The dark side of occupation within the context of modern-day beauty pageants

Abstract

Background: The desire to be physically beautiful is inherent among human beings. In particular, some women who participate in modern-day beauty pageants tend to spend more time, energy, money and emotional resources to alter their natural body and looks to fit socially and culturally constructed standards of beauty.

Objective: The authors frame beauty pageants as the context where diverse occupations are at play with the purpose of becoming a ‘beauty queen’. This commentary aims to discuss the origins and culture of beauty pageants, the different perspectives on pageantry work, and essential and hidden occupations performed within the context of this form of performing art.

Approach: Using the conceptual lens of the dark side of occupation, hidden occupations are characterised by the doings of pageant hopefuls that are less explored and acknowledged because they are perceived as health-compromising, risky, dishonest, illicit, and socially or personally undesirable.

Conclusion: Furthermore, this commentary calls for the exploration of occupations beyond the conventional scope of its understanding and the acknowledgment of hidden occupations intertwined into people’s everyday doings specifically in the context of desiring to be ‘beautiful’.

Keywords: performing arts, occupational science, hidden, health compromising, work
1.0 Introduction

The desire to be physically attractive and to be regarded as having beauty of form and face is a common preference for humans [1]. To cultivate that desire, it is necessary for people to exert a certain level of effort through tasks and activities to become “beautiful”. While “beauty” is a subjective concept, beauty ideals are socially constructed and largely determined by social norms, culture, and social interaction [2]. In the contemporary world, the beauty pageant reinforces this hegemonic social construction of beauty. A modern-day beauty pageant replicates a ritual form that introduces young women to their community, state, or nation transforming them into a special class through the principle of competition [3]. At present, beauty pageants have gone beyond judging the physical attractiveness of a woman as they have started selecting winners who have affective qualities such as confidence, intellect, and communication skills [4] in order to represent a brand, an organisation, or a nation.

In recent decades, more young women have desired not only to be beautiful, but to participate and win in beauty pageants. That is, modern-day beauty pageants are a common place of work, especially in the low-income global south. While only a few women who work as beauty pageant contestants are said to represent these socially constructed standards of beauty, some women tend to spend more time, energy, money, and emotional resources in the endless effort to alter their natural body and look to adhere to these socially constructed beauty ideals [5,6]. In order to participate in a beauty pageant, big or small, a pageant contestant has to perform and experience certain occupations. ‘Occupation’ is commonly understood as everything we do in life including actions, tasks, activities, thinking and being that restore or maintain good health and promote a state of wellbeing [7]. Given these
purposes and functions, beauty pageantry is under the category of occupation referred as “work” which is defined in occupational therapy as “labor or exertion related to the development, production, delivery, or management of objects or services” resulting in financial or nonfinancial benefits including social connectedness, contributions to society, structure and routine to daily life [8 p33]. Beauty pageantry is considered a form of work because it facilitates economic mobility [4] and ensures effective career progression [9] for those who engage in the competitions. Catriona Gray, Miss Universe 2018 winner, was criticised by fans about her body while preparing for the Miss Universe 2018 pageant. This led her to respond by saying:

“Yes, I am preparing for Miss Universe, but first and foremost I am Miss Universe Philippines 2018 and that in itself comes with duties and responsibilities… I post beautiful scenes of travel cause I love to share that with you all, but behind that – what you all don’t see – is me working.” [10]

Her response is a clear indication that preparing, joining, and winning a beauty pageant is indeed a form of work that can become a career, or even a profession.

While the assumption about occupation underpins a positive meaning, it is commonly reserved for the privileged few [11 p 34] and can potentially silence the meaning of occupations for those in the majority world where occupation does not necessarily contribute positively to health, wellbeing, and justice [12,13]. In the context of beauty pageants, some of the contestants go beyond doing what is good for their health and wellbeing just to have a chance of clinching that coveted title “Beauty Queen”. That is, there are instances where contestants engage in doings that are considered, perceived, or experienced to be health-compromising, risky, dishonest, illicit, and socially or personally undesirable. Traditionally, the profession of occupational therapy (which each author is a member of) has focused on the positive impact of occupation in people's lives. As a challenge to this, Twinley introduced her
concept of the dark side of occupation as a prompt to consider 'occupations that have been
hidden or not been implicit' [14, p2] within the literature regarding everyday occupations,
including work. This includes the assertion that work, work places, and work practices are
not always conducive to the health, safety, and well-being of workers themselves [15].

