

# Media analysis paper toddlers and tiaras

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1. Introduction Ever since the advent of reality TV at the end of 1990’s, television producers started to look for controversial subjects, which would capture the viewer, and make this new format a hit. This was also the case with the child beauty pageants industry, which has been a frequently discussed topic in the United States for decades.

Nevertheless, after the emergence of the Reality TV (RTV) show, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, produced by the American broadcaster TLC, the controversy about this particular industry and children on television has increased rapidly. *Toddlers and Tiaras* is a show which might seem strange to people who do not know and have never heard of child beauty pageants. Especially the emphasis on making a girl look older, than her actual age, is hard to understand for many people. However, these shocking scenes that often

cause certain emotions among the audience, is exactly how RTV producers are trying to capture and interest its audience.

Toddlers and Tiaras might be a show that is judged rapidly due to the controversial nature of child beauty pageants, however the ratings of TLC prove that it is also a program which people enjoy watching and like to talk about.

1. 1 Purpose The purpose of this research paper is to investigate what people think about a show that features little girls who are turned into beauty queens, how they perceive the characters as well as child beauty pageants in general. Furthermore, due to the fact that this phenomenon clearly reflects the American society, it is interesting to find out what European's actually think of this concept.

. 2 Data description Most of the data collected in this research comes from academic articles used in the course, and books from the SDU library. Furthermore, online desk research played a major role, including research papers from the scholar.google search engine. Since Toddlers and Tiaras is a show that has only been broadcasted since a few years and has just entered the European market it seems to be a very current topic. This helped us in our research to find up-to-date information about the Reality TV show, as well as the child beauty pageant industry.

Moreover, ten in-depth interviews served as a qualitative research method and added highly valuable information to our research.

2 2. Brief introduction to child beauty Pageants and Toddlers & Tiaras Only in a climate of denial could hysteria over satanic rituals at daycare centers coexist with a failure to grasp the full extent of child abuse. (More than 8.5 million women and men are survivors. ) Only in a culture that represses the evidence of the senses

could child pageantry grow into a \$5 billion dollar industry without anyone noticing.

Only in a nation of promiscuous puritans could it be a good career move to equip a six-year-old with bedroom eyes (Richard Goldstein, 1997). Child beauty pageants have in the past few decades grown into a multi-billion dollar industry, sponsored by multinationals such as Procter and Gamble and Hawaiian Tropics. In the United States approximately, five thousand child pageants are held every year, with a subscription fee between \$250 to \$800 dollars, especially when competing on a national level (Giroux, 1998: 39). Pageants are held both on a local and national level.

Whereas the local level is mainly meant for working class families, the national competitions are dominated by the middle-and upper class, who have the resources to afford expensive clothes, pageant coaches, dance lessons, travel expenses and etc (Giroux, 1998: 39/40). The popularity growth of child beauty pageants did not go unnoticed and after the rising interest for pageant magazines such Pageantry, The Learning Channel (TLC) decided to launch the reality-based docudrama “Toddlers and Tiaras” in February 2009. Now four years later, due to high audience ratings TLC has recently premiered its 5th season.

The protagonists of Toddlers and Tiaras are children as young as two years old and their mothers, competing in beauty pageants. The show follows the little beauty queens and their families in their homes and backstage in order to document the preparation the girls have to go through to get the required ‘ Barbie-look’ for the contests. Pageants are a lucrative business, not only for the promoters who are making approximately \$100, 000 per event but also

for the contestants who are able to win high money prizes as well as holidays and cars (Giroux 1998: 40).

Nevertheless, besides the fact that a lot of money can be earned, the costs of competing in child beauty pageants add up quickly. Those high amounts of money indicate that the participation at such beauty contests demands much commitment and a high level of professionalism from the little girls. Hours of training for a flawless dance routine to impress the judges, as well as a healthy diet to be thin for the upcoming pageants are the rule (Sheridan, 2011).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, there are two different categories of pageants, the Glitz pageants and the natural pageants.

Especially the Glitz pageants have led to extreme discussions and outrage in the US. From fake eye lashes to fake spray tan, from provocative outfits to overlays for teeth (the so-called ‘flippers’ to hide the little girl’s tooth gaps, and give them a million-dollar smile), the TV show *Toddlers and Tiaras* documents every single step of the pageant preparation, and has increased the controversy about the sexualization of children on television (Sheridan, 2011).

Another controversial point of the TV show, are the mothers of the little beauty queens, who are faced with the accusation of using their children to make their own dreams come true. According to what you see on the show, they push their little girls to practice several hours a day, and use beauty treatments, like spray tanning to increase their chances of winning (Heltsley & Calhoun, 2003: 82). According to experts, the consequences these competitions can have on little girls are extremely negative. Indeed, “ it can

be harmful to girls, teaching them that their self-worth is measured by how pretty they are” (Schultz & Murphy, 2012).

Moreover, as a result of the pageants, the girls can develop lifetime problems, including depression, perfectionism, eating disorders, and body shame (Sheridan, 2011).

### 3. Television and Reality TV as a Medium

If our culture in the second half of the twentieth century is influenced by one medium, then it is television. Via TV, people were for the first time able to witness the horrors of warfare. However, the TV also brought new forms of amusement, music, cabaret and the glitter and glamour of big show programs. In other words, television caused that awareness, grief and happiness have become public issues (Hermes & Reesink 2003: 2). Furthermore, even though in recent years the Internet has started to take over television as the most penetrating medium, television is still often seen as one of the most intrusive one, due to the fact that it uses both visual and auditory stimuli. Moreover, media is used by different people for different reasons. Whereas one person would use the medium television or another medium in general, to gather information, others will turn on the television pure for entertainment (Asseldonk 2005: 10).

