

Beyond the Crown: Communication, Culture, and Identity in Philippine Pageantry from Colonial Times to Global Recognition

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of Philippine beauty pageantry as a site of cultural production, identity construction, and communicative practice from the Spanish colonial period to contemporary global recognition. Employing historical discourse analysis, this study traces how pageant discourse has transformed across four distinct historical periods: Spanish colonization (1565-1898), American colonialism (1898-1946), post-independence nation-building (1946-1986), and the contemporary era of global pageant dominance (1986-present). Drawing on archival materials, media coverage, pageant documentation, and visual analysis, the research reveals how pageantry has served as a contested space where colonial subjugation, nationalist aspirations, gender ideologies, and globalized Filipino identity converge. Findings demonstrate that Philippine pageant discourse evolved from colonial exhibitions of ‘civilized natives’ to powerful platforms for asserting national pride and cultural soft power on the global stage. The study contributes to postcolonial communication scholarship by illustrating how a seemingly superficial cultural practice embodies deep-seated negotiations of power, identity, and cultural representation in a postcolonial context.

Keywords

Beauty Pageants, Philippine Culture, Historical Discourse Analysis, Postcolonial Identity, Cultural Communication

1. Introduction

On December 17, 2018, Catriona Gray’s coronation as Miss Universe sent the Philippines into jubilant celebration. Her victory marked the country’s fourth

Miss Universe crown, cementing the Philippines' reputation as a global pageant powerhouse despite its relatively small population and developing economy status. Yet this contemporary triumph represents merely the most recent chapter in a complex, centuries-long relationship between the Filipino people and beauty pageantry—a relationship deeply entangled with colonialism, nationalism, gender politics, and cultural identity formation.

The Philippines' extraordinary success in international beauty competitions—holding multiple Miss Universe, Miss International, and Miss Earth titles—has puzzled observers and prompted questions about the cultural significance of pageantry in Philippine society. Why does a developing nation invest so heavily in an industry often dismissed as superficial? How did beauty pageants become so deeply embedded in Filipino popular culture? What do these competitions communicate about Filipino identity, both domestically and internationally?

These questions demand historical contextualization. Philippine pageantry cannot be understood apart from the country's colonial legacy under Spain and the United States, its post-independence nation-building struggles, and its contemporary navigation of globalization. Beauty pageants have served as sites where competing ideologies of femininity, nationality, modernity, and cultural authenticity have been negotiated, contested, and performed. The evolution of pageant discourse—from colonial-era “carnival queens” to globally recognized “beauty ambassadors”—mirrors broader transformations in Philippine society, politics, and international positioning.

This study employs historical discourse analysis to examine how communication about and within Philippine pageantry has evolved across four distinct historical periods. Discourse, understood as socially constructed systems of meaning that shape reality and power relations (Foucault, 1972), provides a productive lens for understanding pageantry as more than entertainment. Pageant discourse encompasses the communicative practices surrounding these competitions: media representations, pageant rhetoric, contestant performances, public commentary, and organizational messaging. By analyzing how this discourse has shifted over time, we can illuminate how Filipinos have used pageantry to negotiate colonial subjugation, assert national identity, construct gender ideals, and claim global recognition.

The research is guided by the following questions: How has pageant discourse evolved across different periods of Philippine history? What colonial and post-colonial power dynamics are embedded in pageant communication? How have pageants served as vehicles for constructing and communicating Filipino identity? What does the transformation of pageant discourse reveal about broader cultural, political, and social changes in Philippine society?

Through systematic analysis of archival materials, historical media coverage, pageant documentation, and visual evidence, this paper argues that Philippine pageantry has undergone a profound discursive transformation—from colonial spectacles that reinforced Western hegemony to powerful platforms that chal-

lenge Western beauty standards and assert Filipino cultural capital on the global stage. This transformation reflects and enables broader shifts in Filipino collective identity, from colonized subjects to confident global citizens.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Beauty Pageants as Cultural Communication

Scholarly attention to beauty pageants has expanded significantly in recent decades, shifting from dismissive critiques to a recognition of pageants as complex cultural phenomena worthy of serious analysis. Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje (1996) established beauty pageants as “staged events” that communicate cultural values, power relations, and social hierarchies. Their framework understands pageants not as trivial entertainment but as ritualized performances that produce and reproduce cultural meanings about gender, nation, beauty, and worth.

Feminist scholarship has provided crucial critiques of pageantry’s role in objectifying women and reinforcing patriarchal beauty standards (Banet-Weiser, 1999; King-O’Riain, 2006). However, more recent work has complicated these critiques by examining how contestants exercise agency, navigate contradictions, and sometimes subvert pageant norms (Dewey, 2008; Tice, 2012). This scholarship recognizes pageants as contested spaces where multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings coexist.

Craig (2002) and Hoad (2007) have examined how pageants function as technologies of nation-building, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Pageants provide stages for performing national identity, with contestants serving as embodied representatives of their nations. The communicative work of pageantry—through contestant performances, media coverage, and public discourse—constructs particular versions of national character and values for domestic and international consumption.

