like “*ang ganda ganda mo naman pala 'pag inayusan*” (You look beautiful when glammed up). The positive responses she garnered significantly contributed to her overall self-esteem.

Moreover, Kendra amplified the importance of embracing one’s purpose and “walking the talk” in the context of pageants. She stressed the need to accept outcomes gracefully, noting that “you win some, you lose some.” In the event of a loss, she encouraged individuals to move on, as second chances are always

within reach. Kendra reminded others that while pageants are a part of life, they are not the entirety of it. Therefore, she advocates for moving forward after experiencing defeat and emphasizes the necessity of mutual respect within the pageant community. In her own words, “*Tuloy lang ang buhay. Hindi naman katapusan ng mundo ‘pag nanalo ka or natalo ka’*” (Life goes on. It’s not yet the end of the world when you win or lose).

All informants expressed their desire for safe spaces, reduced criticism, and fairness to express their identities freely. The desire for safe spaces and supportive environments (Campen et al., 2022) resonates with Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982), emphasizing the influence of positive group norms and values on social identification and self-categorization processes. Individuals seek a positive social identity by identifying with and belonging to a particular social group. Beauty pageants, in this context, provide a platform for queer individuals to align themselves with the LGBTQ+ community, fostering a sense of belonging and affirmation of their authentic selves (Campen et al., 2022; Frost et al., 2016).

Self-categorization (Turner et al., 1987) extends Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982) by emphasizing the role of self-categorization in shaping behavior and attitudes. It suggests that individuals align their self-concept with a particular social category, adopting the characteristics and norms associated with that category. By participating in beauty pageants, Rhea and Kendra align themselves with the category of queer individuals, adopting the characteristics and norms associated with this group. Their involvement in pageants becomes a form of self-expression and self-categorization within the LGBTQ+ community.

Krai’s emphasis on the imperative of establishing safe spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals in the Philippines reflects the broader understanding that safe spaces provide environments free from judgment and prejudice. This aligns with the literature’s emphasis on “safe spaces” as essential for marginalized communities to express their identities authentically (Campen et al., 2022).

Rhea’s narrative about beauty pageants playing a pivotal role in her journey of self-discovery aligns with literature recognizing the transformative potential of pageants in shaping personal growth and identity (King-O’Riain, 2008). The platform provided by beauty pageants becomes a space for individuals like Rhea to explore and embrace their identities.

Kendra’s experience of positive responses contributing to her overall self-esteem aligns with research indicating that affirming environments, such as those found in beauty pageants, can have a positive impact on individuals’ self-perception and confidence (Frost et al., 2016). Moreover, Kendra’s emphasis on life

continuing beyond pageants aligns with the understanding that beauty pageants, while significant for the queer community, are not the sole determinants of one's worth or identity. This perspective reflects the literature's argument of the broader life contexts in which pageant participants exist (Banet-Weiser, 2023).

Beauty pageants, often perceived as solely competitive events, transcend their conventional portrayal as mere competitions to serve as significant platforms for queer individuals to express their identities in safe and supportive spaces for queer individuals (Campen et al., 2022), as the research findings suggest. The alignment with theoretical frameworks, such as Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987), enhances the scholarly context of the research, emphasizing the role of beauty pageants in shaping identity, fostering a sense of community, and providing opportunities for authentic self-expression within the LGBTQ+ community.

Beauty pageants as an arena challenging conventional beauty and gender notions.

The discussions within this section delve into the role of beauty pageants as spaces that challenge established notions of beauty and gender. The stories and encounters of queer individuals participating in these pageants are explored, and readers can acquire a deeper understanding of how these competitions contribute to a more comprehensive and progressive view of beauty and gender identity within the present-day beauty pageant in the Philippine context.

Krai was the first LGBT member to win a specific title (Mr. Nursing) at a collegial pageant at his university. This demonstrates the changing narrative within the pageant industry, where straight individuals usually win. He advocates for inclusivity and open-mindedness, challenging traditional views and emphasizing the importance of giving trans women a chance to participate. Krai envisions a future where more trans[gender] women and trans[gender] men dominate beauty pageants, promoting acceptance of diverse gender identities. He was hopeful that a transwoman could win the Ms. Nursing pageant, at least in his university.

Rhea brings attention to the dynamic changes within the beauty pageant landscape, applauding its shift towards inclusivity and challenging societal norms. Notably, she points out that individuals with tattoos are no longer confined by restrictions when it comes to participating. Emphasizing the significance of inclusivity, diverse representation, and the redefinition of beauty standards, Rhea underscores how beauty pageants serve as platforms for contestants who break away from traditional norms.

