

Sink or Swim: Deciding the Fate of the Miss America Swimsuit Competition

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Abstract: The Miss America beauty pageant has faced widespread criticism for the swimsuit portion of its show. Feminists claim that the event promotes objectification and oversexualization of contestants in direct contrast to the Miss America Organization's (MAO) message of progressive female empowerment. The MAO's position as the leading source of women's scholarships worldwide begs the question: should women have to compete in a bikini to pay for a place in a cellular biology lecture? As dissent for the pageant mounts, the new head of the MAO Board of Directors, Gretchen Carlson, and the first all-female Board of Directors must decide where to steer the faltering organization. The MAO, like many other businesses, must choose whether to modernize in-line with social movements or whole-heartedly maintain their contentious traditions. When considering the MAO's long and controversial history, along with their recent scandals, the #MeToo Movement, and the complex world of television entertainment, the path ahead is anything but clear. Ultimately, Gretchen Carlson and the Board of Directors may have to decide between their feminist beliefs and their professional business aspirations. Underlying this case, then, is the question of whether a sufficient definition of women's leadership is simply leadership *by* women or if the term and its weight necessitate leadership *for* women. Will the board's final decision keep this American institution afloat? And, more importantly, what precedent will it set for women executives who face similar quandaries of identity?

In Murky Waters

The Miss America Pageant has long occupied a special place in the American psyche. On par with baseball and apple pie, Miss America has defined and maintained nostalgic Americana through war, protest, and a changing society. The pageant's imagery of gowns, bathing suits, and crowns has infiltrated our conscious and unconscious conception of what womanhood should be, but we no longer live in the time of cultural domesticity that established classical beauty and motherhood as imperatives of female worth. Along with the rise of feminism and campaigns for gender equality, feminists have denounced the pageant as a means to suppress and control women (Morgan 1968; Hanisch 2000). Many have accused the swimsuit competition of being especially antiquated and demeaning, particularly in light of the pageant's stated goal to choose the ideal, most well-rounded, all-American woman, not the most physically fit or beautiful one (Hanisch 2000). As women's role in society changes, in the workforce and at home, is a change in the underlying pageant values needed for the institution to survive?

In recent years, antagonism and disinterest toward the Miss America pageant has driven viewership to grave lows. In 2017, only 5.35 million people watched the pageant, compared to the 85 million viewers who watched Miss America 1960 win her crown (Associated Press 2018 n.p.; Miss America Org. 2018c, n.p.). With low viewership comes fewer sponsors, less incentive from network broadcasters to run the show, and fewer young women willing to go through the tiresome process of becoming a queen for a fraction of the fame. New Miss America Organization (MAO) Chair of the Board of Directors Gretchen Carlson must find a way to increase viewership in the wake of scandal, feminist opposition, and waning cultural relevance.¹ Other pageants, including Miss Teen USA and Miss World have taken a risky leap, cutting their swimsuit competitions to curb accusations of sexism and portray themselves as progressive programs of female empowerment (Yahr 2018). Could the same solution work for the MAO or would stripping the pageant of its glamorous gowns and strappy two-pieces be the beginning of its demise?

Causing a Splash: The Miss America Pageant and Feminism

Pageant expert Kimberly Hamlin asserts that “beauty pageants are not about beauty. They are about power” (Hamlin 2004, 46). Many feminists support the notion that beauty pageants are detrimental to gender equalization because they normalize and systematize the evaluation of women on their physical appearances and, consequently, prioritize the acquisition of beauty above all else. Historian Lois Banner states that “beauty pageants have long existed . . . to make it seem that beauty is all a woman needs for success and, as a corollary, that beauty ought to be a major pursuit of all women” (Banner 1983, 249). When women have to be beautiful before they are otherwise successful, they are forced to devote time and energy to attain the unattainable, rather than exert effort towards their substantive goals.²

The conflict between feminists and beauty pageants is not a new one. One of the first widespread protests of a beauty contest descended on the St. Louis Exposition of 1905, which included a beauty contest as part of its attractions (Banner 1983, 260). Although he used era appropriate phrasing, one of the protest organizers, Reverend Thomas B. Gregory, opposed such a contest because of what we would now term the sexualization and objectification to which its participants were subjected (Banner 1983).³

The closest of all early iterations of the American beauty contest to the Miss America pageant was the beach beauty contest.⁴ Such contests were held as early as 1880, but only became regular occurrences closer to the turn of the 20th century (Banner 1983, 265). In addition to beach beauty contests, the Miss America pageant, surprisingly, drew upon the pageant format made popular by suffragettes. The suffragettes “used pageants to persuade viewers, gain publicity, fortify

¹ Gretchen Carlson was elected to office by the MAO Board of Directors on January 1, 2018

² Recent studies have found that as many as 50% to 75% of adolescent girls are “dissatisfied with their weight and their body image” (Rubinstein and Caballero 2000, 1569). Using linear regression, researchers have shown a clear downward trend in Miss America winners’ BMI that indeed placed 16 winners between 1920 and 1999 below the World Health Organization undernourishment line (Rubinstein and Caballero 2000, 1569).

³ A quote from Gregory reads “Imagine a really refined and innocent girl sitting upon a platform at a great exposition to be gazed at and ogled and discussed and commented upon. . . . No truly refined young girl would submit to such a thing” (Banner 1983, 260).

⁴ Banner (1983, 249-260) also traces the origins of modern beauty pageants to May Day celebrations, historical festivals and tournaments, newspaper beauty contests with photographed women, and museum beauty contests with live beauties for which museum goers could pay to see and vote the most beautiful.

adherents, and raise money” (Hamlin 2004, 28).⁵ The beauty pageant, however, is a warped rendition of such pageants, a rendition which seems to strip the affair of its original intention: to collectivize and publicize women’s power. Hamlin describes the difference between beauty pageants and suffragette pageants:

In contrast to the suffragists’ pageants, the Miss America contest did not celebrate women’s history, solidarity, or new opportunities, nor did it encourage feelings of liberation or agency among participants. Instead, it encouraged women to vie for male approval based on physical appearance and to view their looks as their most important assets (Hamlin 2004, 28).