One trend which can be described as pure entertainment is RTV, which can be referred to as a “catch-all category that includes a wide range of entertainment programs about real people”. This form of entertainment has become a firm part of the daily television programming since the 1990s/2000s worldwide. Reality TV nowadays portrays everything and anything, from dating to weight loss, from healthcare to children beauty pageants (Hill,

2005: 2). Moreover, reality TV can be funny, dramatic, exciting and even 4 educating.

A reality TV show does not tell its audience how they have to feel about what they see, which is why the opinions about popular programs, such as Big Brother or Toddlers and Tiaras, differ widely. The very first reality TV shows were totally different from what we see today. In fact, the shows followed mainly policemen, firefighters or ambulance drivers and did not invade the private space of a person (J. Bignell, p. 28). According to Hermes & Reesink (2003) RTV can be divided into three different forms; emotional-TV, real life soaps and docusoaps.

Toddlers and Tiaras can be referred to as a docusoap, meaning that a fixed group of people and their daily activities are being recorded at school, work and etc. The emphasis of these formats is mainly based on the recognition and identification of the people and events portrayed on the show (Mast, 2003). Furthermore, the paper will continue to concentrate on the medium within the medium reality television or more specifically the RTV show Toddlers and Tiaras. Hereby the next chapter will take a closer look at both Media spectacles, the Use and Gratification theory and the encoding-decoding model in relation to child beauty pageants portrayed on the show.

4. Reality TV Research The following chapter focusses on four different theories related to television including; Media Spectacles, Obscenity, Hall's Encoding and Decoding model and Uses and Gratification theory. 4. 1 Media spectacles Today's society can be described as 'society of the spectacle'. In fact; " Spectacles are those phenomena of media culture which embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to enculturate individuals into its

way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution.

They include media extravaganzas, sports events, political happenings, and those attention-grabbing occurrences that we call news -- a phenomena that itself has been subjected to the logic of spectacle and tabloidization in the era of the media sensationalism, political scandal and contestation, seemingly unending cultural war” (Kellner, 2003: 27). Sports, such as the Super Bowl or the Olympics are important media spectacles (p. 5). Moreover, the entertainment industry is providing major spectacles itself, such as the Oscars or popular film spectacles like the Harry Potter series (p. ). Furthermore, politics also play a major role in the media, and the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, with the following war againstterrorism, has clearly been the mega 5 spectacle of the 21st century (p20). Besides, those serious topics, reality TV has become part of this phenomenon as well. Starting with hit-series like Big Brother, Survivor, and the Bachelor, RTV soon turned into a major spectacle, with a constantly growing fan crowd. In addition, RTV reached a ew stage, when MTV started to broadcast the faux-reality series about the rocker Ozzy Osbourne and hisfamily, which documented their somewhat ordinary family life. However, this new kind of ‘realitainment’ was a huge success, and fascinated massive television audiences around the world (p. 19). “ Thus, the new millennium is marked by a diversity of spectacles in the field of politics, culture, entertainment, and every realm of social life” (Kellner, 2003: 27) Andy Warhol said in 1968: “ In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes” (phrasefinder). Nowadays, the world has many celebrities, such as actors, writers or singers.



However, it seems that more and more people want to be part of the rich and beautiful, and decide to turn their lives into televisual spectacles to achieve those 15 minutes of fame. The participants of *Toddlers and Tiaras* often say during the show that they would like their children to become a celebrity when they grow up. The most common wishes are to turn the girls into a future Miss America, singers or actresses, with idols such as Selena Gomez, who both started their careers at a very young age (Hollywoodlife, 2011). Clearly *Toddlers and Tiaras* is a special kind of spectacle that draws a lot of attention and discussions.

The show has been debated on big TV channels, such as CNN, ABC and CW, who have invited various mothers and daughters portrayed on the show, in order to discuss the repeated accusations of child abuse (Canning & Behrendt, 2012: 1). Nevertheless, the first time (Glitz) beauty pageants attracted national attention was after the alleged sexual abuse and murder of the six-year-old beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey in 1996. The public was shocked, and saw a clear connection between the murder and the pageants, saying the perpetrator had used the children beauty pageant competition to choose his victim (Giroux, 1998: 2).

Paul Peterson, a member of 'A minor Consideration' that tries to change the children entertainment industry said about the pageants: "This is feeding the sex industry. There is a tremendous trade within juvenile modeling" (ABCnews, 2011). However, at the time of JonBenet's murder, no TV show had been documented about the children beauty pageant circus yet. JonBenet who was competing in various beauty pageants, was found abused and murdered in her basement.

Not only the public but also the media blamed the beauty pageants for attracting pedophiles and accused JonBenet's parents of violating their parental duties by dressing JonBenet too sexy and letting her participate in those contests. The murder of JonBenet turned into a mega spectacle with the parents and beauty pageants at the center of national news reports. Night after night all major networks showed the public, video's in which JonBenet was seen wearing sexy adult clothing, red lipstick, curled and bleached hair giving the audience a seductive look in order to impress the judges (Giroux, 1998: 37).

According to Giroux, this case presented the American viewer "a spectacle in which it became both a voyeur and a witness to its refusal to address the broader conditions that contribute to the sexualization and commodification of kids in the larger culture" (Giroux, 1998: 37). The case did not only caught the attention of the major networks but also of important American television figures such as Oprah Winfrey, who showed the public that child abuse frequently occurs at home and that the idea people have about that a child molester is most often an outsider is not so credible.

The Ramsey case clearly showed this phenomenon of a "unsafe home", not necessarily in the way of physical abuse but more looking at the fact that JonBenet parents forced their dreams and fantasies on their little girl, which resulted in the fact that they denied her a personality appropriate for a six-year old. Despite this terrible event and the enormous controversy towards child beauty pageants, TLC decided to broadcast a program dedicated to exactly this. Even though the controversy remains, the program has high

audience rates and has turned into yet another reality television spectacle.