The commercial dimensions of contemporary pageantry have gained increasing scholarly attention. Guillen Jr (2023b) analyzed how Philippine pageantry has evolved into a sophisticated marketing platform, with corporate sponsors leveraging beauty pageants for brand exposure through strategic sponsorships and advertising opportunities. This commercialization reflects broader transformations in how pageants operate within contemporary media and consumer culture. The integration of digital platforms has fundamentally altered how pageant content is produced, distributed, and consumed, creating new opportunities for brand partnerships and audience engagement.

2.2. Postcolonial Theory and Cultural Identity

This study is grounded in postcolonial theory, which examines the ongoing cultural, political, and psychological impacts of colonialism in formerly colonized societies (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988). Postcolonial scholars argue that colonialism operates not only through political and economic domination but through cultural imperialism—the imposition of colonizers’ values, aesthetics,

and worldviews as superior to indigenous cultures.

For the Philippines, which experienced over three centuries of Spanish colonization followed by nearly five decades of American rule, postcolonial dynamics remain deeply embedded in cultural practices and identity formation. Rafael (1988) and Tadiar (2004) have documented how colonial discourse produced particular constructions of Filipino identity characterized by colonial mentality—internalized inferiority relative to Western standards—while simultaneously generating resistance and hybrid cultural forms.

Bhabha's (1994) concept of "mimicry" proves particularly relevant for understanding Philippine pageantry. Mimicry describes how colonized subjects adopt colonizers' cultural practices and standards, producing performances that are "almost the same, but not quite"—close enough to validate colonial power but different enough to reveal its constructedness. In pageantry, Filipinas perform Western-derived beauty standards and pageant conventions while inserting distinctly Filipino elements, creating hybrid performances that both accommodate and resist Western hegemony.

Hall's (1996) work on cultural identity in postcolonial contexts emphasizes identity as a process rather than a fixed essence. Identity formation involves strategic positioning within discourse, drawing on historical narratives while constructing new meanings for contemporary contexts. Philippine pageant discourse represents an ongoing negotiation of identity—selecting, emphasizing, and recombining elements of indigenous, Spanish, American, and global cultures to construct a particular version of "Filipino-ness" for performance on national and international stages.

2.3. Discourse Analysis and Historical Methodology

This study employs historical discourse analysis, combining Foucauldian discourse analysis with historical research methods. Foucault (1972) understood discourse as a system of thought and communication that constructs social reality, constitutes subjects, and exercises power. Discourse analysis examines not just what is said but what can be said within particular historical contexts—the rules, assumptions, and power relations that make certain statements possible, intelligible, and authoritative while excluding others.

Historical discourse analysis extends this approach diachronically, examining how discursive formations shift over time in response to changing social, political, and economic conditions (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, 2001). This methodology is particularly suited for studying Philippine pageantry because it allows us to trace continuities and ruptures in how pageants have been understood, discussed, and practiced across distinct historical periods.

Following Jäger and Maier (2009), our analysis attends to multiple dimensions of discourse: the topics and content of pageant-related communication, the argumentative strategies employed, the subject positions constructed for contestants and audiences, the visual and symbolic elements of pageant performances, and

the broader social contexts that shaped discursive possibilities at different historical moments.

2.4. Philippine Pageantry in Scholarly Literature

Despite the Philippines' prominence in global pageantry, scholarly research specifically on Philippine beauty pageants remains limited. Existing work has primarily focused on contemporary pageants and their relationship to nationalism, gender, and globalization. [Parreñas \(2001\)](#) examined how beauty pageants in the Filipino diaspora construct a transnational Filipino identity, while [Dayag \(2011\)](#) analyzed linguistic strategies in the question-and-answer portions of the Miss Philippines pageant.

[Tolentino \(2001\)](#) provided an important analysis of the Philippine beauty industry and its connections to political economy, examining pageantry as part of the broader commodification of Filipino femininity. [Roces \(2013\)](#) situated beauty pageants within Philippine women's history, arguing that pageants both constrain and enable women's participation in public life.

This study addresses gaps in the literature by providing one of the first systematic historical discourse analyses of Philippine pageantry, spanning from Spanish colonization to the present, and examining how Filipinos have utilized pageantry to negotiate colonialism, construct national identity, and claim global recognition.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study employs qualitative historical discourse analysis to examine the evolution of communication, culture, and identity in Philippine pageantry from the Spanish colonial period to contemporary global recognition. Historical discourse analysis offers a systematic methodology for examining how discursive formations—systems of meaning, communication practices, and power relations embedded in discourse—evolve over time in response to shifting historical contexts ([Fairclough, 2003](#); [Wodak, 2001](#)).

The research design is structured around four distinct historical periods that represent significant shifts in Philippine political, social, and cultural conditions: 1) Spanish Colonial Era (1565-1898), 2) American Colonial Period (1898-1946), 3) Post-Independence and Marcos Era (1946-1986), and 4) Post-EDSA to Contemporary Global Recognition (1986-present). This periodization reflects major political transitions while also corresponding to observable transformations in pageant discourse and practice.

The analytical framework integrates Foucauldian discourse analysis with postcolonial theory. Following [Foucault \(1972\)](#), we understand discourse not merely as language but as systems of thought and communication that constitute reality, construct subject positions, and exercise power. Postcolonial theory ([Said, 1978](#); [Bhabha, 1994](#)) provides conceptual tools for analyzing how colonial power relations, cultural imperialism, resistance, and identity negotiation operate within

pageant discourse across different historical periods.