As pageant scholars Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin highlight, “one of the great paradoxes of American women’s history” is that the Miss America pageant began the same year that women were first allowed to vote (Watson and Martin 2000, 107). Theater studies professor Jennifer Jones (1998) postulates that society fueled beauty pageants’ proliferation on a national scale because they provided an opportunity to solidify ideal womanhood—by literally choosing the woman who best performed traditional femininity—in a time of gender equalization.⁶ The pageant, then known as “A National Beauty Pageant,” began in 1921 when several Atlantic City businessmen set out to extend the summer season by a week so that people would stay and spend their money (Elwood and Martin 2000, 107). These businessmen determined that providing a spectacle of feminine beauty would be the perfect way to accomplish this goal (Elwood and Martin 2000, 107). The pageant made its first run “surrounded by a week-long, elaborate festival that included staged spectacles, sports events, automobile races, orchestra and dance competitions, nightly balls on the boardwalk, and the opening parade” (Banner 1983, 268). In an effort to “avoid conservative protest,” the competing women “were carefully enveloped in a rhetoric that stressed their wholesome, natural qualities” (Banner 1983, 266).⁷

Despite the attempts of pageant directors, even in its infancy, the pageant was not without scandal. Among charges of fraud and indecency, one of the most criticized errors was the failure to include a rule that prevented married women from competing even though the competition was intended only for unmarried women (Elwood and Martin 2000). Scandals resulting from this rule omission included that:

Mary Campbell’s [1923 winner] first runner-up turned out to be Mrs. Everett Barnes, wife of a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball player. Then, “Miss” Boston, Mildred Prendergast, showed up with her attorney husband and seven-month-old baby in tow, and officials discovered that Miss Alaska, Helmar Leiderman, was not only married, but a resident of New York City (Elwood and Martin 2000, 107).

⁵ Such pageants “consisted of a series of short scenes, or tableaux, that generally depicted important women in history . . . and showcased women’s contributions to the community as mothers, pioneers and workers” and “suggested that women’s suffrage was the next logical step in the march of progress” (Hamlin 2004, 28).

⁶ Evidence suggesting gender equalization includes: increasing divorce rate, declining birthrate, the newly gained right of (mostly white) women to vote, increasing women’s financial autonomy, and the cultural rise of the flapper, which promoted women’s sexual power and bodily autonomy (Jones 1998).

⁷ Fifteen-year-old Margaret Gorman won the crown in 1921 and was lauded for showcasing ideal womanhood: someone “strong, redblooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood” (Bivans 1991; Elwood and Martin 2000, 107).

The pageant finally gained credibility and stability in the 1930s and 40s, in large part because of Lenora Slaughter, who served as pageant director for nearly 30 years (Elwood and Martin 2000, 108).⁸ Throughout the 1940s, Slaughter revolutionized the pageant by implementing the Talent and the Intellect and Personality portions of the pageant, and she took measures to ensure the purity and innocence of contestants, all with the intent of quelling conservative opposition (Elwood and Martin 2000; Miss America Org. 2018c).⁹ In 1941, after multiple name changes, “The Showman’s Variety Jubilee” permanently became “The Miss America Pageant,” and contestants began competing for scholarship money, a point the MAO still uses today as proof of their support of women’s advancement (Elwood and Martin 2000, 109).

Throughout World War II, the Miss America pageant saw widespread support. Multiple winners were highly successful in aiding the war effort, with Miss Bertel (Miss America 1943) being “awarded a citation from the United States Treasury Department for her part in selling more Series E War Bonds than any other person in the United States” during her war bond tour (Miss America Org. 2018c, n.p.). Even after the war, Miss America maintained her prominence as a face for the nation, but even as the concept of ideal femininity evolved to value women’s education and intellect—observable in the granting of scholarships for pageant winners and the addition of the personality and intellect portion—society maintained its imposition of the duty of motherhood and beauty on women. Banner posits that “the attempts to make a display of women’s bodies respectable . . . did not overshadow the fact that the contestants were being judged on how they looked in bathing suits. . . . physical beauty remained the overriding feature of the ideal American woman” (Banner 1983, 269-270). This fact is largely what continued to drive feminist opposition to beauty pageants in the following decades, regardless of the pageant’s outward presentation that seemed to incorporate some feminist ideals.

In a large upset, Yolande Betbeze, Miss America 1951, “refused to pose in a swimsuit” after her win (Miss America Org. 2018c, n.p.). The Board of Directors respected her decision, offending Catalina Swimwear, a major pageant sponsor (Miss America Org. 2018c). Catalina subsequently revoked their sponsorship and began the process of creating their own pageant, now known as Miss Universe, in 1952 (Miss America Org. 2018c).¹⁰ Swimsuits have been a controversial part of the pageant from its inception, but this anecdote speaks to their importance, considering their removal was enough to constitute the establishment of a rival pageant. Those who liked the swimsuit competition were not willing to see it go.

The most impactful change for Miss America since its inception over 30 years earlier came in 1954 with the live television broadcast of the pageant on the ABC Network (Riverol 1992). For the first time, people could watch the pageant and marvel at the contestants from the comfort of their own homes.¹¹ The pageant’s viewership grew to encompass over 47% of the American population by 1960 (Miss America Org. 2018c). The end of the 1960s saw the most publicized

⁸ A combination of scandal and the Great Depression caused the pageant to go inactive from 1928 to 1932. The pageant returned for one year only to be canceled again in 1934 before returning permanently in 1935 (Elwood and Martin 2000).

⁹ The new rules imposed by Slaughter mandated little to no contact with men during the week before the pageant and signature of a contract verifying that contestants had not previously engaged in any “moral turpitude” (Elwood and Martin 2000, 108).

¹⁰ Miss Universe is still a successful pageant and maintains its swimsuit component. It is distributed in over 190 countries and has nearly half a billion viewers (Miss Universe 2015).

¹¹ The 1959 pageant was the first in which all 50 states in the Union were represented at the National Finals (Miss America Org. 2018c). The first color telecast came in 1966 (Miss America Org. 2018c).

backlash the pageant had ever faced, charged by its massive television following and the concurrent national social movements.