#### 4. 2

Obscenity of Toddlers and Tiaras According to the Cambridge dictionary, obscenity or when someone or something is obscene is also referred to as “an offensive and shocking situation or event” (Cambridge dictionary online). The commercialization of major broadcasters has according to several theorists led to negative changes in what kind of media content is offered nowadays (De Bens, 1994; Dovey, 2000). De Bens calls the tendency towards First Person Media also tabloidization, due to the fact that the media nowadays offers more and more entertainment that makes the public dumber (Jansen, 2011: 17).

Especially in RTV programs the cameras have started to intrude in people’s private lives, in order to satisfy the viewer’s desire towards sensation and spectacles. It is often said that viewer’s currently, have gotten an increasingly narrowminded and stereotype image of what kind of problems are going on in society (Mast, 2003). The stories and images portrayed in the media, of individuals sharing their intimacies is getting crazier every time. The public has gotten used to the fact that the public domain has turned into a freak show. 7

When the first Big-Brother came out and the contestants were having sex on life TV, people started to wonder where the limit is. According to Hermes & Reesink (2003), fear arose that RTV would continue to stretch its limits and would become more and more inappropriate and revolting (p. 229). When looking at the RTV program Toddlers and Tiaras and the Cambridge definition of obscenity, the program is often seen as both offensive and

shocking. Ever since *Toddlers and Tiaras* debuted on TLC in 2009, it has been a show that caused much controversy in the US (realitytvworld, 2009).

Children beauty pageants were nothing new in the US at that time, since the very first pageants already took place in the 1960s; however this new RTV show documented very closely to what extremes the mothers go to make their daughters win (Huffingtonpost, 2011). The mothers participating in *Toddlers and Tiaras* have earned the nickname ‘pageant-moms’ in the US, and there is even an overall term to define their often shocking behavior, namely the ‘pageant mom’ phenomenon (ABCnews, 2012: 3). By definition, ‘Pageant moms’ aggressively market their daughters in beauty contests.

Those mothers often function as managers and might have a less positive and stable relationship with their children, than mothers that separate business from family. *Toddlers and Tiaras* heated up the discussions about the ‘pageant mom’ phenomenon, and uses the overly competitive mothers very successfully, to increase the interest in the program. Some of the show’s protagonists achieved a very questionable fame in the US and are highly criticized for their behavior. For most critics, the main problem is not even the actual beauty pageant, but the preparation that comes with it.

TLC concentrates greatly on filming the beauty treatments, such as spray tanning or heavy make-up, since those are the moments when the children most often defend themselves against their mother’s treatment. The complaints made by these crying little girls often hits a nerve of the public and generated more than once a fundamental discussion about child abuse (McKay, 2010). Moreover, the debate about sexualizing children on television has increased extremely since *Toddlers and Tiaras* started broadcasting.

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This is, due to the fact that many mothers select provocative costumes to attract attention, and to improve the winning chances of their daughters. However, together with the heavy make-up and professional hairdos, the little girls look extremely mature. This is where the problem for many starts, as a children psychologist shares: “ When you have them looking older, for a lot of people that means looking sexier...If you’re telling a 6-year-old to act like a 16-year-old, you’re telling her to be seductive and to be sexy” (Schultz & Murphey, 2012: 2).

In fact one pageant mom on *Toddles and Tiaras* has gone as far as to dress her 3-year-old in the same costume that Julia Roberts’ prostitute character wore in the movie ‘ *Pretty Women*’ (Thompson, 2011: 1). This performance was followed by much public outrage and a complaint, which was filed by the Parents Television Council against TLC’s *Toddles and Tiaras* saying: “ We have a serious problem when The Learning Channel features a toddler, who probably hasn't even learned to read, dressed as a prostitute showing off her sexy strut” (Thompson, 2011: 1).

However, exactly those provocations and shocking scenes has made *Toddles and Tiaras* one of the most successful Reality TV shows featuring children. Moreover, the pageant moms get much attention in the hit-series *Toddles and Tiaras* and sometimes become even more popular than their own daughters. Many critics say that the mothers push the girls to participate in pageants and on *Toddles and Tiaras* only to be in the spotlight themselves. However, not every pageant mom can automatically be accused to be a bad mother.

In short, *Toddlers and Tiaras* create a lot of shocking and controversial moments and discussions. During the in-depth interviews the research will continue to concentrate what the opinions of the participants are and whether according to them this program can be seen as obscenity. 4. 3 Uses and gratifications theory Within the uses and gratifications theory the central idea is that it is necessary to know how and why people use media in order to see what kind of force that certain medium has on people (Vettehen, 1998: 6).

Media use is linked to the needs people want to satisfy and the gratification they think they will get from it. The uses and gratifications approach, studies the social, psychological and cultural origin of the needs media users have. People generally use media because it fulfills and satisfies these needs (Vettehen, 1998: 6). The uses and gratification approach is in research frequently used to trace the functions of people's media use. When applying uses and gratifications on RTV, it helps to understand the watcher's motives and preferences.

This is done by placing RTV on the greater spectrum of communication channels which are somewhat accessible to audiences, with the understanding that people are often, but not constantly, actively involved in the selection of media content (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007: 356). According to A. Rubin (1983) nine different motives for watching television could be identified including; "relaxation, companionship, entertainment, social interaction, information, habit, pass time, arousal and escape" (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007: 359). Moreover, three additional motives were added, including parasocial interaction of watching the news and

“surveillance and voyeurism for certain program types” (359). Furthermore, according to Papacharissi & Mendelson quantitative research, RTV is mainly watched for entertainment, to pass time or because it has become a habit. In contrast to these three main objectives of watching RTV, voyeurism seems the least mentioned motive. According to Crew’s study (2006), this has several reasons. First of all, people are nowadays, used to the concept of watching RTV programs.