3.2. Data Sources and Collection

The qualitative corpus was assembled through systematic consultation of archival collections held at the National Library of the Philippines, the Manila City Library, the De La Salle University Library, and the DLS-CSB Main Library. Archival records of historical newspaper and periodical coverage—including bound and microfilmed holdings of the Manila Times, the Manila Bulletin, the Philippine Daily Inquirer, and selected women's magazines across different periods—were accessed from these institutions, yielding over 30 newspaper and periodical items directly relevant to pageant discourse across the four historical periods. Archival documents, encompassing colonial government records, church records, festival programs, and organizational materials drawn from these collections, comprised approximately 38 primary sources. Visual materials—including archival photographs, pageant programs, costume documentation, and promotional materials—totaling roughly 49 items were incorporated to enable symbolic and semiotic analysis alongside textual sources. The scope of the corpus was determined by theoretical saturation and direct relevance to pageant discourse rather than by predetermined quantity; materials were included when they contributed meaningfully to the identification of discourse strands across the four historical periods. A broader body of contextual historical sources was also consulted to inform periodization and interpretation, but was not subjected to formal discourse coding.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

Data analysis proceeded through multiple phases, following established procedures for historical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Jäger & Maier, 2009). The analytical process was iterative, moving between data collection, analysis, and theoretical interpretation.

- Phase 1 involved corpus development and initial coding, where materials were organized chronologically within each historical period, and a database of relevant content was created.
- Phase 2 focused on discourse strand identification, systematically examining how pageants and contestants were described, the purposes pageants were said to serve, the qualities in contestants that were valued, how Filipino identity was represented, and the relationships to colonial powers or global contexts that were evident.
- Phase 3 involved an analysis of argumentative strategies, examining rhetorical justifications for pageantry, claims about the accomplishments of pageants, narratives about contestants, and frames used to interpret pageant victories or losses.
- Phase 4 focused on subject position analysis, examining what identities contestants were expected to perform, who could speak authoritatively about pageants, and how gender, class, race, and national identities were constructed.

- Phase 5 involved visual and symbolic analysis of costume choices, staging arrangements, bodily presentations, symbolic objects, and relationships between visual and textual elements.
- Phase 6 provided historical contextualization, relating discursive patterns to broader political, economic, social, and cultural conditions.
- Phase 7 conducted comparative analysis across periods, identifying continuities, ruptures, and transformations in pageant discourse.

Throughout the analysis, attention was maintained to both explicit content and implicit meanings embedded in the discourse. The analytical process was documented through detailed memos, coding records, and analytical notes, ensuring transparency and facilitating reflection on interpretive decisions.

4. Historical Discourse Analysis: Four Periods of Philippine Pageantry

4.1. Period 1: Spanish Colonial Era (1565-1898)—Beauty as Colonial Spectacle

4.1.1. Historical Context

The Spanish colonial period, spanning over three centuries from 1565 to 1898, fundamentally shaped Philippine culture, religion, social structure, and identity. Spanish colonialism operated through both political-military domination and cultural-religious transformation. The Catholic Church served as a primary vehicle of colonial power, establishing Spanish language, Catholicism, and Hispanic cultural practices as markers of civilization and superiority over indigenous Filipino cultures (Rafael, 1988).

Colonial Manila emerged as the center of Spanish power, developing a stratified society organized around racial hierarchies. Peninsulares (Spanish-born Spaniards) occupied the highest positions, followed by insulares (Spanish-born in the Philippines), mestizos (of mixed Spanish-Filipino heritage), and indios (indigenous Filipinos) at the bottom. This racial hierarchy was reinforced through legal, economic, and social practices (Wickberg, 1964).

Within this colonial context, public festivals and celebrations served multiple functions: demonstrating Spanish power and cultural superiority, providing controlled spaces for indigenous participation under Spanish supervision, reinforcing Catholic religious hegemony, and displaying the colonial order through ritualized performances.

4.1.2. Pageant Practices and Discourse

During the Spanish colonial period, pageant-like practices emerged primarily in the form of “fiesta queens” or “carnival queens” selected during religious and civic celebrations. These were not formal beauty contests in the modern sense but rather selections of young women from elite families to serve as symbolic representatives during festivals.

Participation was highly restricted by class and racial status. Archival evidence suggests that only young women from wealthy, preferably mestiza or Spanish de-

scent families were considered suitable candidates for fiesta queen roles. Indigenous Filipinas from lower classes were systematically excluded, reinforcing social hierarchies through beauty competitions. Festival programs and newspaper announcements consistently described selected queens using terms that emphasized their Spanish heritage and European features (*La Oceanía Española*, 1880-1898; *Diario de Manila*, 1860-1896; festival programs, archival holdings, National Library of the Philippines).

Selection criteria and discourse around these early beauty representatives explicitly privileged European aesthetic standards. Fair skin, Spanish features, and European manners were consistently praised in descriptions of fiesta queens (*La Oceanía Española*, 1880-1898; *El Comercio*, 1870-1890, archival holdings, National Library of the Philippines). When indigenous or mestiza women were selected, they were described in terms of how closely they approached European ideals rather than any appreciation for indigenous Filipino beauty.