In 1968, second-wave feminists made their national debut by flooding the area outside of the Boardwalk Hall theater, which hosted the pageant (Miss America Org. 2018c). The protesters carried signs with such phrases as “WELCOME TO THE MISS AMERICA CATTLE AUCTION,” “IF YOU WANT MEAT- GO TO THE BUTCHER,” and “CAN MAKE-UP COVER THE WOUNDS OF OUR OPPRESSION?” (Associated Press 2008, n.p.; Bettmann Archive 2017, n.p.; Grant 2018, n.p.). Though dated now, the flyers distributed at the 1968 protest contain a digestible list of feminist grievances with the pageant, including the evocative “Madonna-Whore Combination,” racism, and the offering of “patronizing pseudo-power” (Morgan 1968, n.p.).¹² Protesters hoped to use the pageant as proof that women were still viewed as subordinate and domestic creatures, rather than equal and deserving participants in the workforce and society at large (Hanisch 2000, 378-79).

Carol Hanisch, an organizer for and participant in the 1968 protest, reflects upon how the protest misstepped: “[Protesters] didn’t say clearly enough that we women are all forced to play the Miss America role—not by beautiful women but by men who we have to act that way for, and by a system that has so well institutionalized male supremacy for its own ends” (Hanisch 2000, 379). The pageant survived the protests in large part because many news outlets shaped public opinion to brand the protesters as radical bra-burners and women-gone-rogue, rather than sensible and prudent activists (Hanisch 2000). Even so, the controversies took their toll. The MAO admits that “people were still questioning the relevance of Miss America” during the 1970s, yet the organization continued to regard itself as a platform for women’s advancement rather than women’s suppression (Miss America Org. 2018c, n.p.).

By 1970, “the groundwork for the modern Miss America—a sophisticated, eloquent, well-educated public figure—was sealed. Not only were contestants becoming more interested in gaining a good education, but they also saw Miss America as a means to success” (Miss America Org. 2018c). Rebecca King, Miss America 1973, was the first winner who used her scholarship funds to pay law school tuition (Miss America Org. 2018c). Controversially, King voiced her support for the *Roe v. Wade* decision on abortion issued by the Supreme Court earlier that year, a topic that had divided the nation and still continues to do so (Miss America Org. 2018c). King’s highly public support for *Roe v. Wade* and her decision to attend law school as a woman in the 1970s can be seen as distinctly feminist acts that the pageant made possible. By the end of the 70s, social norms for women’s roles were definitively altered, and the 80s would bring about key landmarks in the course of the pageant’s evolution.

As Miss America lurched into the 1980s, the pageant “maintained its prominence and popularity in a world that was quickly finding the competition less relevant” (Miss America Org. 2018c, n.p.). Thirteen years after the first black woman competed at the national level, and two decades after the civil rights movement, Vanessa Williams, Miss America 1984, became the first black woman to win the title (Miss America Org. 2018c). Later that year, the MAO forced Williams to resign her crown after posing for nude photos in *Penthouse Magazine*, and her runner-up, also a black woman, was crowned for the remainder of her reign (Miss America Org. 2018c). This event is suitable evidence of what Margot Mifflin deems the “enduring (and defining) paradox

¹² The Madonna-Whore Combination refers to the requirement that women “be both sexy and wholesome” to gain the approval or desire of a man (Morgan 1968, n.p.). Patronizing pseudo-power is gifted to pageant winners when men choose them as the best woman. This act is indeed a conference of power, but only on men’s terms. For the full flyer text see the Appendix A.

of the pageant”—the practice of “exposing women’s bodies while denying their sexual and physical power” (Mifflin 2018, n.p.).¹³ When Williams used her physical appeal for publicity and money, arguably what the pageant itself does, especially in the context of the swimsuit competition, the pageant and the public considered her impure and promiscuous, and most importantly, unfit to be Miss America.

Conversely, in a victory for feminist protesters and pageant dissenters, 1985 would be the last time that “bust, waist, and hip measurements appeared . . . in the pageant’s program book” (Miss America Org. 2018c, n.p.). Four years later, “the familiar term ‘reign’ [describing the year in which a titleholder has her crown] was replaced with ‘Year of Service’ in pageant vernacular” (Miss America Org. 2018c, n.p.). Both of these changes moved the pageant further away from the competition it once was. Instead of prioritizing beauty, the pageant began to value ideas for program-driven social improvement that would come to define the central character and purpose of Miss America in the present.

In line with this shift toward community engagement and the incorporation of feminist influences, beginning in 1990, every Miss America was “required to have a platform issue” to which they desired to bring public awareness (Miss America Org. 2018c). Upon her crowning, Miss America embarks on a nation-wide speaking tour devoted to her platform (Miss America Org. 2018c).¹⁴ The MAO continued its precarious balance between tradition and modernity as it headed into the 21st century.

In 2006, confronted with waning popularity and growing dissent, the Miss America pageant left Atlantic City, its home for nearly nine decades, and moved to Las Vegas (Miss America Org. 2018c). With falling viewership, CMT and then TLC took over broadcasting for two years from ABC, which had been the sole broadcaster for almost 50 years (Miss America Org. 2018c). ABC once again resumed broadcasting the competition in 2011, and in 2013 the pageant moved back to Atlantic City, where it remains today (Miss America Org. 2018c). These changes are representative of the tumultuous time in pageant history; now, feminists and political progressives agree that the pageant is outdated and offensive, while conservatives and traditionalists take offense with the progressive choices the pageant is making, all contributing to fewer and fewer viewers. For example, Nina Davuluri, Miss America 2014, was the first Indian-American to win the crown, and faced xenophobic and racist backlash not dissimilar to the anti-Semitism that the first and only Jewish Miss America, Bess Myerson, faced 70 years previously (Rao 2013). The decision to crown Davuluri indicated a trend toward ethnic inclusivity but was too late for some and appalling to others. Despite such troubles, Miss America renewed its contract with ABC to last at least three more years in 2016, ensuring that the program will be aired on the network through the 2019 pageant (Miss America Org. 2018c). This contract now gives the MAO and Gretchen Carlson the leeway to experiment with pageant marketing and structure, deciding whether to emphasize the beauty aspect of the pageant or the feminist aspect without fearing for its immediate destruction.