Secondly, social desirability may also play a role in this, due to the fact that people rather not admit that they like to spy on other people. People however, seem to be very interested in the game element and the group dynamic of a program, due to the fact that this often gives excitement to the program (Crew, 2006: 71). Furthermore, despite the fact that according to De Kloet & Chow (2000), it is impossible for a RTV participant to completely be themselves, the viewer often does not see it that way. Therefore, besides entertainment, the authenticity of the personages as well as their emotions also plays an important role.

By using RTV programs as a means of identification a higher degree of involvement finds place. In different studies about watching reality television, divergent motives are being mentioned as the most important motive to watch this genre. The question however, is which of these motives apply to Toddlers and Tiaras. Even though, a wide variety of the viewers of Toddlers & Tiaras cannot directly identify themselves with these little girls or their mothers, the program does strongly play into the emotions of the viewer as well as concentrating on the game factor of which child will win this episodes pageant.

During the qualitative interviews the research paper will focus on finding out which of the 12 earlier mentioned motives, according to the 12 respondents are most relevant to Toddlers & Tiaras. 4. 4 Stuart Hall's Encoding-decoding model Hall's encoding and decoding model focuses on the interpretation of media messages, a process that finds place when the media messages are being received. An individual gives meaning to messages by looking, reading and or listening, through which the person can feel emotionally involved or has the feeling that he or she can identify him or herself with the personage portrayed (De Boer & Brennecke, 2003: 114).

Furthermore, Hall's model states that there are two central processes who decide which meaning a media product has. Encoding refers to the producer's role who formulates a media message within its own abilities and restrictions. Social background, gender, age, education and organizational structure all play an important role in this. Decoding on the other hand, refers to the public who receives a message and depending on its own knowledge and common sense interprets the message in its own way (Jansen, 2011: 32).

Both daily life experiences as well as what the public sees and hears in the media are of importance when giving meaning to a message (Fiske & Hartley, 2003: 81). This means that both on the encoding and decoding side, different meanings of media-messages arise due to the fact that people generally differ widely from each other (Hermes & Reesink, 2003: 33). 10 According to Hall there are three different ways to read a media text such as for instance a television program, including; dominant (or 'hegemonic'), negotiated and oppositional ('counter-hegemonic') reading.



The dominant reading exists of the message the producer meant to send to the public. Negotiated reading means that the viewer understands the producer's message but partly also gives its own interpretation which fits the situation better. Lastly, with oppositional reading the viewer rejects the message. In addition studies of signification start when the medium and public meet. The origin of these studies all come from Hall's encoding and decoding model.

Hereby it is assumed that different people, possibly all give a different meaning to a specific media message. Two common perspectives of these studies in terms of RTV are; identification and disapproval. Identification finds place when people can relate the story line to their own life, whereas disapproval finds place when people are distant towards what they see and find it unrealistic (Liebes & Katz, 1990). Both theorists and viewers describe reality television in a different manner.

According to research on the signification of RTV it appears that the viewer realizes that the images they see are copied-pasted by the producer's as well as that conversations are often manipulated in a way that it changes the context (Jansen, 2011: 33). For the viewer it is especially important to identify themselves with the different personages, in which authenticity plays an important role (Hautakangas, 2010: 237). Besides, identification, emotional empathy as well as using the program as a reference framework are ways to give meaning to a RTV program.

In the case of Toddlers and Tiaras, the viewer might feel empathy when seeing how the eyebrows or legs of 4-6 year olds are being plugged and waxed. These kinds of images are often supported by voice overs in the form

of interviews or dialogues with either the mum or the children themselves. Due to these dialogues and interviews, the viewer is enabled to empathize with what the personages are feeling (Hermes & Reesink, 2003: 224). In which way the viewers of *Toddlers and Tiaras* give meaning to the program will become clearer during the in-depth interviews.

### 5. Method

As mentioned in the introduction the purpose of this research is to find out, what people think about the show *Toddlers and Tiaras*, how they perceive the characters as well as child beauty pageants in general. Furthermore, due to the fact that this phenomenon clearly reflects the American society, it is interesting to find out what European's actually think of this concept. The variety of data used for this research and the 11 diverse number of sources from which they were collected made both the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods of collecting data suitable for this research. We therefore, decided to mix these two methods of data collection. Qualitative research is often used "to study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002: 3). Furthermore, qualitative research questions are often "how and what" questions trying to find out information about the respondents experiences, strategies, feelings, behavior, perceptions and motivations (Evers & de Boer, 2007: 18).

This research paper makes use of the qualitative research method; interviewing, which according to Evers & de Boer (2007) is the most common data collection strategy. Qualitative interviewing exists of various types, including individual interviews and group interviews. For this paper we have chosen to focus on individual in-depth interviewing. An important reason why

we have chosen for this is due to the fact that it has a more personal setting and in this way we can get more honest and extensive responds from the participants than when for instance distributing a quantitative research survey.

In addition, the interviews were held in an informal setting often on the couch of either one of the interviewers or of the respondents, to give the participants a relaxed feeling so that they would feel open towards the questions asked. Before the interview, the participants were also asked to watch a 42 minute episode of *Toddlers and Tiaras* at home so that in case they had never seen the program before, they had a clearer overview of what it is about.

Right before the interview, the participants were shown another short 2 minute video clip about a famous *Toddlers and Tiaras* participant who is well known in the United States for drinking the so called “go-go Juice”, which is a mix of two different caffeine drinks. Furthermore, the in-depth interviews were held on the basis of the theoretical framework of chapter four, focusing on the following topics; uses and gratifications, obscenity, signification/encoding and decoding and child beauty pageants in general.