These early pageant practices served to display colonial social order. The ritual of selecting and crowning fiesta queens visually performed the colonial hierarchy, with Spanish and mestiza women occupying positions of visibility and honor while indigenous Filipinas served as spectators or subordinate participants. The discourse emphasized pageant participants' Catholic piety, Spanish manners, and cultivation—markers of successful colonial acculturation.

Analysis reveals that pageant discourse served several ideological functions reinforcing colonial power: naturalizing European beauty standards, creating aspirational models of colonial mimicry, providing ideological justification for colonial hierarchy, and constructing subject positions for elite Filipinas that allowed limited participation while constraining their roles to ornamental representatives rather than agents.

4.2. Period 2: American Colonial Period (1898-1946)— Modernity, Democracy, and the “New Filipina”

4.2.1. Historical Context

American colonization of the Philippines represented a distinctly different colonial project than Spanish rule. While Spanish colonialism emphasized religious conversion and cultural Hispanicization, American colonialism promoted itself as “benevolent assimilation”—a civilizing mission that would prepare Filipinos for democracy and modernity before eventual self-governance (*Kramer, 2006*).

The American colonial administration implemented wide-ranging education reforms, establishing English-language public education throughout the archipelago. By the 1920s and 1930s, significant portions of urban Filipino populations had received American-style education and adopted American cultural practices (*Gonzalez, 1980*). American colonialism brought new conceptions of gender, particularly regarding women's education, public roles, and modernity. Colonial discourse positioned Filipino women as particularly oppressed under Spanish rule and in need of liberation through American education and values (*Choy, 2003*).

The period also saw increased Filipino nationalism and movements toward in-

dependence. By the 1930s, independence had become inevitable, with the Commonwealth period (1935-1946) serving as a transition toward full sovereignty. This context of approaching independence shaped cultural productions, including pageants, as Filipinos increasingly asserted their own identity distinct from colonial powers.

4.2.2. Transformation of Pageant Practices

The American colonial period witnessed a significant transformation and formalization of beauty pageant practices. Moving beyond the informal fiesta queen selections of the Spanish era, the American period saw the establishment of formal beauty contests modeled on American pageants, particularly the Miss America contest established in 1921.

Pageants became more formally organized and commercialized. American colonial-period pageants were typically sponsored by civic organizations, commercial enterprises, or colonial administrative bodies. The Manila Carnival, established in 1908 as a major annual exposition modeled on American world fairs, became a primary venue for beauty competitions. The Carnival Queen contest became the most prestigious pageant of the period (*Manila Times*, 1900-1946, archival holdings, De La Salle University Library; *Manila Bulletin*, 1900-present, archival holdings, National Library of the Philippines).

Pageant discourse explicitly linked beauty competitions to American values of democracy, modernity, and progress. Unlike the Spanish-era emphasis on religious piety and Spanish cultural markers, American-era pageants emphasized contestants' education, English-language ability, and adoption of modern American femininity. Newspaper coverage of Carnival Queens consistently highlighted their educational achievements, English facility, and familiarity with American culture (*Manila Times*, 1900-1946; *Philippine Magazine*, 1914-1935, archival holdings, National Library of the Philippines).

The discourse constructed a new subject position: the "Modern Filipina." This figure was educated, English-speaking, professionally aspirational, familiar with American culture, and retained a Filipino identity, embodying a hybrid of Western and Filipino femininity. Pageant coverage positioned contestants and winners as exemplars of this Modern Filipina.

However, by the 1930s, as nationalist sentiment grew stronger, pageant discourse increasingly emphasized Filipino judges, Filipino beauty standards, and contestants' embodiment of Filipino rather than American identity. The shift toward independence was reflected in a shift in pageant discourse from celebrating American acculturation to celebrating Filipino national identity.

American-era pageant discourse struggled with tension between adopting American beauty standards and asserting distinct Filipino beauty. Early American period discourse often praised contestants who resembled American beauty ideals. However, by the 1930s, discourse increasingly emphasized uniquely Filipino beauty, with winners praised for representing authentic Filipina appearance rather than approximating American looks (*Manila Bulletin*, 1900-present;

Philippines Free Press, 1935-1941, archival holdings, National Library of the Philippines).

4.3. Period 3: Post-Independence and Marcos Era (1946-1986)—Nation-Building and Pageant Nationalism

4.3.1. Historical Context

The Philippines achieved independence from the United States on July 4, 1946, entering a period of nation-building characterized by efforts to consolidate Filipino national identity, develop economic independence, and establish political stability. However, independence was complicated by continuing American influence through military bases, economic ties, and cultural dominance (Steinberg, 2000).

The declaration of Martial Law by President Ferdinand Marcos in 1972 marked a dramatic political shift. The Marcos regime (1965-1986) combined authoritarian control with nationalist rhetoric and development discourse. Marcos promoted himself as the architect of a “New Society” that would modernize the Philippines while celebrating Filipino culture and identity (McCoy, 1999).

The Marcos era saw intensive cultural production aimed at constructing and projecting Filipino national identity. The regime sponsored cultural centers, heritage projects, and international cultural exchanges designed to position the Philippines as a culturally sophisticated nation. Imelda Marcos particularly championed cultural projects, positioning herself as patron of Filipino arts and culture while using cultural institutions to legitimize the regime (Roces, 1998).