In contrast to popular feminist opinion, pageant contestants usually have a different point of view about how pageantry affects women and society. Former Miss Americas often appreciate

¹³ A similar scenario occurred in 1921 “when a contestant was arrested on the beach for wearing the swimsuit she’d competed in the day before” (Mifflin 2018, n.p.). The pageant creators used women’s bodies for profitability but did not extend their concern toward women’s freedom off of the stage.

¹⁴ Debbye Turner, Miss America 1990, won with a platform to promote awareness of domestic violence, and previous platforms have ranged from AIDS awareness to literacy to advocacy for the homeless (Miss America Org. 2018c).

the pageant for the opportunities it gave them, including scholarships that allowed them to attend college and obtain post-graduate degrees, or the recognition required for launching a modeling or acting career. Nancy Redd, Miss Virginia 2003, describes her experience “[defending her] participation in the Miss America pageant after graduating from Harvard with a degree in women’s studies” (Redd 2013, n.p.). She is grateful for the “powerful, if unusual, platform” that allowed her to reach thousands of young women (Redd 2013, n.p.). “I believed that a large contingency of young women might be open to exploring feminism ‘cause Miss Virginia said so” (Redd 2013, n.p.). Seven years later, she learned that Caressa Cameron, Miss America 2010, considered one of Redd’s many school auditorium speeches a “turning point in her life” (Redd 2013, n.p.). She set out to become Miss America, and did, as well as becoming “a global ambassador in the fight against AIDS and an inspiration to others” (Redd 2013, n.p.). Leaning on the fact that “feminism is not a zero-sum game,” Redd considers the “cycle perpetuated by the Miss America Organization” not one of objectification or female subordination, but one of women’s empowerment (Redd 2013, n.p.).¹⁵

The nature of the future relationship between the pageant and feminists is far from certain. It is possible that the long-lived feud between the two will fade away as the Miss America pageant increasingly values the intellectual and charitable characteristics of its contestants. Although various stages of evolution are apparent throughout the pageant’s history, author Margot Mifflin asserts that “the pageant has always been deeply invested in protecting the status quo in the face of women’s progress” (Mifflin 2018, n.p.). Regardless of one’s perspective or opinion, it is clear that the importance society places on Miss America creates an influential force that conveys ideal womanhood across the nation. If Miss America can control that force to have it represent the academic and community accomplishments of which women are capable, rather than the objectification and subordination of women, more feminists might just join the pageant parade. This change, however, could very well be at the expense of crucial traditionalist supporters. As the board looks forward, they will have to keep the past in mind, whether deciding to cast off the pageant’s static characterization or own it.

Swimming Upstream: Recent Scandals

The first sign of an impending crisis for the Miss America Organization (MAO) came with a 2014 report on John Oliver’s investigative comedy show *Last Week Tonight*. The show dissected the MAO claim that they provided \$45 million in scholarships annually, making them the largest provider of scholarships for women worldwide (LastWeekTonight 2014). Oliver ultimately determined that the pageant was indeed the largest provider of scholarships for women worldwide, despite the fact that the amount of scholarship money actually awarded was far less than the original \$45 million claim (Kuperinsky 2015). Oliver criticized the pageant for its outdated entry requirements, including stipulations that a contestant is not, nor has ever been, married or pregnant (LastWeekTonight 2014). He lamented that a woman had to meet these specifications, in addition to being beautiful and fit, to receive a scholarship from the organization. This story struck a chord with viewers and with the pageant. After the episode aired, other women’s scholarship funds received a massive influx of donations, and Miss America conducted an investigation that resulted

¹⁵ In Redd’s opinion, feminism is not a zero-sum game in the sense that one woman’s achievement, even if attained through pageantry, does not inhibit or diminish another woman’s. Pageantry is simply one avenue toward success and does not hamper others.

in changing “45 million” to “millions in scholarships” on their website (Kuperinsky 2015, n.p.).¹⁶ In the video, Oliver found fault less with the existence of the pageant, and more with the pageant’s attempts to disguise, by boasting of nonexistent scholarships, what it really was: a competition that judges and awards women’s beauty. This critique resonated especially with feminists and progressives after a long period of relative silence on the pageant and complacency for its proceedings. In the coming months and years, the public call grew louder for the MAO to change its ways or admit defeat by ending the pageant.

Three years later, a revealing *Huffington Post* article detailed lewd, sexist, and hateful emails shared between MAO CEO Sam Haskell and other top pageant leadership between 2014 and 2017 (Y. Ali 2017b). The emails included comments about former winners’ lack of intelligence and declining physical appearance, and contained explicit remarks degrading their character (Y. Ali 2017b). Despite attempts to present the Miss America pageant as a supportive and empowering environment, it was anything but that. Subsequent reporting also revealed that Dick Clark Productions, an important affiliate of the pageant, severed ties with the MAO a few months prior when the board did nothing to resolve the email problem after the production company brought the issue to their attention (Stapleton and Andone 2017).¹⁷ Not only were misogynist sentiment and action hurting viewership, they were ending important business contracts.

An opinion piece, published in the *New York Times* one day after the original *Huffington Post* article, was boldly titled “The End of Miss America.” The author Jennifer Weiner described a pageant that “has struggled to reconcile its search for brains with its obsession with beauty” (Weiner 2017). She cites Oliver’s show, the #MeToo movement, and reality show opportunities for those seeking fame and prizes as some of the reasons we may have “seen our last weeping, rhinestone-crowned Miss A. making her way down the Atlantic City walkway” (Weiner 2017). The same day, 49 of the previous Miss Americas signed a petition demanding the resignation or firing of those involved with the emails (Y. Ali 2017a). The *Huffington Post* article on the matter portrayed Gretchen Carlson (Miss America 1989 and future MAO Chairman) as a vocal leader for the petition, with her picture headlining the story (Kuperinsky 2017). Only hours after the former Miss Americas made their petition public, the board voted to suspend Haskell, who resigned soon thereafter. Along with him resigned President Josh Randle, Chairwoman Lynn Weidner, and board member Tammy Haddad; the board fired telecast lead writer Lewis Friedman (Kuperinsky 2017; Y. Ali 2017a; Moniuszko and Alexander 2017).