Through the conceptual lens of the dark side of occupation [16,17], we would like to
collaborate to the ongoing discourse about occupations that challenge pervasive beliefs and
dominant social order. In doing so, we do not intend to further problematise the binary
conceptualisations of occupation; rather, we assume the role of occupational scientists—who
study and consider people as occupational beings—to critically examine and expose
misrepresented occupations. Being cognisant of the diverse occupations participated by a
plurality of human groups, including beauty pageant contestants, this commentary aims to
explore the dark side of occupations enveloping the unique context of beauty pageants.

Inspired to shed light on certain occupations that have been, until now, hidden or unseen
following the conceptualisations of Twinley and Hocking [18], the article begins by defining
the modern-day beauty pageant, followed by discussing beauty pageants from different
known perspectives, outlining the hidden occupations in the context of beauty pageants, and
ends by suggesting the conceptual lens of the dark side of occupation provides a relevant
focus from which to explore beauty pageants from an occupational science perspective.

2.0 Modern-day beauty pageants

Historically, especially in the twentieth century, pageants were not really about celebrating
physical beauty, but by bringing communities together through theatrical performances that
fabricate the local past and its folk traditions [19]. The first known beauty pageant was held
in Scotland in the year 1839. It was organized by Archibald Montgomerie, 13th Earl of
Eglinton, to re-enact a medieval joust, and in the pageant, Georgina Seymour, Duchess of
Somerset, was proclaimed the “Queen of Beauty”—she was the first known beauty queen in history [20].

In this paper, we look at modern-day beauty pageant as work in the field of performing arts where diverse occupations are at play. Purposes of modern-day beauty pageants may differ but they have one thing in common—the winner is almost always called the “Beauty Queen”. These beauty queens win for various purposes including empowering women [21], embodying national pride [22], promoting certain products, charities, or organizations [3,6], and espousing inclusivity, diversity, and cultural identity [21,23]. Aside from signing a one-year contract to live the purpose of the organization, winners are also granted the voice to speak publicly to advocate for a specific cause, material rewards that go along with winning, and powers for social and political purposes [3,24].

3.0 Perspectives on pageantry and beauty

To have a deeper understanding of how beauty pageants have evolved from historical re-enactment with performative educational function [19] to a global spectacle of socially constructed physical beauty with performative political and commercial functions [3,6,25] it is important to have an overview on the different perspectives surrounding the origins, culture, and work-related underpinnings of modern-day beauty pageants.

3.1 Feminism

By the 1990s, the media discourse about the world of pageantry conveyed how it served as a platform of feminism due to its empowering nature, whereby women are granted a voice to speak up, a stage to showcase their talents and skills, and an opportunity to be publicly recognized for society to emulate [26]. Supporters who feel pageants embody feminism declare that “beauty pageants give a voice to diverse women everywhere, especially as
contestants come from all different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds and even bring certain disabilities to the world stage” [27]. However, in spite of the popularity of modern-day beauty pageants, feminists around the world have seriously opposed the existence of beauty pageants, which they denounce as degrading (towards women), sexist, and racist [28]. Miss America is the oldest beauty pageant that is in operation today and recently shifted its rhetoric from seeing pageants as sites for the objectified feminine body to spaces in which this feminine body possesses choices and freedoms [9,28]. Mainstream feminists challenge the normalization of ‘flawless femininity’ which means having firm breasts and buttocks, no cellulite, white sparkling teeth, and beautiful healthy hair among others [9]. In some instances, achieving these beauty standards requires the unending effort to modify the natural body through cosmetic surgery, weight control, and consumption of endless beauty products [5,29]. This kind of body transformation is supported by a postfeminist standpoint where women have the power and control over their bodies as a result of choice and self-improvement [9].