Beauty pageants fit perfectly into this cultural nationalist project. The Marcos regime heavily promoted Philippine participation in international pageants, viewing pageant victories as evidence of Filipino excellence and sources of national pride. When Gloria Diaz won Miss Universe in 1969 and Margarita Moran in 1973, the victories were celebrated as national triumphs demonstrating Filipino superiority.

4.3.2. Pageantry as National Project

During the post-independence and Marcos periods, Philippine pageantry underwent dramatic transformation into an explicitly nationalist cultural project. Beauty pageants, particularly participation in international competitions, became sites for performing and asserting Filipino national identity on the global stage.

The Binibining Pilipinas organization, established in 1964, became the primary institution for selecting and training Filipino representatives to international pageants. The organization positioned itself explicitly as serving national interests, describing its mission in patriotic terms and emphasizing its role in projecting Filipino excellence internationally. Binibining Pilipinas winners were not merely beauty queens but national representatives charged with embodying and communicating Filipino identity to global audiences.

Pageant training became increasingly rigorous and professionalized. Contestants underwent intensive preparation covering interview skills, talent develop-

ment, physical fitness, grooming, and cultural knowledge about the Philippines. This training emphasized contestants' roles as cultural ambassadors who needed comprehensive knowledge of Philippine history, culture, and current affairs to effectively represent the nation.

Pageant victories generated extraordinary national celebration and were extensively covered in media as national triumphs. When Gloria Diaz won Miss Universe 1969, media coverage framed her victory in explicitly nationalist terms—as proof of Filipino beauty, intelligence, and grace, as validation of the Philippines' place among nations, and as source of national pride (*Manila Bulletin*, July 1969; *Manila Times*, July 1969; *Philippines Free Press*, August 1969, archival holdings, National Library of the Philippines). Margarita Moran's 1973 victory was celebrated as evidence of the New Society's success (*Manila Bulletin*, July 1973; *Manila Times*, July 1973, archival holdings, National Library of the Philippines). Winners returned to ticker-tape parades and presidential receptions.

The discourse around Filipino beauty has shifted significantly toward celebrating distinctly Filipino aesthetics rather than approximating Western standards. While American and European beauty ideals remained influential, pageant discourse increasingly emphasized *morena* (brown-skinned) beauty as authentically Filipino and beautiful in its own right. Winners were praised for representing Filipino beauty rather than conforming to Western standards (*Liwayway*, 1970-1980; *Manila Bulletin*, 1975-1985, archival holdings, De La Salle University Library).

National costume competitions in international pageants became particularly important for cultural expression. Filipino designers created elaborate costumes incorporating indigenous textiles, traditional clothing elements, and cultural symbols. These costumes served as visual performances of Filipino cultural identity, communicating Filipino heritage and creativity to international audiences.

The Marcos regime was particularly adept at utilizing pageantry for political purposes. Imelda Marcos personally championed beauty pageants, positioning herself as patron and supporter. Government-controlled media emphasized how the pageant's success showed the Philippines achieving international recognition under Marcos's leadership. The regime used pageant celebrations as spectacles that distracted from political repression and economic problems, though pageant supporters maintained that celebrating Filipino achievement remained valid regardless of political context.

4.4. Period 4: Post-EDSA to Contemporary Global Recognition (1986-Present)—Pageant Powerhouse and Cultural Confidence

4.4.1. Historical Context

1) Phase 4a: Post-Revolution Nation-Building (1986-Early 2000s)

The 1986 People Power Revolution, which toppled the Marcos dictatorship, marked a democratic renewal and cultural opening in Philippine society. The post-EDSA period saw the flourishing of civil society, the expansion of media free-

doms, and renewed cultural dynamism (Hutchcroft, 2008).

Globalization profoundly shaped Philippine society during this period. Economic liberalization, technological advancements, and cultural exchanges connected the Philippines more closely to global networks. Filipino overseas workers became a major economic force, with millions of Filipinos working abroad and remitting billions of dollars annually. This diaspora created transnational Filipino communities (Parreñas, 2001).

The present period has witnessed the rise of social media and digital communication technologies, which have transformed how culture is produced, circulated, and consumed. Filipino pageant fans have become globally connected communities, sharing content, discussing contestants, and celebrating victories in real-time across borders. The effectiveness of social media in shaping public engagement and behavior, including cultural practices around pageantry, has been documented in Philippine contexts (Uy-Tioco, 2007).

Against this backdrop, the Philippine pageant performance reached unprecedented heights. Following earlier victories, Filipinas won Miss World in 2013 (Megan Young), Miss Universe in 2015 (Pia Wurtzbach), 2018 (Catriona Gray), and recently, 2025 3rd Runner Up (Ahtisa Manalo) (GMA Integrated News, 2025), along with multiple Miss International, Miss Earth, and other international titles. This sustained success established the Philippines as an undisputed global powerhouse in pageants.

2) Phase 4b: The Digital and Social Media Age (Mid-2000s-Present)

Whereas Phase 4a was defined principally by the restoration of democratic institutions and renewed nationalist cultural projects in a post-authoritarian landscape, Phase 4b is distinguished by the emergence of digital and social media technologies that fundamentally reconfigured the mechanisms through which “global recognition” is produced, distributed, and experienced. The shift represents not merely a change in platform but a qualitative transformation in pageant discourse: real-time global fan communities, viral pageant moments, and algorithmically amplified national pride operate under logics that differ significantly from the broadcast-era nationalism of the immediate post-EDSA period.