Suddenly, the MAO had an opportunity to revamp the pageant by hand-picking new leadership during a time in which it was critical for them to do so.¹⁸ Eight days after the resignations, the remaining members of the board voted in Carlson as Chairman of the Board, as well as Heather French Henry (Miss America 2000), Laura Kaeppler Fleiss (Miss America 2012), and Kate Shindle (Miss America 1998) in as board members (Isidore 2018). Carlson is the first

¹⁶ While only 7.7 million total viewers watched the pageant live the previous weekend, more than 18 million have watched Oliver’s 15-minute segment on YouTube at the time of writing this case in 2018 (Neddog 2015, n.p.; *Last Week Tonight* 2014).

¹⁷ Dick Clark Productions was “made aware” of some of the emails in an undisclosed way and insisted that the board conduct a full investigation. When they did not, Dick Clark Productions distanced itself from the MAO, including relinquishing its seats on the MAO board (Stapleton and Andone 2017, n.p.).

¹⁸ In 2017, viewership had been in steady decline for four years, dropping from 8.6 million in 2013 to 5.53 million in 2017 (Associated Press 2018, n.p.).

former Miss America to hold the position (Isidore 2018). She brought with her promises of revitalization.

In Carlson's first interview after taking over her position, she said that "Miss America will represent a new generation of female leaders focused on scholarship, social impact, talent, and empowerment" (L. Ali 2018). Three months into the new leadership's tenure, the *Washington Post* published an opinion piece further encouraging a restructuring of the pageant in light of the #MeToo movement against workplace sexual harassment. Author Margot Mifflin (2018) underscored her outcry for revision, drawing on a criticism similar to that of Oliver's. The MAO's self-branding as a scholarship organization in conjunction with continuing to make beauty, not intellect, paramount in deciding a winner seemed to be an extension of a culture that has yet to stop judging women for their appearances regardless of their achievements (Mifflin 2018).

With the #MeToo movement exposing the ways women are diminished, exploited, assaulted and professionally disfranchised because of their gender, it will be difficult this fall to stomach a national ritual—the pageant—in which contestants are asked to show their bodies in exchange for an opportunity (Mifflin 2018). By the time Mifflin published her article in March, the need for a decision was becoming more evident by the day; the board of the Miss America Organization must choose between clinging to its traditions or remodeling the message and methods of the pageant. To do so, they would look toward Carlson for guidance, who is herself shaped by feminism, #MeToo, and the Miss America pageant.

Floating to the Top: Gretchen Carlson

Born and raised in Anoka, Minnesota, Carlson grew up to be valedictorian of her high school class, a skilled violinist, a Stanford University alumna, Miss Minnesota 1988, and Miss America 1989 (Miss America Org. 2018d). Aside from her experience with the MAO from her year as Miss America, Gretchen Carlson had previously served on the board before stepping down under the pressure of other board members, including Sam Haskell, for refusing to participate in speaking against other former winners, namely Kate Shindle, when she came out with a revealing and at times unflattering book about her experiences with the pageant (Chokshi and Khatib 2017; Stapleton and Andone 2017). In addition to her tenure at MAO, Carlson became somewhat of an icon for standing up against sexual harassment after suing her previous boss and co-founder of Fox News, Roger Ailes, for repeated sexual advances (Chappell 2016). She accused him of lowering her salary and moving her from a more distinguished spot on Fox & Friends to a less-viewed afternoon show after she refused to engage sexually with him (Chappell 2016). While not the first of its kind, this suit was highly publicized because of both parties' fame and has been pointed to as the beginning of the wave of sexual harassment suits that have contributed to the still-evolving #MeToo movement (Isidor 2018).

Carlson has written two autobiographies, *Getting Real* and *Be Fierce: Stop Harassment and Take Your Power Back*, in which she discusses everything from her early pageant days to being a national news personality, and facing sexism and harassment throughout. In *Getting Real*, published in 2015 before the Ailes suit, she writes in detail about her journey to becoming Miss America. Carlson proclaims her appreciation that contestants could only wear one-piece swimsuits in her competition year and expresses frustration with people's assumption that she had won solely because of her beauty, and not a combination of talent, poise, and determination (Carlson 2015).

In her latest book *Be Fierce*, published in October 2017, Carlson tells of an incident during her time as Miss America in which a "top public relations executive in Los Angeles . . . grabbed the back of [her] head and pushed [her] face so hard into his crotch [she] couldn't breathe" (Carlson

2017, 107). The assault made her realize that many people, particularly men, associate Miss America with promiscuity (Carlson 2017). In Carlson's words, "the idea holds that [pageant contestants are] asking to be treated like sex objects, and therefore their harassment should be absolved" (Carlson 2017, 105). She continues that "our expectation of women to be perfectly pure and virginal is, ironically, part of the packaging of ideal womanhood that opens the door to harassment in the first place. I experienced this idealized pedestal as Miss America, but this idealization is, in itself, a disempowerment of women" (Carlson 2017, 106). Carlson's previous encounters with harassment, her mistreatment as Miss America, and her intimate understanding of how Miss America is perceived made her a candidate predisposed to implementing systematic change. When the board voted her in, they voted for reform.

Navigating Turbulence: Organization and Pageant Structure

Presently, The Miss America Organization is legally classified as a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization, meaning that the people who are financially invested in its success are those that it employs, the network on which it is broadcast, and the pageant's sponsors, rather than direct shareholders as with a for-profit company (Miss America Org. 2018b). The MAO includes all 50 states, in addition to the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and 52 licensed organizations (Miss America Org. 2018b). Local and state feeder pageants must follow the same guidelines as the national competition to ensure equality of process and guarantee that the state winner is qualified and prepared to compete nationally (Miss America Org. 2018a).