These pageants, by showcasing individuals who defy conventional expectations, actively contribute to a more expansive dialogue on beauty and

gender. Rhea advocates for the acceptance and celebration of queer individuals based on their authentic selves, urging society not to treat them as outcasts. In doing so, she promotes a culture of appreciation for the diversity that enriches the beauty pageant community.

Kendra acknowledges the varying perspectives surrounding beauty pageants, with some perceiving them solely as “entertainment.” She advocates for the genuine inclusion of individuals across diverse gender identities. Recognizing the profound impact beauty pageants have on contestants, she emphasizes the importance of valuing beauty both internally and externally, particularly for those who rely on beauty pageants as their “only source of income.”

In the midst of differing opinions, Kendra calls for mutual understanding, support, and respect for the efforts of all candidates. She highlights how beauty pageants serve as agents of change, challenging societal norms and stereotypes and actively promoting inclusivity. Through this lens, the concept of beauty extends beyond aesthetics, becoming a pathway to economic freedom for many participants in beauty pageants.

Beauty pageants have long been associated with narrow, stereotypical representations of beauty, often criticized for their exclusionary practices and emphasis on physical appearance. However, the narratives of Krai, Rhea, and Kendra, three LGBTQ+ individuals who have participated in beauty pageants in various roles, challenge these conventional perceptions and offer a glimpse into the potential of these competitions as platforms for social identity formation and advocacy for inclusivity.

Their participation in beauty pageants has been a transformative experience, highlighting the process of social identification (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982). They have aligned themselves with the LGBTQ+ community and individuals challenging traditional beauty norms, finding a sense of belonging and support among those who share similar experiences. This alignment has fostered their advocacy for inclusivity and acceptance within beauty pageants, demonstrating their desire to strengthen their social identities and promote positive social change.

Their advocacy aligns with the core tenets of Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987), which emphasizes the role of social categorization in shaping behavior and attitudes. By actively categorizing themselves and others into groups that challenge conventional beauty and gender norms, Krai, Rhea, and Kendra demonstrate how self-categorization shapes their engagement with beauty pageants. They encourage contestants to embrace their authentic selves, challenging the notion of a narrow, homogeneous beauty ideal and contributing to the enrichment of social categories within the pageant context.

Furthermore, their emphasis on appreciating beauty beyond physical appearance and valuing contestants' efforts aligns with the idea that self-categorization involves adopting shared values and norms within a specific group. By actively challenging superficial judgments and stereotypes associated with beauty pageants, the informants collectively reinforce the broader purpose and significance of these competitions, moving beyond mere physical beauty to celebrate individual achievements and diverse expressions of identity.

Their acknowledgment of beauty pageants as agents of change, challenging societal norms and stereotypes, also aligns with the potential for positive social change within Self-Categorization Theory. By actively promoting inclusivity and challenging traditional views, beauty pageants, as described by Krai, Rhea, and Kendra, emerge as dynamic spaces challenging and reshaping conventional beauty and gender notions, contributing to a more comprehensive and progressive view of identity within the LGBTQ+ community.

The experiences and perspectives of Krai, Rhea, and Kendra provide a nuanced understanding of how beauty pageants can align with and contribute to social identity processes and self-categorization theories. Beauty pageants, as described by these informants, can transcend their conventional portrayal to become platforms for reshaping societal perceptions and fostering a more inclusive and accepting society for the LGBTQ+ community.

Beauty Pageants as a Stage for Raising Awareness of Queer Concerns and Fostering Acceptance

Beauty pageants, especially in the Philippines, have a significant role in promoting social change. They go beyond showcasing physical beauty and talents as they serve as platforms where queer individuals actively raise awareness about critical issues affecting their community, such as acceptance and economic freedom. The queer community utilizes the stage, spotlight, and microphones at these highly visible events to share their voices and stories, contributing to a more inclusive society and challenging preconceived notions about gender and sexuality. This section delves into how beauty pageants not only celebrate beauty but also serve as forums for promoting acceptance and supporting queer causes, highlighting their potential for transformation beyond the glitz and glamour.

Krai emphasizes the pageant platform's potential to promote acceptance and raise awareness, particularly regarding mental health issues. "Having a platform like this can help not only me but also those who [will benefit from] my advocacy, which is mental health." He mentioned organizations like Love Yourself, which provide inclusive services and consultations, addressing issues such as HIV and supporting the LGBTQ+ community.