4.4.2. Professionalization and Industry Development

The contemporary era has witnessed dramatic professionalization and commercialization of Philippine pageantry, transforming beauty contests from relatively amateur competitions to a sophisticated, highly organized industry. Training for pageants became increasingly intensive and specialized, with aspiring beauty queens undergoing months or years of preparation with professional coaches.

The pageant industry expanded to include numerous stakeholders: pageant organizations, corporate sponsors, media companies, fashion designers, makeup artists, stylists, coaches, and fan communities. Guillen Jr. (2023a) documented how major corporations leverage Philippine pageants for brand exposure through strategic sponsorships and advertising opportunities, creating a sophisticated

marketing ecosystem. Pageant finals became major televised events, attracting millions of viewers and substantial advertising revenue. This commercial infrastructure professionalized pageantry while also making it more accessible, as sponsorships and commercial interests provided resources that enabled wider participation.

Media coverage of pageants intensified dramatically, particularly with digital and social media. Every aspect of pageant preparation, competition, and aftermath is extensively documented and discussed. Contestants build social media followings before, during, and after competing. Fan communities engage in real-time commentary, analysis, and celebration. This media saturation amplifies pageantry's cultural presence while also subjecting contestants to unprecedented scrutiny.

The professionalization brought a more sophisticated approach to cultural representation and messaging. Contemporary Filipino contestants strategically deploy cultural symbols, articulate sophisticated positions on social issues, and craft compelling personal narratives. National costume presentations became elaborately produced spectacles featuring innovative designs that blend traditional Filipino elements with contemporary creativity.

Winners receive substantial endorsement deals and leverage titles into long-term entertainment careers, making beauty contests rational career investments. The commercial value of pageant success increased dramatically, reflecting broader transformations in how celebrity, marketing, and consumer culture operate in contemporary Philippines.

4.5. Contemporary Pageant Discourse

Contemporary discourse is characterized by confident, unapologetic assertion of Filipino pageant superiority. Rather than positioning success as overcoming disadvantage or proving equality to Western nations, current discourse assumes Filipino excellence and dominance in pageantry. This confidence reflects the actual track record of success and marks a significant shift from the more defensive nationalism of earlier periods.

Contemporary contestants and their teams approach cultural representation strategically and thoughtfully. Rather than simply wearing traditional clothing or mentioning Filipino culture, contestants craft sophisticated narratives about Filipino identity, select cultural elements for maximum impact, and articulate positions that resonate with both Filipino and international audiences.

Contemporary pageant discourse emphasizes contestants' advocacy work and commitment to social causes. Beauty queens are expected to champion specific issues—such as education, environmental protection, HIV/AIDS awareness, and disaster relief—and to use their platforms for social good. This 'beauty with a purpose' discourse positions pageantry as socially meaningful rather than superficial.

Contemporary discourse increasingly frames pageant participation as an expression of female empowerment and agency. Contestants are positioned as

strong, independent women making their own choices rather than passive objects of the male gaze. This empowerment discourse coexists tensely with continuing objectification and narrow beauty standards.

Pageant discourse explicitly frames victories as enhancing the Philippines' global image and providing cultural soft power. Media coverage highlights how pageant success fosters positive recognition of the Philippines by other nations, potentially benefiting tourism, investment, and diplomatic relations.

A distinctive feature of contemporary Philippine pageantry is the emergence of massive, passionate fan communities in digital spaces. Filipino pageant fans constitute sophisticated, globally connected communities that actively produce and circulate pageant content, analysis, and commentary. These communities serve as sites for performing Filipino national identity and collective celebration.

4.6. Recent Triumphs and Ongoing Contradictions

The Philippines' recent pageant victories represent the culmination of decades of pageant development. Catriona Gray's 2018 victory particularly exemplified a sophisticated contemporary approach. Her "lava walk"—a distinctive, slow, deliberate runway style—became iconic and widely imitated. Her national costume, featuring enormous illuminated sun rays referencing the Philippine flag, was an elaborate spectacle that garnered international attention. Her advocacy work focused on providing education to children from low-income families.

Media coverage of these recent victories reflects a heightened sense of cultural confidence. Rather than expressing surprise or framing victories as unexpected triumphs, coverage assumes Filipino excellence and presents them as confirmation of established dominance ([Philippine Daily Inquirer, December 17-20, 2018](#); [Manila Bulletin, 2018](#); [YES! Magazine, January 2019](#)). International media recognition of Filipino pageant success is celebrated as validation, but Filipinos no longer seem to need external validation to believe in their own excellence.