3.2 Post-colonialism

History of colonisation has greatly influenced the beauty pageant culture in previously colonised countries in Asia, Central and South America, and Africa. According to postcolonial theorists, ‘Western structures of knowledge’ are imposed and deemed superior to southern peripheral contexts in terms of political, socio-economic and psychological aspects [6,30]. This Western influence bred a ‘cultural hegemony’ where the ruling class from the colonising countries constructed cultural values and norms, including the standards of beauty, to maintain their powers, privileges, and dominant status [31]. An example of this is the santacruzan, an annual festival celebrated all over the Philippines in the month of May. It is a Roman Catholic tradition in honour of Saint Helena, mother of Constantine the Great,
which was introduced in 1854 to the Filipinos during the Spanish colonisation in 1865 as a means to further cement the Catholic religion into the Filipinos’ way and image of life [32]. From a primarily religious event, present-day santacruzan has become a beauty pageant of sorts which expands beyond the archipelago such as in Canada where Filipino-initiated pageants are shaped by present-day forms of colonialism [33]. Trying to fit in the white settler context as migrants, these beauty pageants struggle to serve as an opportunity for the unique Filipina traits to be recognized even in the play of multiculturalism. In Hong Kong, Filipina domestic workers enjoy the idea of being a ‘Sunday Beauty Queen’ which signifies how even for one day (of the week), they can be free from their oppressed roles as a domestic helper and have the control on how they want to express themselves [34]. In Indonesia, the practices of beauty are highly influenced by the history of Dutch colonialism [35]. Indonesian transgendered women, also known as waria, hold beauty pageants across large cities to promote glamor and transnationality. While beauty pageants are not reflective of Southeast Asian culture, pageantry still persists due to the colonial influences rooted from the European model of commodifying beauty [35].

3.3 Dominance of white beauty standards

For over fifty years in America, black women were excluded from the Miss America Pageant. Kinloch asserts that “with the obvious exclusion of black women, the pageant maintained its principles to value the beauty of white women while devaluing that of black women” [36 p105]. However, on the politics of sex, beauty, and race, Kinloch discusses the cultural political context and what this signified, suggesting that the pageant’s acceptance and public construction of Vanessa Williams, the first African-American to win Miss America in 1984 reiterated, momentarily, its own discourse of power: “to prove, despite a racist history, that the pageant was raceless in its representation of all American women” [36 p99].
3.4 Capitalism and consumerism

Beauty pageants are largely commercialised and are usually run by transnational corporations across the globe to capture the Eastern societies with Western’s standards of beauty through cosmetic promotions and tourism campaigns impacting economic development [25]. There has been an assumption that most titleholders are chosen from countries belonging to the Global South because these transnational cosmetic conglomerates want to capitalize on the lucrative market for their beauty products for women in southern peripheral countries [6].

While most women are cognisant about the huge gaps between their “natural beauty” and the beauty standards constructed by world cultural, political, and economical hegemonies [6], the capitalists in world dominant core countries take advantage of this corporeal dilemma among women from the Global South so that they can blindly patronise their products no matter how expensive or dangerous they are. The capitalist perspective of modern-day beauty pageants intersect with the post-feminist standpoint where women are seen as powerful citizens and consumers who have control over their physical body through materialistic consumption and cosmetic surgeries [9]. This intersection is called ‘consumptive femininity’ in which products such as beauty products, apparels, and clothing mark idealized gendered norms that are class-bound through purchasing power [4].