Krai firmly believes that beauty pageants provide a crucial space for self-expression and an essential platform to confront questions or the “stigma against LGBT.” He sees them as an opportunity for seeking guidance, fostering open discussions, and breaking down barriers surrounding sensitive topics such as HIV. According to Krai, the question-and-answer portion serves as a significant starting point for opening up discussions and creating a more inclusive atmosphere.

Expressing his viewpoint, he encourages pageant candidates to take a bold stance on the causes and advocacies they believe in, even if they are considered controversial. In his words, “*Bakit ka magiging neutral, eh you’re in a position to say something?*” (Why would you give neutral answers if you are in a position to say something?) Krai advocates for candidates to use their platform to speak out and contribute to meaningful conversations, challenging the status quo.

Rhea discusses the challenges faced by transgender individuals in physical spaces, advocating for inclusivity and awareness to normalize their experiences and reduce stigma.

Sa CR sometimes may mga friend[s] ako na trans na hindi maka-CR sa girls kasi parang feeling nila baka ma discriminate sila pagdating sa loob. Or hindi rin naman sila kumportable kung papasok sila sa male restroom.

[Occasionally, my trans friend[s] cannot go to restrooms intended for girls because they feel like they might be discriminated against when they come inside. Or they don’t feel comfortable when they enter the male restroom.]

Rhea has voiced her unequivocal support for transgender participation in beauty pageants, understanding the pivotal role their voices play in shaping conversations and dismantling gender-related stigma. She advocates for the normalization of transgender participation in and out of beauty pageants, emphasizing that it should not be regarded as a privilege. According to Rhea, the inclusion of transgender individuals sparks essential discussions and actively contributes to societal progress.

Beauty pageants are seen as powerful platforms for advocacy, activism, and education, with the ability to amplify voices and raise awareness of queer issues. Kendra acknowledges the evolution of beauty pageants, emphasizing the importance of purpose and advocacy. She noted the growing acceptance and understanding among audiences, with pageants now occurring during cultural celebrations and festivals where support is more pronounced. As Kendra recalled instances of queer beauty pageants,

I think ngayon, since *kuha na siya 'pag may mga pistahan, kapag may mga celebration[s], medyo nafifeel ko naman na yung acceptance and masaya na siya. Mas nako-control na kasi yung crowd. Dati binabatok-batukan [ang candidates], nag-aalisan na yung crowd wala pa nga. Ngayon, medyo okay okay na kasi nga nakakatulong din yung pageant na nakikita natin sa TV, 'yung mga programs sa social media. So pinapalalpakan na, unlike before na sobrang wala talaga, dini-degrade talaga.*

[Nowadays, queer beauty pageants are more visible in festivals and cultural celebrations, so I feel like we are more accepted, especially since the crowd is more controlled and disciplined. However, previously, the candidates were being attacked, and the crowd was already seen leaving even if the event had not yet started. But today, queer pageants are already televised and have even earned a social media presence. Now, queer pageants are being applauded, unlike before, when there was really nothing; it was really being degraded.]

Kendra recognizes the role of beauty pageants in raising awareness and providing platforms for candidates to express their advocacies, generating discussions, and shedding light on important issues. However, she advocates for the respect of original intents and setting boundaries, suggesting separate pageants specifically created for the LGBTQ+ community rather than forcing participation in pageants originally designed for women. She believes in celebrating different talents and skills within their respective domains to preserve the essence of certain pageants.

I'm into equality, (but) we have to understand *na may kanya-kanyang talent and skills tayo, pero may limit lang.* I mean, *'yung mga pinaglalaman ngayon na pag-isahin na lang (ang pageants ng babae at trans), well, sad to say, hindi ako sang-ayon doon... meron namang pageant for the (LGBT) community eh.*

[I'm into equality, (but) we have to understand that we have respective talents and skills, so there must be limitations in place. I mean, those who are pushing now to unite (female and trans pageants), well, sad to say, I can't entirely agree with that... there is a separate pageant for the (LGBT) community.]

Kendra notes progress in the acceptance and recognition of queer beauty pageants focused on queer issues, observing improvements in quality, funding, and organization, as well as growing support from sponsors and fans.

Before kasi... *pinagtatawanan, minamaliit, or hindi talaga siniseryoso. Pero ngayon... may mga formal pageants na tayo, malalaki na 'yung premyo, may mga sponsors... respetado yung organization, talagang may funds, maayos, may mga sponsors... 'Yung mga kandidata, talagang well-educated at talagang may fans sila. Kaya nila, praktisado, mahuhusay. Unlike dati na wala, tae-tae lang talaga 'yung mga candidate[s] natin.*

[Before, queer pageants were laughed at, belittled, or not really taken seriously. But now, we have formal queer pageants, where the prizes are big, there are sponsors, the organization is respected, there are funds... and the candidates are really well-educated and are really supported by fans. They are trained well, unlike before when candidate(s) are really shitty.]