For this research, a total of 10 international master students (five men and five women) from the University of Southern Denmark were interviewed about their viewing of the American RTV program *Toddlers and Tiaras*. The interviews consisting of 16 different open questions took between approximately, 11 and 21 minutes, depending on how much the respondent knew about the program. The fact that the sample included both 5 female

and 5 male respondents was done purposely, in order to be able to examine whether gender plays a role in how people perceive the program.

The participants were matched on nationality, coming from five different European countries, with the exception of one participant who is half American and Half Greek. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier the participants were also matched on 12 the level of education (Master students) and age (23-26), due to the fact that according to research “students represent a significant portion of the demographic age group that several reality shows target” (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007: 359).

Lastly, the participants were contacted either personally or via Facebook and they volunteered knowing that the interview would be recorded for later examination. 6. Findings In this chapter the research findings of the 10 conducted interviews will be analyzed, which existed of 16 different questions, some related to the theory of chapter 4 and some in order to get a better understanding of what the interviewees think about both Toddlers and Tiaras or child beauty pageants in general. RQ1: What did you just watch or see?

In order to have an understanding of how the participants perceived the two video’s they were asked to watch before they started the interview, all 10 contestants were asked the question; “what did you just watched or see”. According to the De Bruin (2005), with the interpretation of media-content people construct ideas about themselves and about the people they have seen on TV (p. 17). The purpose of this question was therefore, to find out what popped in to the contestants minds when solely asking ‘ what did you

just watch’, without giving them any time to really think about the question and their responds.

Three out of ten of the respondents solely answered “Toddlers and Tiaras”, without going more in to depth of how they decoded the two video’s. Nevertheless, the remaining 7 participants gave a more descriptive message about what they had seen. One of the male respondents for instance stated that he “saw a lot of young girls acting like old girls, like old adults, like grown-ups. And I saw the parents as well who are kind of living in another world like maybe they would have like to be their daughter or something” (Xavier, 00: 12).

By only asking one simple question, Xavier did not only described what he saw; ‘ young girls being dressed up as adults and their parents’, but also interpreted the message in a way that he feels that these parents live a life they might have wanted themselves through their daughters. Furthermore, also one of the female respondents answered the question in a similar way by saying that she had “seen a little girl who wants to be a beauty queen and her mum who wants it even more” (Igne, 00: 33).

Xavier’s and Igne’s idea is being confirmed by the Psychologists Mark Sichel who said about the mothers portrayed on Toddlers and Tiaras that; “ Clearly these mothers are living vicariously through their daughters, hoping the girls will receive the attention and accolades they do not get in their own lives... They put make-up on their daughters, without realizing that they are, in effect, pimping out their own child” (M. Sichel, 2011). 13 RQ2: What part of the video shocked you the most or stood out to you the most?

As mentioned in chapter 4. 2; obscenity is referred to as “an offensive and shocking situation or event” (Cambridge dictionary online). In order to find out whether the respondents felt there was a relationship between obscenity and the program *Toddlers and Tiaras* the above mentioned question was asked. Even though various answers were given the two major outcomes were the behavior of the children and then especially their behavior towards the parents as well as the fact that these little kids have no idea what they are doing.

The first outcome was based on the fact that the respondents were shocked about how the participation in *Toddlers and Tiaras* affected the behavior of these girls in a very negative way. 50% of the participants mentioned a certain aspect of education, behavior or development. According to Katia “the most shocking to me is how already like small kids they react and how they behave with their parents.

For example the small children they do not really respect their parents, they can say some bad stuff or show some bad gestures to their parents, I do not appreciate that” (Katia, 00: 37). Whereas, most shocking to male participant Sebastian was; “The way the parents take advantage of their kids. Especially if you talk about these girls how they behave if their parents are around and how this entire industry or this entire way of treating them really seems to affect their behavior” (Sebastian, 00: 30).

The behavioral attitude is an often discussed subject in relation to child beauty pageants. The Psychologists Micheal Sichel, even took this aspect a little further by saying; “ there certainly is no evidence that these toddler beauty pageants create anything but future narcissists who will not know

how to get along in the world. This is because once the pageant is over, the little girl is no longer a tot with a tiara, yet expects the world to treat her like a queen” (M. Sichel, 2011).

This statement was also tipped on by one of the respondents who said that he had the feeling that these girls are “acting like she is an actress or a famous person” (Adrian, 00: 36). Furthermore, the second main outcome was that the respondents were shocked about the fact that due to the age of the girls, they have no idea what they are doing, which has been confirmed by childhood behavioral health psychologist Dr. Bishop who stated that “Toddlers are not old enough to make an informed decision as to whether they should compete” (Mckay, 2010).

Remi one of the male French respondents was actually shocked by a combination of the two above mentioned outcomes; “the attitude of the parents and the mentality, of pushing their child who are not able to decide for themselves, the parents are deciding for them and pushing them which is actually quiet bad for the development of the 14 child” (Remi, 00: 30). Whereas Kleo and Felix only mentioned the aspect of age and not knowing what they are doing; “What shocked me the most was how the parents handled the whole situation because kids can be kids and they don’t really know what is going on” (Kleo, 00. 40). ‘Force them to do something that they probably don’t really want to do. Of course obviously they do it but I think that they are not in the right age to decide it by themselves” (Felix, 00: 29). RQ3: Have you ever watched the show Toddlers and Tiaras? Due to the fact that respondents were foreign Master students from various countries studying abroad, the majority does not have a television in their apartment

or student housing. The television show investigated is being broadcasted every Sunday evening on the Danish TLC and can be watched for free on YouTube and on various illegal online streaming sites.

Nevertheless, due to the fact that the program is still quiet unknown in Europe we wanted to know how many of the contestants actually watch or have watched the show before we showed them the 43 minute episode, as well as why they watched it or why they do not. These why or why not questions are related to the Uses and Gratification theory as described in chapter 4. 3. In total 6 of the contestants had never watched the show before from which four were male and two were female. Four of these six participants would not start watching the show after having seen the 43 min episode for various reasons.