3.5 Classism and Class Politics

Modern-day beauty pageants must have risen as an opportunity to address political issues in the façade of a ritual performance. These pageants reflect the perspectives of (some) women in modern society and officialise the role of women as part of the community [3]. Ironically, being a beauty queen does not entail political power, but rather acquires a symbolic capital. Contestants are usually sponsored by capitalists, social entities, or local communities which
implies that if she wins and becomes the ‘Beauty Queen’, she is expected to represent her
sponsors based on their hierarchies [37]. Evidently, beauty pageant contestants come from
middle class backgrounds [4,21,38] because they have the appetite for consumerism and the
resources to pay for personal pageant training, gym memberships, social media managers,
and high-fashion apparel in order to remain competitive. Seeing many titleholders and beauty
queens coming from middle-class backgrounds suggests that pageant organisers select
women who received formal education, can speak the English language eloquently, and are
striving for upward mobility i.e., moving from middle class to elite social class, or at least
close to that [4,6]. The process of upward mobility, however, can necessitate doings that may
seem risky, illicit, or even immoral from the eyes of society, but may be considerably
meaningful to the aspiring beauty queen.

3.6 Morality and religion
In the world of pageantry, being physically beautiful is closely associated with embodying
wholesome and moral values [9]. Religion also plays a part in the existence or abolition of
modern-day beauty pageants. For instance, when Miss World 1996 was hosted in India,
indignant protests from feminists and Hindu right-wing organizations fled the streets to
condemn the beauty pageant [39]. To appease the protesters, the swimsuit competition was
held on an offshore island in Seychelles. Indians who opposed the beauty pageant were under
the rhetoric of banning pageant hosting in India because Indian women are ‘pristine
commodities’ [40]. They believed that to bring honour, Indian women must embrace
femininity, purity, submissiveness, mothering, caretaking instincts, compassion, and
morality—and upholding these values protects Indian women from the corrupting influences
of the West including beauty pageants that bring ‘nudity, dubious morals and AIDS in their
wake’ [40].
Along similar lines, the Islam religion also has a conservative take on beauty pageants. In Indonesia, Miss World 2013 was afflicted with much protests from dominant Muslim groups stating that the beauty pageant is an ‘immoral event’. Hence, there was a need to transfer the event’s venue to Bali, a predominantly Hindu province in Indonesia [41]. In Islam marriages, the criteria a man looks for a woman to be his wife, in addition to her religious commitment, are her wealth and beauty [42]. This moral perspective implicates that beautiful Muslim women are bound to get married and fulfil their duties of taking care of their children, family life, and home that brings peace and contentment [42]. Thus, joining beauty pageants is not part of a Muslim woman’s duties. In response, Miss World Muslimah USA was presented as a peaceful protest to Miss World and “aims to advocate for women’s modesty in Islam and how Muslim women should be honoured [and] poses a great alternative to other global-scale glamorous pageants, which may not be in line with what Islam permits” [43].

In Christian religion, Biblical values perceive female beauty in terms of piety and labour rather than any transient form of physical appearance (Proverbs 31:30) [44]. While physical beauty is not discounted in Biblical texts, beautiful women are ‘noble’ when they uphold modesty and ingenuity through entrepreneurship (Proverbs 31:11) and do not use charm and vanity for their own advantage (Proverbs 31:29) [44].

Typical eligibility rules in beauty pageants include being between 18 to 26 years of age, unmarried, to not have had children, and being biologically female at birth; in some instances, racial purity is also considered (i.e., being 50% of a certain ancestry), being able to speak a certain language, and have never posed for any men’s magazine [25]. These pageant rules could have been drawn largely from the aforementioned and oldest existing beauty pageant, Miss America, which originated from the United States of America, a country that is statistically, predominantly Christian.
4.0 Occupations associated with participating in beauty pageants

The pursuit of participating and working to win a modern-day beauty pageant has never been as serious and competitive as is in recent years. With all the entitlements, material rewards, and social glory accompanying the ‘Beauty Queen’ title, the journey requires more than mere hard work, being healthy, and mental preparation. That is, to some hopefuls, to win a title—from a small town, a national competition, or the world stage—entails engaging in hidden occupations to various extents [45].