The five main sections of the 2017 national pageant for which judges assigned a numerical score were Artistic Expression (commonly known as Talent, worth 30% of the total score), Presence and Poise (Evening Wear, 15%), and Lifestyle and Fitness (Swimsuit, 10%), and Presentation and Community Achievement, comprised of the Private Interview (25%), and the On-Stage Interview (20%) (Miss Washtenaw 2017). The preliminary rounds of competition narrow the 51 contestants down to five, with a final vote cast by the judges for the order, one through five, in which they think the remaining women should be placed. This final ballot decides the winner.

As with all decisions, when considering how or if to adjust this existing pageant structure, including the various competition components and the weight placed on each, the board will look toward its chairwoman for direction. In 2018, the board consists of eight women, not including Carlson or President and CEO Regina Hopper—six of the eight are former Miss Americas (Miss America Org. 2018d). Any major decision must be reached by at least a majority of the board.

The Changing Tide: Miss America and Corporate Social Responsibility

A great number of problems the MAO is facing can be viewed as a result of poor responsiveness to social issues, particularly sexism and sexual harassment. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a field that explores the ways in which corporations are beholden to the societies in which they exist, and could help the board avoid future issues through more sensitivity and proactivity in their decisions. Integrative Theories within CSR argue that corporations should integrate social demands because "business depends on society for its continuity and growth and even for the existence of business itself," and therefore must appease society's stipulations for appropriate business practices (Garriga and Melé 2004, 52). Despite being a non-profit organization, the MAO is dependent upon consumption of their product (the television broadcast) by their consumers (telecast viewers) for its continuation—without viewers, broadcasters will drop the program all together—and should therefore follow similar guiding principles as for-profit organizations.

Recently, other companies have been confronted with many of same the social demands as the MAO is now, including the growing consumer desire for greater bodily inclusivity and gender equality. For example, after a 20% drop in Barbie sales from 2012 to 2014, in part because mothers did not want to instill harmful body images in their children, Mattel, Barbie's parent company, set out to create more representative dolls (Dockertman 2016, n.p.). In 2016, Barbie got three new shapes, and sales increased 9% in the fourth quarter of 2017 (Mallenbaum 2018, n.p.). Fashion companies, big and small, have started to include plus-sized models in their advertisements and plus-sized clothing on their racks (Cheng 2017). *Time* named Fenty Beauty, founded by popstar Rihanna, one of its top 50 Genius Companies in 2018 because it provided makeup shades for all skin colors, with an emphasis on darker tones that have been absent from most mainstream cosmetic lines (Lang 2018). Because Rihanna was in tune with the wants and needs of consumers, her company was highly successful, making \$100 million from sales in the first 40 days of product release (Lang 2018). The #MeToo Movement has affected internal corporate action as well as consumer products. Over the last year, many companies have fired those accused of sexual harassment and assault, whereas before the #MeToo movement, allegations were often hidden and settled secretly with little consequence for those accused (Johnson and Hawbaker 2018).

While it may seem the clear resounding answer is that CSR allows business to cater to changing norm and values, there are examples in which staying the course has also yielded success. The Miss Universe pageant, created by Catalina Swimwear more than 60 years ago and now distributed in over 190 countries, has a viewership of nearly half a billion people annually, despite of—or quite possibly because of—its more sexualized display of its contestants (Miss Universe 2015). Commercially, Hooters, the classic American chain 'breastaurant,' is still opening new locations, and has expanded internationally over the past several years (Bahler 2018). As writer Kristen Bahler (2018) indicates, a restaurant that capitalizes on promiscuity and mandatory flirtation, behavior that would constitute sexual harassment in any other workplace environment, is not exactly keeping up with the times. Nevertheless, sticking to their pre-#MeToo business model has continued to make Hooters a highly profitable enterprise.

Although responding to social change has helped countless companies stay current, Miss America is in a unique position because its very foundation, that of a beauty competition, is itself going out of vogue. The board must decide if the modification of what is such an essential component, the swimsuit competition, is a viable option for the pageant.

A Deep Dive: Considering Elimination

In March of 2018, only five months after the conclusion of the email scandal, the MAO Board of Directors, now led by Chairwoman Gretchen Carlson, met to discuss the future of the pageant, specifically whether to eliminate the swimsuit competition as Miss Teen USA and Miss World had already (McDermott 2016; Sanghani 2014).¹⁹ For years, the Miss America pageant has dealt with problems stemming from its decline in popularity, whether due to scandal, association with systemic sexism, or the increase in quality programming that puts Miss America toward the bottom of the viewership reports.²⁰ This declining popularity has created a shortage in participants

¹⁹ Neither the Miss Teen USA or Miss World pageants televised their swimsuit competitions before making the decision to eliminate them, and therefore did not have similar concerns for affecting viewership as the MAO board (Hall 2007; Sanghani 2014).

²⁰ Airing the same week as the 2018 pageant, America's Got Talent, a talent show in which a panel of judges and audience members vote for their favorite performer, and a largely politics free affair, collected 10.7 million viewers. While the program is different from the Miss America pageant, they are entirely comparable in design and purpose (to choose America's favorite competitor), and the shows respective viewerships serve as a sign that the politics surrounding the pageant are contributing to its lower viewership (Associated Press 2018, n.p.).

and sponsors, without which the organization will collapse. Under new leadership, the board has the momentum to create meaningful changes in the hopes of curbing the steady downturn of Miss America. Eliminating the swimsuit competition might just achieve this reinvention, or it could spell an end for the pageant.

When making such a crucial decision, the board members must consider the benefits and detriments of elimination. A typification of certain swimsuit competition supporters and dissenters will aid in describing the outlooks of various groups on the section's place in the pageant. Feminist and progressive dissenters especially have criticized the swimsuit competition as an unnecessary form of bodily regulation, especially when considering Miss America's self-imposed identity as a scholarship organization. In their opinion, the swimsuit competition overly sexualizes contestants and perpetuates harmful beauty standards. Alternatively, traditionalist supporters have reasonably asserted that there must be some room to judge physical beauty in a beauty pageant; those who choose to compete understand that they will be judged on their appearance, and the swimsuit section is a motivating force to be fit and live healthily. Aesthetic supporters, the final group, enjoy watching the pageant in the same way people enjoy watching a fashion show or a talent show, they do not focus on the politics, but rather simply on its entertainment value.