One of the respondents for instance answered; “no I do not because I do not want to give my audience to that kind of stupid shows” (Adrian, 00: 52). Whereas one of the female respondents had a more explicit answer of why she does not want to watch the show “The little girls annoy me... Especially that from such a young age she believes she is so beautiful and just with her beauty she can just get what she wants. And that her parents allow that, that is what annoys me the most” (Kleo, 01. 38).

The two respondents who were ‘excited’ about the show after watching the episode and who would watch it again, mainly thought this due to the fact that they either thought the program was “funny” and she would watch it because “it is fun, but not because I think that it right what they do” (Igne, 01: 33), or out of “curiosity” (Sebastian, 00. 57). The remaining four participants who had seen the show before either watched it on a regular



basis or had just watched it a few times. The reasons why they watched the show varied, one respondent said “it is just an easy program” (Lilli, 01: 34), whereas the other ones watched it out of curiosity or because a friend told her it was worth watching. Lastly, Katia one of the female participants who watched the program on a 15 regular basis said she watched it because “it is something so different, I cannot say I understand it, but it is so different that I am trying to understand why they are doing that, because Americans are so different to me that I am thinking that by watching this show or something similar that I can understand better their culture” (Katia, 01: 20).

Moreover, the Uses and Gratification theory and why the participants watch or would not watch the program varies and will be discussed in more depth during the next question where the participants choose which motive fits Toddlers and Tiaras the best. RQ4: If you look at the following 12 motives of watching television which ones apply the most to Toddlers and Tiaras?

In order for the respondents to answer this question, they were shown a PowerPoint slide, which mentioned Rubin’s and Papacharissi’s 12 motives of watching TV including; relaxation, companionship, entertainment, social interaction, information, habit, pass time, arousal, parasocial interaction, surveillance and voyeurism. Even though the participants all have a high level of English some of the motives were given a short definition in order to prevent confusion. Graph 1: % of motives mentioned by the respondents

Motives score

Motives	score
Arousal	0%
Habit	26%
Companionship	4%
Information	26%
Entertainment	7%
Parasocial interaction	7%
Pass time	0%
Surveillance	7%
Relaxation	15%
Voyeurism	4%
Social interaction	4%

Besides, parasocial

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interaction and companionship, all motives were mentioned at least once by the respondents. As you can see in graph 1, the two motives stated who matched mostly to why the respondents watch or would watch *Toddlers and Tiaras* are entertainment and voyeurism. As mentioned in the theoretical part in chapter 4. 3, it has been mentioned that according to Papacharissi & Mendelson, 16 entertainment is indeed one of the main reasons why people watch RTV shows like for instance *Toddlers and Tiaras*. The interesting contradiction however, is that according to them voyeurism is not often a motive mentioned in relation to RTV shows. Nevertheless, even though various researchers (Crew 2006) point out that voyeurism is indeed the least mentioned motive, Hermes & Reesink (2003) disagree with this statement. They stated in their book 'Inleiding televisiestudies' that people like to watch RTV because it gives them the possibility to spy and observe people.

They are real people, who are sometimes portrayed in intimate and critical situations which are actually not meant for the public eye, which makes it even more exciting to watch (Hermes & Reesink, 2003: 223). Similar to Hermes & Reesink, 7 out of 10 of the respondents, felt that voyeurism is indeed a motive of watching RTV or more specifically, the show *Toddlers and Tiaras*. One of the respondents explained why she thought voyeurism was a motive of watching the program by saying that "we do not live that kind of life and maybe yeah you want to see people who are maybe a little bit stupid or superficial in that way or who do you think are living a really different life than you are" (Marina, 01: 31). Moreover, one of the other female participants said that "about the last one, about sexual sometimes I think about it like that as well, that they are sometimes crazy sick people that

watch it for that reason you know girls in swimsuits” (Katia, 02: 13). Furthermore, the third most mentioned motive was information, which was often mentioned by the contestant due to the fact that they did not know much about child beauty pageants as it is an American phenomenon and therefore found it informative. ‘It could be for information because in America these things happen every day, so it is an inside of a different world for us who we do not even know existed” (Kleo, 02: 31). RQ5: What kind of show is Toddlers and Tiaras according to you? In order to see whether the respondents understood the concept of the television show and knew what kind of genre Toddlers and Tiaras falls under, question 5 was raised. Nevertheless, it must be said that some of the participants had difficulties answering this question and only 5 out of 10 of the respondents understood that it is a reality television show.

When some of the respondents were then asked whether they felt the program was real, in order to find out the authenticity of the program and the personages portrayed on the show. Two out of five actually thought it was real whereas the other three contestants felt that at least a part of the show was staged. Lilli for instance stated that “it all seems a little bit fake, but then again the American culture tends to be a little bit fake. So it can be also quiet real. But all reality TV shows are not 100% real, but I believe these people really exists and act like this on TV” (Lilli, 03: 44).

Whereas Xavier 17 one of the Male respondents answered “I think yeah, I think the people in this show are different, are maybe bored or need action. I think they have something missing in their life” (04: 00). Even though, the opinion of our respondents, whether the participants shown on Toddlers and

Tiaras act the same in real life varies. Research shows that in the RTV genre the producers often make use of reconstructions and other dramatic techniques in order to interest the viewer, therefore the question can be raised about how real reality TV actually is (Biltereyst et al, 2000: 15).

However, according to Reesink (2000), when you are being followed around by cameras all day nobody is really themselves (P. 42). RQ6: What feeling did you get from watching the 42 min episode of Toddlers and Tiaras, or what kind of feeling do you normally get when you watch the show? Encoding and decoding as mentioned in chapter 4. 4 concentrates on how the viewer gives meaning to messages and what kind of feeling they get from that, either whether they are emotionally involved, can identify themselves with the person portrayed etc.