Before discussing perspectives regarding the dark side of occupations, it is important to outline the occupations that are commonly involved before, during, and after participating in a beauty pageant. The non-exhaustive list of occupations for beauty contestants involve going to the gym, exercising, eating nutritious food, formal and/or informal schooling, grooming, dressing up, and communicating through various media outlets. Contestants participate in these occupations many months and even years before they decide to join the pageant. The expectation to be in a certain body shape is prevalent in the beauty pageant world, hence it is imperative for contestants to have a gym membership, exercise routine, and a strict nutritional diet [21] in order to adhere to social and cultural standards [38] produced and reproduced within the pageant industry. Moreover, desired winners in beauty pageants are contestants who are formally educated and who have undergone beauty pageant-related training sessions [4]. Possessing knowledge and skills obtained from formal and informal schooling or camps (e.g., being able to walk in high-heels, speak eloquently in English and in other languages, and wear fashionable apparel on-point all the time) is advantageous not only for the beauty queen but more so for the organisers who will not have to exert much more effort to train the beauty queen who got the ‘job’ [23, unpublished data]. Grooming and dressing up are occupations for pageant contestants as they are always on photoshoots, press
conferences, social events, and social media. Since female beauty pageants are largely
sponsored by cosmetic and beauty product companies, their contestants are expected to use
body-enhancing products like toiletries, lotions, and shampoos not only to maintain their
personal hygiene but also to build their personal identities, social bodies, and the bounds of
femininity [4]. One of the most important occupations beauty queens are expected to engage
in is autodidacticism (or self-education) in order to prepare to be deemed a well-informed
contestant, as their interpersonal communication and expression of self is judged through
questions, interviews, and during public (on and off stage) speaking. This occupation can
only be maximised by the beauty queen who is granted the platform to publicly voice out her
ideals, advocacies, and opinions--though always in consonance to the organisation she is
representing--towards social issues [3].

During the competition, several occupations are also performed in a ritualistic manner
with feminine meanings as Finol [46] described. In his article, he talked about the male
pageant held in Venezuela, which he found to have similar elements to the women’s beauty
pageant such as having a master of ceremony, the judges, the spectators, and the contestants.
He even outlined that the ‘12-step ritual’ commonly seen in a beauty pageant includes:
introducing of the contestants, singing and dancing, presenting of judges, parading, singing
and dancing, parading, singing and dancing, parading, singing and dancing, presenting of the
past winner, selecting the finalists, and announcing of the winner. Additionally, the format in
female beauty pageants usually has a question and answer portion, up-close interview, and a
series of competitions (i.e., traditional dress, swimsuit, evening gown, and talent) [25]. In
principle, these series of ritualistic tasks and activities can only be performed by pageant
hopefuls who made it to the final show after being able to routinely participate in most, if not
all, of the occupations aforementioned.
The occupations that were discussed are traditionally perceived as socially acceptable activities that are performed by pageant contestants to adhere to the beauty standards of the competition hence increasing their chances of winning the beauty pageant. These occupations, to some extent, adhere to the many definitions - as illustrated by Law and Baum’s [7], for example - wherein they restore, maintain or enhance good health and promote a state of wellbeing towards occupational participation. Alternatively, the dark side of occupations [17,47] are, to a certain extent, silenced, hidden, or secretive and are engaged in by pageant hopefuls with the shared goal of winning the beauty pageant, regardless of how they may be socially, culturally, politically, or morally perceived, judged, or experienced.

However, the authors of this article would like to make a crucial point of clarification; there has been misuse of the phrase ‘dark occupations’ and a misinterpretation of the intention of Twinley's concept of the dark side of occupation. For instance, Twinley has explained this is not about labelling occupations as ‘dark’—as Kiepek [48 p4] refers to— which would of course connote a moral judgment towards individuals who engage in the (said) occupations under consideration. Conversely, the phrase the dark side of occupations explicates a metaphor for occupations that are not acknowledged, hence lacking exploration and understanding [14,18]. In the context of beauty pageants, the dark side of occupation is very much about illuminating an aspect of human experience—in the form of doing beauty for competition—that is masked in secrecy and is known to have a hidden side [45].