Krai, Rhea, and Kendra recognize the power of beauty pageants as platforms for self-categorization and collective identification. The informants' discussions and advocacies reflect the pursuit of positive distinctiveness, a central proposition of Self-categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987). By participating in beauty pageants focused on queer issues, they seek to challenge stereotypes, raise awareness, and promote acceptance. They recognize the significance of their voices in shaping conversations and fostering understanding. Beauty pageants provide opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard and for contestants to showcase their talents and competencies, highlighting positive distinctiveness within the LGBTQ+ community.

The informants' pageant participation efforts, though dynamic, align with the proposition that social identification can lead to positive social change and increased awareness. They believe beauty pageants are powerful platforms for advocacy, activism, education, and awareness. By engaging in open discussions, raising sensitive topics, and addressing societal issues, beauty pageants contribute to shifting societal perceptions and promoting acceptance. The informants aim to create a more inclusive and understanding society through active involvement.

Krai, Rhea, and Kendra actively engage in beauty pageants, aligning with the principles of Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982). Through their participation, they strategically position themselves within the LGBTQ+ community, actively contributing to the ongoing social identification process. Their vocal advocacy within beauty pageants serves as a mechanism to reinforce their social identities within the unique cultural context of these events.

Furthermore, the informants' discussions and advocacies align with the central tenet of Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987), where they

actively categorize themselves as individuals challenging societal norms and advocating for acceptance. By participating in beauty pageants centered on queer issues, they contribute to breaking down barriers and fostering a more inclusive society. This aligns seamlessly with the self-categorization process outlined in the theory, emphasizing their role in shaping social categories within the LGBTQ+ community.

Additionally, the discussions about the evolving nature of beauty pageants, acceptance within cultural celebrations, and the growing visibility and respect for queer pageants underscore the significance of inclusive representation. This aligns with the literature's emphasis on the role of inclusive environments in challenging norms and altering societal perceptions. The participants' experiences contribute to the ongoing narrative of beauty pageants as transformative spaces that challenge societal ideals and promote inclusivity.

Finally, Kendra's emphasis on the importance of separate pageants for the LGBTQ+ community resonates with the concept of self-categorization, highlighting the need to recognize diverse talents and skills within distinct domains. This aligns with the broader concept of celebrating positive distinctiveness within different social groups, emphasizing the uniqueness of beauty pageants tailored to the LGBTQ+ community.

The experiences and perspectives of the informants within the context of beauty pageants provide nuanced insights into the intersection of social identity processes, self-categorization, and the transformative potential of beauty pageants as agents of positive social change. As queer individuals, the informants' active involvement, advocacy, and discussions within beauty pageants actively contribute to the ongoing journey toward a more accepting, inclusive, and understanding society for the LGBTQ+ community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research explored how beauty pageants empower queer individuals and address their personal struggles, which manifest in various forms (e.g., economic hardship, lack of family acceptance and support, absence of safe physical spaces and affirming environments, stereotypes, etc.). The findings and discussions unveil the interconnectedness between the pageant and queer communities, promoting acceptance and empowerment while challenging conventional beauty and gender standards in the evolving landscape of pageantry's rainbow revolution.

The study underscores the importance of providing safe and supportive spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals to express themselves freely. Beauty pageants have the potential to be such spaces, allowing queer individuals to openly share

their thoughts, experiences, and struggles (personal identity). Creating more inclusive environments within pageants can further enhance the sense of identity and belonging among queer individuals (social identity).

Furthermore, the research emphasizes the transformative power of beauty pageants in fostering self-expression, empowerment, and personal growth. Participants and supporters of pageants find inspiration and connection through the contestants' fashion choices, interview and Q&A responses, and overall presence. By witnessing the contestants' journeys, queer individuals can explore and embrace their identities while gaining confidence and pride.

The research also contributes to the field by highlighting the need for inclusivity, reduced criticism (stereotyping), such as the "Bakmogs" or "gay fog" (intergroup conflict), and fairness within beauty pageants. These findings call for a shift in the norms and values of the pageant community to create a more accepting and supportive environment for queer individuals. By challenging traditional views, embracing diversity, and redefining beauty standards, beauty pageants contribute to a broader societal conversation on beauty and gender.