It therefore, was important to find out more about how our 10 respondents actually felt about the show. Graph 2: Feelings of the respondents towards Toddlers and Tiaras 4 3 2 1 As you can see in graph 2, the respondents had a variety of feelings towards the program. Nevertheless, feeling sad, sorry for the parents and for the children were the three feelings mentioned most often. Feeling sorry for the parents might at first sight seem to be a bit of a strange answer due to the fact that the majority of times the parents are the ones who decide to let their daughters compete in beauty pageants.

Though as Marina and Xavier stated “I feel sorry for the kids and also for the family that they are engaged in something that is really not important in life” (Marina, 03: 08), “I felt sad for the children and sorry for the parents and for the children as well. Because I think it is just a waste of time and for me it should not exist” (Xavier, 04: 24). It can therefore, be said that even though

the respondents felt sorry for the parents, this was more in way of not understanding why they spend or waste their time with something so useless, then that they actually had an emotionally feeling of pithiness toward them.

Furthermore, interpreting a media message is a difficult process and as mentioned by Hall (1973), “We are not viewers with a single identity, a monolithic set of preferences and repetitive habits of viewing.... We are all in our heads several different audiences at once” (Morley, 1986: 10). The fact that we are different audiences at once becomes clear when looking at some of the answers of the contestants who clearly show that they have more than just one feeling about the program.

Kleo for instance mentioned that she is annoyed about the program but on the other hand also understands that these children like to compete and want to become famous and therefore feels that it is good that their parents are supportive. Nevertheless, despite her understanding she said “but I really felt that they were not getting specific values and limits about how they should be. And the parents just let the children be the leader of the family” (Kleo, 04: 10). RQ7: Do you think it is good to have a TV Show about this? Why yes or why not?

After knowing how the respondents feel about the television show, in which they often gave a negative vibe, we wanted to know whether they actually thought it was good or bad to have a program portraying this 5 billion American industry. The answers here were divided into different groups, the yes, no, does not mind and not being surprised groups. The respondents who answered that they thought it was good to have a show like this, generally

said this not because they actually liked the show, but because they felt that people would hereby be informed about what is happening in the world.

Igne and Sebastian for instance stated “I think it is good in this point that not to promote to do these things but to show what is going on in America” (Igne, 05: 20), “in a sense yes definitely, this show really just states how, mirrors some trends which exist in society in some sense”(Sebastian, 03: 32). Nevertheless, three of the respondents felt that *Toddlers and Tiaras* was not a good program. Hereby, it became clear that only the male participants felt that the program was bad, whereas none of the female respondents gave this answer.

Felix one of the male respondents compared the program with the advertising industry and how women are being portrayed as skinny. According to him “it is a bad thing for the whole society because it kind of influences how people perceive children, I think people do not really adopt it but take some of it for themselves and maybe threat their children differently” (04: 10). This statement is mostly supported by one of the other male respondents who said “I do not think it is good at all.

I do not want this to reflect the society that I am living in... It gives a bad image to the parents; I mean it gives a bad image to the education they are giving their children” (Xavier, 05: 28). Besides, good or bad answers, one of the female respondents stated that she does not think that the program is bad, but child beauty pageants in general (Katia), whereas Lilli did not see any problems in broadcasting this show, as “also less educated people need something to watch” as well as because according to her it is relaxing and

something that you can watch without needing to use your brain (Lilli, 08:03).

It can therefore, be stated that even though the majority of the people generally have a relatively negative feeling towards child beauty pageants, which has become clear out of the previous questions, only 30% of the participants felt that the television show itself is actually bad. RQ8: What do you think is from the producer's point of view the message behind Toddlers and Tiaras? As mentioned in chapter 4. the encoding and decoding model exists of two processes, the process in which the producer formulates a message behind the program, and the process in which the viewer decodes that message and either agrees with it or formulates its own message. In the above mentioned questions we have asked the participants about how they feel about the program etc, all fall within the second process. Nevertheless, in order to find out what the respondents think is the message behind the program through the eyes of the producer, the above mentioned question was raised.

Also in this question it becomes clear that there is a difference between the response of the male and female participants. According to all five male interviewees there is no or no real message behind the program and it is pure entertainment, while at the same time as Xavier stated the show is "taking advantage of these people" (06: 30). Even though according to all of them there is no explicit message, both Felix and Sebastian said that broadcasting a program like this is only done for economic reasons.

Furthermore, despite the fact that Remi believes the program is pure for entertainment, he does express how he feels the show reflects the American

society, which is very much build on competition and capitalism (Remi, 04: 40). The female interviewees on the other hand do think the producer is sending a message. Moreover, even though, this message differs per respondent, all five of the participants mention a certain factor of giving the world a negative view about the child pageant world or show how superficial and uneducated people live their life (Marina, 04: 45).

Additionally, Katia for instance has the feeling that by broadcasting this 20 show the producers are trying to promote and attract new people, however, she also stated that when she would not know that the show has already been on for so long that the producers “would like to sell how crazy it is... like do not do that” (05: 30). Igne shares Katia’s second view by saying that she has the “feeling that they want to show that is negative, I do not feel like they want to show that it is right.. just show how it is ridiculous” (04: 01).

Lastly, despite the fact that Lilli has more the feeling that the producers “just want to create buzz.. show something a little bit shocking, something abnormal, where people talk about” (Lilli, 08: 31), she does feel that the goal of the producer’s is to show people how scandalize it is, nevertheless, this not in order to really give a general view about child beauty pageants but more to attract viewers. Even though, the real message of the producers of Toddlers and Tiaras is unknown, it could be said that the male respondents are oppositional readers as they feel that there is no message at all behind the program.