4.1 Dark side of occupations within beauty pageants

Before discussing the dark side of occupations within beauty pageants, it is imperative to clarify that the following discussions do not espouse dualism or promote ‘othering’ or ‘exoticising’ [48] of individuals who engage in occupations that resist, or are in opposition to, the expected and accepted social and cultural norms. Rather, the discussions challenge these
aforementioned conceptions of occupations to work towards more critical and integrative understanding of occupations [17,49]. Hidden occupations in modern-day beauty pageants include doing some things away from others that might be perceived and experienced to be rather mundane or tedious, such as use of instant teeth whitening strips and skin-lifting tape. Hidden occupations can also then include use of excessive use of whitening products (e.g., glutathione, dubbed as the ‘wonder drug for skin lightening’; steroids for muscle building for men), cosmetic surgeries, occupations that ensure survival or involve risk (i.e., weight control regimen), and sex work (i.e., receiving money or support in exchange for sexual services).

4.1.1 Use of illicit beauty products

Despite the controversies surrounding the use of glutathione as a skin whitening drug [50] and its non-sanctioned distribution in some countries, more people in the southern peripheral countries have started using it due to its ‘whitening effect’. For instance, in the Philippines, oral glutathione is not restricted, while the use of intravenous glutathione is given public warning due to its adverse effects [51]. While health-related harm can be incurred by glutathione users, the desire to be ‘whiter’ remains more compelling than the health risks. This can be explained by the continued valorisation of ‘whiteness’ or ‘lightness’ impacting the biggest international pageants [25] which could be the impetus for beauty pageant contestants to engage in this occupation. In male beauty pageants, the values of masculinity including showing of muscles, physical attractiveness, heterosexuality are extensively promoted [46]. Where physical attractiveness is the determining factor to win a title in men’s beauty pageants, some male contestants resort to using anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS), an illicit substance to increase muscle mass, hence becoming more physical attractive, at least subjectively [52]. Some male bodies are genetically ectomorphic which make it difficult for them to gain muscle mass in spite of consistent workouts, hence the urge to use AAS to
hasten gaining muscles especially when the pageant is forthcoming. Although the popularity
of using glutathione and AAS may reinforce its normalisation as a self-care routine for
beauty contestants, in the beauty pageant context where ‘natural beauty’ is being espoused,
some contestants may still feel the need to hide this reality to adhere to the ideals of the
competition.

4.1.2 Cosmetic surgery routine

The effort to control the body is evidenced by the proliferation of a ‘weight control culture’
and cosmetic surgery [29]. Before further discussing cosmetic surgery, it is important to
differentiate it with plastic surgery. Plastic surgery is commonly defined as a surgical
procedure done for the reconstruction of facial and body defects due to birth disorders,
trauma, burns, and disease, whereas cosmetic surgery involves procedures and techniques
focused on enhancing a person’s appearance for aesthetic purposes [53]. Common cosmetic
surgery procedures done to these beauty pageant contestants include breast enhancement,
facial contouring (e.g., rhinoplasty), facial rejuvenation (e.g., face lift), body contouring (e.g.,
liposuction), and skin rejuvenation (e.g., Botox® and filler treatments). The normalisation of
cosmetic surgery through reality television shows, ‘Botox parties’ (use of
OnabotulinumtoxinA injection), cosmetic gift cards, and even social media endorsements has
refified the post-feminist slogan ‘girl power’ where women, young and mature, are lured into
the belief that they have control over their bodies [9]. The bombardment of this rhetoric to
women, in turn, legitimises the practice of cosmetic surgeries globally. The problem lies not
in the surgical procedures per se, but when pageant contestants undergo cosmetic surgeries
when pageant rules forbid it. Contestants who were suspected to have had cosmetic and
plastic surgeries are expected to conceal these doings otherwise their chances of winning the
beauty pageant would diminish instantaneously. Although it is rare for contestants to be
expelled from the pageant due to ‘cosmetic enhancements’, some contestants choose to
showcase their ‘untouched beauty’ to evoke the other end of the spectrum within the post-
feminist rhetoric.