However, ongoing contradictions persist. Feminist critics argue that beauty pageants, regardless of empowerment rhetoric, fundamentally objectify women and reduce them to physical appearance. Class critics argue that pageantry remains an elite activity, accessible primarily to wealthy and upper-middle-class women, despite its democratic rhetoric. A more granular comparison with historical exclusions is instructive here: while the Spanish colonial era barred indigenous Filipinas through explicit racial and lineage-based criteria, contemporary barriers are economic but no less effective as gatekeepers. Aspiring beauty queens typically invest in months of professional training under specialized coaches, commercial styling and grooming, wardrobe, and pageant fees—cumulative costs that can range from tens to hundreds of thousands of pesos and are largely borne privately. This financial burden reproduces exclusivity through market mechanisms rather than legal fiat, suggesting that the democratization of pageantry rhetoric outpaces its practice. A deeper critical analysis of the "Contemporary Pageant Discourse" section should therefore address how economic barriers function as a

structural analog to the lineage-based exclusions of the Spanish era, limiting genuine access even as the pageant industry espouses narratives of meritocracy and national representation. Cultural critics question whether contemporary pageantry represents cultural confidence or a continued colonial mentality, noting that Filipino pageant success occurs within Western-dominated institutions that use Western-derived standards.

These ongoing critiques demonstrate that Philippine pageantry remains a contested cultural terrain rather than simply a celebrated national achievement. The tensions between empowerment and objectification, democratic rhetoric and class exclusion, cultural confidence and colonial mentality persist in generating debate.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Discursive Transformation: From Colonial Spectacle to Global Platform

The historical discourse analysis reveals a profound transformation in Philippine pageant discourse across the four periods examined. During the Spanish colonial period, pageant-like practices served colonial projects by performing racial hierarchies, privileging European aesthetics, and positioning Filipinas as objects of colonial gaze. The discourse naturalized Spanish superiority and encouraged colonial mimicry.

The American colonial period introduced new discursive elements—democracy, modernity, progress—while maintaining colonial power relations in a transformed guise. The discourse constructed the “Modern Filipina” subject position that required navigating between American and Filipino identities, creating hybrid performances that simultaneously accommodated and resisted American colonial influence.

The post-independence and Marcos periods witnessed a decisive shift toward explicitly nationalist pageant discourse. International pageant participation became a vehicle for performing Filipino national identity and generating collective pride. Victories were celebrated as national achievements demonstrating Filipino excellence. Importantly, discourse began asserting value of distinctly Filipino beauty rather than merely conforming to Western standards.

The contemporary period represents the culmination of this transformation. Current discourse assumes Filipino pageant excellence and dominance. Contestants strategically represent Filipino culture while demonstrating cosmopolitan sophistication. Victories generate intense national pride, as well as economic value and soft power benefits. The discourse constructs pageantry as a meaningful cultural arena where Filipinos excel.

This transformation is not simply a linear progress from colonial subjugation to postcolonial liberation. Rather, it represents complex, uneven evolution involving persistence of colonial patterns alongside the emergence of resistant and alternative discourses. Contemporary pageantry continues to operate within Western-dominated institutions and retains elements of colonial logic. However, the

discursive transformation in how Filipinos understand, practice, and communicate about pageantry marks important shifts in Filipino cultural confidence and identity construction.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to several theoretical conversations in postcolonial studies, communication scholarship, and cultural analysis. The analysis demonstrates the productive ambivalence of postcolonial mimicry and cultural hybridity. Philippine pageantry involves adopting Western cultural forms while transforming their meanings and inserting Filipino content and values. This produces hybrid performances that are neither purely Western nor purely Filipino, but rather creative combinations that enable both accommodation to global standards and the assertion of cultural difference.

The findings complicate simple narratives of cultural globalization as Western cultural imperialism. While Philippine pageantry operates within Western-dominated global institutions, Filipino actors exercise agency in strategically representing their culture, asserting their excellence, and transforming the meanings of pageants. This supports perspectives that emphasize local actors' agency in engaging with global cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996) rather than passive reception of Western cultural products. Nevertheless, the "empowerment" narrative that structures contemporary pageant discourse warrants more rigorous problematization. A central question the Discussion should explicitly address is whether Filipino "cultural confidence" genuinely disrupts Western hegemony or whether it succeeds precisely by mastering that hegemony's own rules. The evidence examined here supports a more ambivalent reading: Filipinas win within institutions whose criteria—verbal fluency in English, mastery of Western interview conventions, adherence to internationally legible beauty standards, and alignment with neoliberal advocacy frameworks—remain largely unchanged. Victory on these terms may signal extraordinary adaptability and excellence, but it does not inherently challenge the terms themselves. Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry again becomes useful: if Philippine success is "almost the same but not quite", the question is whether that residual difference constitutes subversion or whether the institution absorbs it as exotic variety without relinquishing normative power. The Discussion would be strengthened by engaging directly with this tension rather than resolving it prematurely in favor of either a celebratory or a defeatist reading, thereby more honestly representing the productive ambivalence at the heart of postcolonial pageant participation.

The study demonstrates how discourse operates as a site of power and resistance in postcolonial contexts. Colonial and postcolonial power relations are embedded in ostensibly apolitical beauty judgments and pageant practices. However, discourse is also a contested terrain where colonized and formerly colonized peoples can assert alternative meanings and construct resistant subject positions.

The findings illuminate complex relationships between gender, nationalism,

and cultural representation. Beauty pageants position women as embodied representatives of the nation and culture, creating opportunities for public visibility while also constraining women to particular subject positions and objectifying their bodies. The discourse constructs idealized femininity that serves nationalist projects while claiming to honor and empower women.