The swimsuit competition is the oldest and longest lasting area of judgment for the Miss America pageant, and for that reason, has become one of its defining features. Of the numerous problems the board's solution must address, low viewership seems to be the most crucial. When viewership is high, sponsors are willing to invest more because they receive more publicity, the television network makes more money from advertisements, and participants are incentivized to compete with more name recognition and, therefore, greater career opportunity. The pageant has steadily and drastically lost viewers from both the traditionalist and progressive pool by trying to find a middle ground between the sides. Eliminating the swimsuit competition provides an opportunity to re-focus the program on women's empowerment by emphasizing contestants' talents and advocacy goals over their personal appearances. Such a move should appeal to progressives, but they may continue to oppose the pageant for what it has historically represented and still refuse to watch. Additionally, aesthetic viewers who are entertained by the swimsuit portion are likely to become disinterested in a pageant that lacks it, while traditionalist viewers could be offended by perversion of pageant tradition under the competition's removal. Elimination, therefore, wagers a potential increase in progressive viewers against the near definite loss in traditionalist and aesthetic viewers.²¹

Both declining contestant entry and sponsorships are related to the swimsuit competition outside of viewership's effect on them. Some businesses are reportedly reluctant to have their name or money associated with the swimsuit competition because of its contentiousness and have, therefore, distanced themselves from the pageant (Yahr 2018). Companies have multitudes of other places to which they can donate that are far less controversial. Similarly, many young women do not want to be judged in a swimsuit and have other avenues to obtain scholarship money or recognition that do not require such an event (Yahr 2018). Miss America expert Hilary Friedman reports that "since the late 1960s the number of contestants is down from 70,000 to 12,000" (Friedman 2018, n.p.). Regardless of personal beliefs about whether the swimsuit competition is

²¹ In 1995, ABC Network, the broadcaster of the pageant at the time, reported that 79% of their sample did not support eliminating the competition; however, despite being the most recent research done on the matter, this survey is now over two decades old and could be considered methodologically unscientific (Curran 1995). The data was based on votes cast via phone call during the 1995 pageant; each phone call cost the voter 50 cents, and only the people who were watching the pageant and so knew what phone number to call were included (Curran 1995).

ethical or beneficial to society, presenting oneself in a swimsuit for assessment by millions requires extreme vulnerability with which many people are not comfortable. Eliminating the swimsuit competition would alleviate the concerns of potential sponsors and contestants, but it could also alienate some very powerful pageant proponents.

Many previous Miss Americas and state pageant organizations are strong supporters of the swimsuit competition and believe that it is an integral aspect of the pageant. As the petition calling for Haskell to resign proved, former Miss Americas and contestants can influence the board's confidence in the MAO leadership. Eliminating the swimsuit competition could turn these forces against Carlson, and possibly even against the entire board, which could end in all of the current decisionmakers losing their positions. The choice, therefore, is not only about the future of the organization, but the future of each individual board member.

With all of these potentialities swimming in their heads, Carlson moved to put the issue to a vote. Has the last swimsuit-sporting Miss America already been crowned or are more yet to come?

Taking the Plunge: Miss America 2.0

On June 5th, 2018, Gretchen Carlson announced on *Good Morning America* that constants will no longer be judged “on their outward physical appearance” (Yahr 2018, n.p.). In a total re-make of the pageant's brand, the Miss America pageant became Miss America 2.0 (Bennett 2018). In addition to eliminating swimwear, Miss America 2.0 has a revamped evening gown portion that allows contestants to dress however they feel most comfortable (Bennett 2018). Carlson opted for the word “competition” over “pageant” to describe Miss America 2.0. Carlson elaborated, “we're interested in what makes you you . . . it's what comes out of [a contestant's] mouth that we're interested in when they talk about their social impact initiatives” (Bennett 2018, n.p.). This news was met with varied responses, including concern and dismay from the Miss South Carolina and Miss Georgia state pageants, but the media generally received the change well (Tolentino 2018). Miss America 2.0 also included a new mission: “To prepare great women for the world, and to prepare the world for great women” (Bennett 2018, n.p.). The first 2.0 pageant aired on the 9th of September, 2018, a program that writer Megan Garber described as “a dizzying and at times spellbinding collision of determined progress and regressive tradition” (Garber 2018, n.p.).

Despite the clamor surrounding all of these changes, viewership continued to decrease as in previous years, clocking in at only 4.3 million, down 23% from the previous year's pageant (Carroll 2018, n.p.). This viewer downturn may speak to a continuing disconnect between consumer capitalism and feminism. Even though Carlson's leadership pushed the MAO to incorporate progressive ideals of women's empowerment, the changes were unsuccessful in restoring the pageant to the acclaim it once held; but, numbers are not everything. The Miss America title is one that now includes the message that a woman's values and character make her who she is, above her physical appearance. Nia Franklin, Miss America 2019 and the first Miss America crowned without a swimsuit portion, told the Associated Press “I'm glad that I didn't have to [wear a swimsuit] to win this title tonight because I'm more than just that. . . . And all these women onstage are more than just that” (Acuna 2018). It is yet to be seen if this swimsuit-less iteration of the Miss America pageant will survive the test of time, but history suggests that the pageant will continue to be met with criticism and applause no matter the clothes it wears; such is the fate of an icon measured against the future and beholden to the past.