4.1.3 Weight control regimen
To more conservative contestants, choosing a stringent weight control regimen could be the
only way to adhere to the thinness-promoting norms in the pageant world. Excessive weight
control involves overly selective nutritional diets, intensive exercises, and misuse of
laxatives, diet aids, and enemas which heightened eating disorder symptoms among pageant
hopefuls [21]. One of the participants in Crawford’s study [21] expressed that while
contestants were mindful of the fact that they need to eat regularly to sustain their physical
fitness routines, some still engaged in starving or non-eating. In more extreme cases, women
in South America could access a quick weight-loss alternative called “tongue mesh”. With
the help of plastic surgeons, a piece of plastic mesh is sown on the contestant’s tongue with
six stitches which promises instantaneous weight loss as illustrated by Sayej [54]:

The patient keeps it in their mouth for a month. From day one, it becomes incredibly
painful to eat any solid food, so they stick to a strict liquid diet. All they can drink is
broth, smoothies, juice, and soup. It costs as low as $600 to get the mesh sewn to your
tongue for a month. The results? Shed 30 pounds in 30 days.

These procedures are usually done in preparation for the big pageant and are hidden from the
media until the beauty queen wins and finishes her reigning contract.

4.1.4 Sex work, escorting, and sexual exploitation
The issue on distorting the female body and mind for the sake of beauty has been raised to
public consciousness since the Women’s Liberation Movement in 1971, but Wolf [55] argued
rather succinctly that the real issue was not about wearing makeup, losing weight, and
undergoing surgeries but women’s lack of choice. For some women who may experience a
lack of choice, especially when competing for a beauty pageant and being judged by others as
part of the competition, the exchange of sexual services can be one way, or the only way, to
achieve more choices. More broadly speaking, Rule and Twinley [56] recently provided an
occupational perspective of women involved in sex work, in which they asserted: “sex work
is interpreted and performed differently, depending on the political, religious, cultural, and
legal context; all of which shape the dominant cultural narrative of stigmatising perceptions
of sex workers”. While sex work can either be perceived as empowering or oppressive [57],
engaging in the exchange of sexual services within a beauty pageant context is fraught with
issues related to risk, danger, stigma, and exploitation. In 2018, the Miss Venezuela
organisation was accused of offering its contestants for sexual activity (termed by media
reports as a prostitution scandal) to seek sponsors from political figures and big-time
businessmen to obtain houses, luxury cars, trips, designer clothes, and jewelry [58].
This exploitation led to the suspension of the Miss Venezuela Organisation from operating,
which instigated the restructuring of the organisation’s leadership in order to restore its
reputation to the Venezuelan public. When sex is not viable, time is exchanged for pageant-
related funds or sponsorship through escorting. Escorting is the provision of entertainment or
companionship to a client in exchange for money or something else [59]. Escorting
constitutes accompanying the client to entertaining events such as an opera, club, or dining
experience. The temporal aspect of escorting depends on the mutual agreement between the
escort and the client, but escorts can either choose to engage in repeated transactions through
word-of-mouth advertising [59] or short-term mating via easily-accessed online websites or
social media applications [60]. Wright [57] argued that from a capitalistic standpoint, sex
work and pageantry create a sex class where women are relegated to service work and
provide pleasure to the males of society. However, when applied with critical reflexivity at
the societal level of analysis to occupations as proposed by Kiepek [48], we can also
understand modern-day sex work as an occupation that can be enjoyable, empowering,
rewarding; it can help one build social networks and friendships, experience healing and
companionship to another, and feel independent [61].

5.0 Discussion
This commentary recognised the diversity of human beings and their diversity allows for
understanding them through their contexts, situations, and occupations. The motivation to
write this piece is largely in response to recognising the need to expand the scholarship on
less explored and acknowledged occupations; in this instance, we have discussed beauty
pageantry as a work occupation in order to contribute to the wider challenge regarding
common assumptions that have been made about occupations people, groups, and
populations engage in [12,17,18,47,49].