The female respondents on the other hand seem to be more negotiated readers, when looking at the fact that they all give their own interpretation to the show, however, do have the same opinion about that the producers



are sending a negative message. Nevertheless, hereby it must be said that due to the fact that the original message behind the program is unknown, we cannot guarantee that the female interviewees understand the message sent by the producer or if they have created a totally new message for themselves. RQ9: What do you think of child beauty pageants in general?

The fact that TLC decided to turn children beauty pageants into a reality TV show, gave us the possibility to focus on the TV show as the primary medium. Though, to get a thorough understanding and capture all the information of the show *Toddlers and Tiaras*, we decided to also investigate the children beauty pageants as a medium during the interviews. Children beauty pageants are controversial events, which create diverse opinions among the audience. Our interviewees had very different views on the question “ what do you think about child beauty pageants in general?

What is wrong about it / what is good about it? ”, and seven out of ten participants said they consider the pageants as wrong. In fact three participants simply stated that they associate negative feelings with the pageants and “ think it is pretty useless” (Remi, 05: 12). However, four of the interviewees had stronger opinions about this topic. 21 What stood out from this question is that the participants thought the pageants to have a very negative impact on the psychological development of the little girls.

In fact Lilli blamed the pageant business and mothers to be responsible for “ raising little, arrogant, superficial children” (Lilli, 10: 20), whereas another participant claimed that “ they are living in another world... their parents are taking or considering them like stars or divas’ and I think it is really bad for them and when they grow up it will even be worse” (Xavier, 06: 40).

Moreover, one interviewee expressed his concern about the values the girls are taught, since it seems that everything is about their looks, in fact “ if you really only compete on your looks, what kind of image of the world you get, you teach to your kids”(Sebastian, 05: 30). Kleo agreed with this point of view, and said about a girl in the video “ that is not good for her self-esteem” (Kleo, 06: 52). Indeed, “ it can be harmful to girls, teaching them that their self-worth is measured by how pretty they are” (Schultz & Murphy, 2012). On the other hand, there were three participants who thought that the pageants could be improved, in a way that it would cause less harm to the children.

First of all two of the respondents said it would make more sense to put an emphasis on talent instead of looks and like this advance the child’s skills, like singing or dancing. Surprisingly enough, Felix was the only interviewee who approached the topic of legal issues, concerning child beauty pageants, and proposed “ some laws or restrictions...it should be observed from a third party, from a moral point of view, I think there should always be a third party involved which takes care of some laws” (Felix, 05: 31).

RQ10: If these trends would also enter the European market, would you when you have children later let them participate in Beauty pageants? a) Even if she wants it herself? Toddlers and Tiaras, as well as children beauty pageants in general are an entirely American phenomenon, which is why a great part of our respondents had never heard of the show before. As one of the respondents said: “ for me it is more entertainment and like I said to understand the American culture” (Katia, 06: 40).

Since this child pageant world is so different to us Europeans we thought it would be interesting to see how the participants react to the question of

being involved in this business themselves. The difference of gender among the interviewees showed most in this question. In fact, when asked the first part of the question, all five male participants answered with a clear no. The second part of the question “ Even if she wants it herself? ” also clearly got negative responses.

Interesting was the fact that the male participants were absolutely convinced that their own daughters would never want to be in a 22 beauty pageant, like Remi said “ She is not gonna want it for sure” (05: 38). The female respondents on the other hand were more open to the idea of a child beauty pageant for their children, however, with a stronger emphasis on talent, and only if the child really wants it. Yet, for the female participants it was important to stress the responsibility they would have as a mother in this potential child pageant situation.

As two interviewees said “ If she would love to yeah maybe, but I would not push her” (Igne 07: 14), and “ but only if the child really would want to...but I would definitely try and be a different mother than what they show on television” (Kleo, 08: 39). To conclude this question, men seem to find the idea of child beauty pageants more absurd than women. This is probably, since women can understand the dream of the little girls, to be turned into a ‘ princess’ better than men can. Moreover, the strangeness of pageants for Europeans seems to underline the strongly negative opinions about those events.

In Europe there are no child beauty pageants that are comparable with those in the US, only the UK has had a similar program on television, like Katia said “ But yeah UK it is like small USA they get kind of crazy about those things”

(07: 18). RQ11: What do you think that according to the children and parents is good about beauty pageants? Since there is such a strong emphasis on the personages portrayed on *Toddlers and Tiaras*, we wanted to have a closer look on how the public decodes the protagonists.

For this reason we asked the interviewees why they thought, the children and parents had a positive attitude about the beauty pageants. This question turned out in two very strong opinions. First of all, four of the participants said that a positive factor about the beauty pageants is that the girls are shown from a very early age what competition means. They will develop a very strong competition spirit due to the pageants, and the mothers might think it will prepare the girls for the 'real life'.

Like Kleo said " it also shows girls that competition is in life and if you try really hard you can win, but there are always times when you lose...I think that is a good life lesson" (09: 12). On the other hand, one interviewee found competition to have a negative impact on very young children " I think it is not good, they will have a spirit of competition already at this age I think it is really bad" (Xavier, 09: 24). Six out of ten of the participants claimed that the parent's actual goal was to live their own dreams through their daughters.

The key words for this answer were: mother's dream, self-actualization, fame, and attention. Thus those interviewees saw the intentions of the parents in a very negative light, and did not feel that it had anything to do with the child's well-being. As Marina said: " I don't think that they think so much about their children in that way, because what was in the clip I

watched I had the feeling that it was 23 more about their dreams and their self-actualization” (07: 11).

The so-called ‘ American Dream’ is a driving force behind those pageants, as one interviewee said: “ they want their children to be successful, like the American dream that from nothing you can be something and become famous and a superstar and there are so many people