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Appendix A: "No More Miss America!"*

On September 7th in Atlantic City, the Annual Miss America Pageant will again crown "your ideal." But this year, reality will liberate the contest auction-block in the guise of "genyooine" de-plasticized, breathing women. Women's Liberation Groups, black women, high-school and college women, women's peace groups, women's welfare and social-work groups, women's job-equality groups, pro-birth control and pro-abortion groups- women of every political persuasion- all are invited to join us in a day-long boardwalk-theater event, starting at 1:00 p.m. on the Boardwalk in front of Atlantic City's Convention Hall. We will protest the image of Miss America, an image that oppresses women in every area in which it purports to represent us. There will be: Picket Lines; Guerrilla Theater; Leafleting; Lobbying Visits to the contestants urging our sisters to reject the Pageant Farce and join us; a huge Freedom Trash Can (into which we will throw bras, girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, wigs, and representative issues of *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Family Circle*, etc.- bring any such woman-garbage you have around the house); we will also announce a Boycott of all those commercial products related to the Pageant, and the day will end with a Women's Liberation rally at midnight when Miss America is crowned on live television. Lots of other surprises are being planned (come and add your own!) but we do not plan heavy disruptive tactics and so do not expect a bad police scene. It should be a groovy day on the Boardwalk in the sun with our sisters. In case of arrests, however, we plan to reject all male authority and demand to be busted by policewomen only. (In Atlantic City, women cops are not permitted to make arrests - dig that!)

Male chauvinist-reactionaries on this issue had best stay away, nor are male liberals welcome in the demonstrations. But sympathetic men can donate money as well as cars and drivers. We need cars to transport people to New Jersey and back.

Male reporters will be refused interviews. We reject patronizing reportage. *Only newswomen will be recognized.*

Anyone interested in further information, and anyone willing to help with ideas, transportation, money, or anything, can write us at: P.O. Box 531, Peter Stuyvesant Station, New York, N.Y. 1009, or telephone (212) 475-8775 between 7:30 and 10:00 p.m. weeknights. Get a group of women together, come to the Miss America Pageant on Saturday, September 7th, and raise your voice for Women's Liberation. We will reclaim ourselves for ourselves. On to Atlantic City!

The Ten Points We Protest:

1. *The Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol.* The Pageant contestants epitomize the roles we are all forced to play as women. The parade down the runway blares the metaphor of the 4-H Club county fair, where the nervous animals are judged for teeth, fleece, etc., and where the best "Specimen" gets the blue ribbon. So are women in our society forced daily to compete for male approval, enslaved by ludicrous "beauty" standards we ourselves are conditioned to take seriously.
2. *Racism with Roses.* Since its inception in 1921, the Pageant has not had one Black finalist, and this has not been for a lack of test-case contestants. There has never been a Puerto Rican, Alaskan, Hawaiian, or Mexican-American winner. Nor has there ever been a *true* Miss America- an American Indian.
3. *Miss America as Military Death Mascot.* The highlight of her reign each year is a cheerleader-tour of American troops abroad- last year she went to Vietnam to pep-talk our husbands, fathers, sons and boyfriends into dying and killing with a better spirit. She

- personifies the "unstained patriotic American womanhood our boys are fighting for." The Living Bra and the Dead Soldier. We refuse to be used as Mascots for Murder.
4. *The Consumer Con-Game*. Miss America is a walking commercial for the Pageant's sponsors. Wind her up and she plugs your product on promotion tours and TV-all in an "honest, objective" endorsement. What a skill.
 5. *Competition Rigged and Unrigged*. We deplore the encouragement of an American myth that oppresses men as well as women: the win-or-you're-worthless competitive disease. The "beauty contest" creates only one winner to be "used" and forty-nine losers who are "useless."
 6. *The Woman as Pop Culture Obsolescent Theme*. Spindle, mutilate, and then discard tomorrow. What is so ignored as last year's Miss America? This only reflects the gospel of our Society, according to Saint Male: women must be young, juicy, malleable-hence age discrimination and the cult of youth. And we women are brainwashed into believing this ourselves!
 7. *The Unbeatable Madonna-Whore Combination*. Miss America and Playboy's centerfold are sisters over the skin. To win approval, we must be both sexy and wholesome, delicate but able to cope, demure yet titillatingly bitchy. Deviation of any sort brings, we are told, disaster: "You won't get a man!!"
 8. *The Irrelevant Crown on the Throne of Mediocrity*. Miss America represents what women are supposed to be: inoffensive, bland, apolitical. If you are tall, short, over or under what weight The Man prescribes you should be, forget it. Personality, articulateness, intelligence, and commitment- unwise. Conformity is the key to the crown- and, by extension, to success in our Society.
 9. *Miss America as Dream Equivalent To-?* In this reputedly democratic society, where every little boy supposedly can grow up to be President, what can every little girl hope to grow to be? Miss America. That's where it's at. Real power to control our own lives is restricted to men, while women get patronizing pseudo-power, an ermine clock and a bunch of flowers; men are judged by their actions, women by appearance.
 10. *Miss America as Big Sister Watching You*. The pageant exercises Thought Control, attempts to sear the Image onto our minds, to further make women oppressed and men oppressors; to enslave us all the more in high-heeled, low-status roles; to inculcate false values in young girls; women as beasts of buying; to seduce us to ourselves before our own oppression.

*Text from a flyer distributed at the 1968 Miss America pageant protest (Morgan 1968).

Appendix B: Miss America Firsts

- 1921 **Margaret Gorman**
First Miss America
 - 1926 **Norma Smallwood**
First Miss America with Native American Heritage
 - 1945 **Bess Myerson**
First College Graduate Winner and First and Only Jewish Miss America
 - 1954 **Lee Meriwether**
First Miss America Crowned on Live T.V.
 - 1983 **Vanessa Williams**
First Black Miss America
 - 1984 **Sharlene Wells**
First Miss America Not Born on U.S. Soil
 - 1994 **Heather Whitestone**
First Miss America with a Disability
 - 2000 **Angela Perez Baraquio**
First Asian-American Miss America
 - 2016 **Erin O’Flaherty**
First Openly Lesbian Contestant at the National Level
 - 2018 **Nia Franklin**
First Miss America Selected without a Swimsuit Competition
- (Acuna 2018; Gajanan 2016; Miss America Org. 2018c)



Margaret Gorman, Miss America 1921
(Miss America Org. 2018c)



Nia Franklin, Miss America 2019
(Rees 2018)