The study demonstrates that Philippine beauty pageants play a significant role in empowering queer identities and promoting inclusivity by allowing them to share their stories on a much larger platform. The research findings emphasize the importance of safe spaces, self-expression, and acceptance within the pageant community. By challenging traditional beauty and gender standards, beauty pageants promote a more inclusive and tolerant society. This research offers valuable insights for those involved in the beauty pageant industry, including practitioners, organizers, and participants, laying the foundation for a more diverse, supportive, and affirming future.

In exploring beauty pageants as platforms for sharing queer narratives, the study uncovered how Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Turner, 1982) extends to Self-categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987) to understand the experiences of the queer informants better. The process of self-categorization, where individuals identify with social groups based on shared characteristics and norms, is evident in the narratives and experiences of the informants. They identify themselves as participants in beauty pageants, recognizing their shared experiences, struggles, and aspirations, aligning with the self-categorization process. Furthermore, their advocacy for mental health awareness and marginalized voices underscores forming a shared social identity centered around social causes and inclusivity.

Additionally, beauty pageants offer safe and supportive spaces for queer identities to express themselves authentically. Self-categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987) extends Social Identification Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978;

Turner, 1982) by emphasizing the role of self-categorization in shaping behavior and attitudes. The informants' experiences in embracing their identities and expressing themselves within beauty pageants align with this process, as they align themselves with the category of queer individuals, embracing associated characteristics and norms. Moreover, their desire for more inclusive and affirming environments in and out of pageantry reflects the influence of group norms and values on social identification and self-categorization processes, emphasizing the need for safety, support, and authenticity.

In the context of challenging conventional beauty and gender notions, the informants' recognition and promotion of diverse identities align with the tenets of Self-categorization Theory. They recognize the significance of inclusive representation and challenge the concept of a narrow, homogeneous beauty ideal by encouraging contestants to embrace their authentic selves. This emphasis on appreciating beauty beyond physical appearance and valuing contestants' efforts, particularly those who participate in pageants for economic empowerment, mirrors the adoption of shared values and norms within the queer community, reflecting the self-categorization process.

Moreover, beauty pageants serve as stages for raising awareness of queer concerns and fostering acceptance. The informants actively seek to challenge stereotypes, raise awareness, and promote acceptance by participating in beauty pageants focused on queer issues, highlighting the pursuit of positive distinctiveness. Their voices shape conversations, fostering understanding and showcasing the positive distinctiveness within the LGBTQ+ community.

Based on the results and discussions presented in the study, the researcher recommends the following:

- a. **Enhance inclusivity and create safe spaces:** Beauty pageants should strive to create inclusive environments where queer individuals feel safe and supported in expressing their identities. This can be achieved by implementing policies that promote diversity, educating pageant participants and organizers about LGBTQ+ issues, and actively fostering a culture of acceptance and respect within the pageant community.
- b. **Address criticism and derogatory language:** Efforts should be made to discourage bashing, derogatory terms, and harsh criticism within the beauty pageant community. Promoting respectful dialogue and constructive feedback can create a more positive and empowering environment. Pageant organizers and participants should actively create a culture that celebrates diversity and discourages negative behavior.
- c. **Expand representation and redefine beauty standards:** Beauty pageants can challenge societal norms and redefine beauty standards.

Pageant organizers should actively seek to diversify the pool of participants, ensuring representation of different gender identities and body types. By promoting a broader definition of beauty, pageants can inspire individuals from marginalized communities to embrace their identities and feel empowered.

- d. **Provide support and resources:** It is crucial to provide resources and support for queer individuals who wish to participate in beauty pageants. This can include mentorship programs, workshops on public speaking and interview skills, and financial assistance for those who face barriers to participation. By offering guidance and assistance, pageant organizers can help aspiring contestants develop their confidence and navigate the challenges they may encounter.
- e. **Collaborate with LGBTQ+ organizations:** Pageant organizers should consider partnering with LGBTQ+ organizations and advocacy groups to ensure that the needs and perspectives of queer individuals are adequately represented. These collaborations can lead to the development of initiatives, such as workshops, awareness campaigns, and community outreach programs, that address the unique challenges faced by the queer community and promote social inclusivity.
- f. **Conduct further research:** This study provides valuable insights into the significance of beauty pageants in empowering queer identities. However, further research is needed to explore other dimensions of this topic, such as the impact of beauty pageants on mental health, the experiences of transgender individuals in pageantry, and the long-term effects of pageant participation on personal empowerment and community engagement. Future studies can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of beauty pageants in promoting inclusivity and social change.

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