Modern-day beauty pageants are perceived differently by people, including scholars,
depending on factors including their social and political identities (e.g., gender, race,
sexuality, disability, class, religion or spirituality), personally-held and political beliefs (e.g.,
feminism), history and culture (e.g., historiography, post-colonialism), and social status
(involving capitalism, consumerism, and classism). While multiple perspectives can ensue
agreements and disagreements, looking at modern-day beauty pageants as a context where
diverse and hidden occupations are at play initiates a new way of understanding the things
people do. A non-exhaustive list of occupations was outlined to build on the growing
knowledge about the dark side of occupations. From these intersecting discussion points, the
authors argue that modern-day beauty pageant, as a form of work, is both a means and an end
to achieving a work role, career, or profession that can afford public recognition but that can
involve engagement in some occupations that are perceived as health-compromising, for instance. Occupational justice is defined as having the right to meet basic needs and equal opportunities to reach one’s potential to engage in diverse and meaningful occupations [62].

Coming from an occupational justice standpoint posits how modern-day beauty pageants could potentially give winners, the beauty queens, the socialised rewards of possessing power, fame, money, and the voice to be able to choose and participate in more and varied occupations than before. Moreover, the beauty pageant also characterises the rhetoric ‘the end justifies the means’. This suggests how beauty pageants, its organisers and fans, have the tendency to highlight the ‘end’ or the goal rather than the means since these means (steps and processes) towards the goal (participating or winning the pageant) were commonly perceived to be illicit, tricky, harmful, or unhealthy. With the purpose of better understanding occupations, it could be possible that some pageant hopefuls have experienced injustices and have caused injustices on others during the process of participating in beauty pageants. This is supported by Angell’s [13] argument that ‘occupation is not only a means of resistance and change but also a site where inequality and social difference are constituted’. It is also an opportunity to recognize the identity of humans as autonomous agents who are capable to choose occupations beyond the barriers of social differences such as “gender, class, caste, religion, education, poverty, ethnicity, age, culture, geographic location, sexual orientations and other axes of difference” [12] and that challenge the social order [13].

Contributing to a more critical and socially responsive occupational science, we can therefore consider modern-day beauty pageants as work sites where occupational injustices are experienced and occupational justice are achieved. Whether this is true or questionable, the authors perceive contradictions as spaces for future debates and potential scholarship.

Furthermore, this commentary articulated underrepresented and unique occupations that affect the health and wellbeing and envelope majority of individuals and collectives
belonging to the Global South. Apart from the USA, this paper has contextualised the
literature review on beauty pageants by citing examples from countries like India, Indonesia,
Nigeria, Philippines, and Venezuela to illuminate issues and forms of work that are distinct in
these cultures and social realities using an occupational science perspective. This
commentary is intended to be non-exhaustive and data-free since the goal was not to
generalise but rather to consider and reconsider the conceptualisations of occupations within
exposed and hidden social realities and contexts. While this article largely extracted literature
from pageants for women, it is valuable to note that modern-day pageants have catered to
more diverse groups such as babies, children, teenagers, married women, grandmothers [28]
men [46], gay men, and trans people [22].

In conclusion, we hope to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the ‘dark side of
occupations’ so as to challenge occupational scientists, and indeed all those interested in
studying people as occupational beings, to explore occupations beyond the more traditional
boundaries of thought and scholarship of human doings and work. Concretely, we would like
to raise consciousness in considering occupations from different cultures and subcultures by
sharing this work through online and offline discourses and debates in higher education
institutions and more informal platforms such as podcasts, vlogs, and social media. For
readers coming from the fields that intersect with occupational science, we hope to offer a
critical understanding of people's diverse doings to guide in reconceptualising their practice,
research, and policy making, especially when involving people who engage in hidden
occupations and work in the context of desiring to be ‘beautiful’, whilst being judged against
unrealistic beauty standards.
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