The study contributes to understanding how nations utilize cultural practices as a form of soft power and cultural diplomacy. The success of the Philippine pageant demonstrates how achievement in ostensibly trivial cultural arenas can generate genuine international recognition and enhanced national prestige. However, it also raises questions about the effectiveness of such cultural strategies and whether success in Western-dominated cultural competitions truly challenges or merely accommodates global power structures.

5.3. Significance for Philippine Identity and Culture

The analysis sheds light on several key insights about Philippine identity and culture more broadly. Pageantry reveals ongoing negotiation between colonial legacies and postcolonial assertion that characterizes much Philippine cultural production. Like many postcolonial societies, the Philippines continues to grapple with its colonial past while constructing contemporary identities.

The intense Filipino investment in pageantry reflects broader patterns of seeking international recognition and validation. As a relatively small, developing nation with a long colonial history, the Philippines appears particularly invested in achieving international recognition that validates national worth. Pageant success provides one avenue for this recognition, generating intense pride precisely because it represents a rare arena where the Philippines achieves global prominence.

The centrality of pageantry in Philippine popular culture highlights the particular importance of beauty, appearance, and performance in Filipino cultural values. This may reflect colonial legacies that created particular consciousness about physical appearance and racial hierarchies, hybrid cultural formations that value both indigenous and Western aesthetics, or other cultural dynamics.

The evolution of pageant discourse mirrors broader transformations in Filipino cultural confidence and global positioning. From colonial subjects to an independent nation to a global diaspora, Filipino identity has evolved across the periods examined. Pageant discourse reflects these shifts, moving from colonial mimicry to nationalist assertion to contemporary cosmopolitan confidence.

Ultimately, pageantry illustrates how seemingly trivial cultural practices can convey profound meaning and serve vital social functions. Beauty contests appear superficial and apolitical on the surface, but analysis reveals how they embody power relations, negotiate identities, and perform cultural work.

6. Conclusion

This study has traced the evolution of Philippine beauty pageantry from the Spanish colonial period to contemporary global recognition, employing historical dis-

course analysis to examine how communication about and within pageants has transformed across distinct historical periods. The research demonstrates that Philippine pageantry has undergone a profound discursive transformation—from colonial spectacles that reinforced Western hegemony and racial hierarchies to powerful platforms for asserting Filipino cultural excellence and global recognition.

The findings contribute to postcolonial communication scholarship by demonstrating how discourse operates as a site of both power and resistance in postcolonial contexts. The evolution of pageant discourse illustrates complex, uneven processes of postcolonial identity construction, involving the persistence of colonial patterns alongside the emergence of resistant and alternative discourses. The study supports theoretical perspectives that emphasize local agency within global cultural flows, while also demonstrating the limitations to this agency when operating within Western-dominated institutions.

However, important continuities and contradictions persist across periods. Tensions between empowerment and objectification, democratic rhetoric and class exclusion, cultural confidence and colonial mentality remain present in contemporary pageantry. The study reveals the pageant transformation as incomplete and ongoing, rather than a linear progress from colonial subjugation to postcolonial liberation.

The research sheds light on insights about Philippine culture and identity more broadly. Pageantry's centrality reflects the ongoing negotiation between colonial legacies and postcolonial assertion that characterizes Philippine cultural production. The intense Filipino investment demonstrates the particular importance of international recognition and validation for a relatively small, developing nation with a long colonial history. The evolution mirrors broader transformations in Filipino cultural confidence and global positioning, from colonial subjects to cosmopolitan global citizens.

Future research might examine the economic dimensions of the contemporary Philippine pageant industry, analyzing commercial interests, resource flows, and relationships between pageantry and the broader entertainment economy. Investigation of diverse pageant communities could provide an important perspective on how alternative pageant spaces negotiate gender, sexuality, and identity. Audience reception studies could examine how different Filipino publics interpret and engage with pageant discourse. Comparative analysis with pageant practices in other postcolonial contexts could illuminate whether patterns observed are specific to the Filipino context or reflect broader postcolonial dynamics.

The title "Beyond the Crown" reflects the argument that Philippine pageantry signifies far more than the pursuit of beauty titles. Behind the crowns, gowns, and runway walks lie profound questions about colonial legacies, national identity, cultural confidence, and the Philippines' place in the world. The evolution of pageant discourse reveals transformations in how Filipinos understand themselves and communicate their identity to global audiences.

As the Philippines continues to achieve pageant success in the twenty-first century, the discourse will undoubtedly continue to evolve. Future transformations will reflect ongoing negotiations between local and global, tradition and modernity, empowerment and objectification, cultural confidence and persistent inequalities. By providing a historical perspective on how pageant discourse has evolved to the present, this study enables a better understanding of these ongoing dynamics and their significance for Philippine culture, communication, and identity.

Lastly, this research demonstrates the value of taking popular culture seriously as a site where important cultural work occurs. Beauty pageants might appear trivial or superficial, but analysis reveals how they embody and negotiate fundamental questions about power, identity, beauty, gender, and national belonging. By examining pageantry as a complex form of cultural communication rather than dismissing it as mere entertainment, we gain insight into how postcolonial societies, such as the Philippines, navigate their histories, construct their identities, and claim their place in an unequal global order. The crown represents centuries of cultural struggle, transformation, and assertion that continue shaping Philippine society and identity today.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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