# Costume & Theme Selection

You don't have bad intentions, but your social theme or costume idea could have a negative impact. Themes and costumes may intentionally or unintentionally appropriate another culture or experience. In short: Cultural appropriation is when somebody adopts aspects of a culture that is not their own. While there is much to learn about cultural appropriation, let this be an introduction.
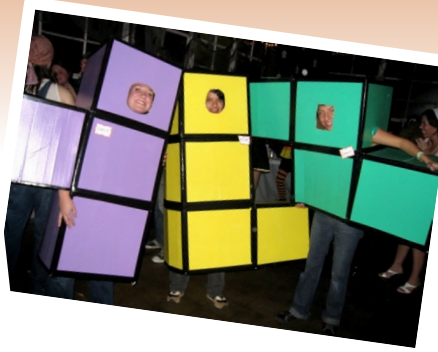
A checklist to create better themes and costumes:

☐ **Why are we considering this theme?**
Is there something specifically powerful or engaging about the particular theme? The more "unique" or "exotic" the theme, the more potential for issues of stereotyping, oversimplification, or false representation. A theme connected to our own communities are more likely to be respectful and fun for everyone (e.g. rather than a "jungle" theme, try a "Texas beach" theme).

☐ **How does this theme align with our organization's values?**
Did we pick the theme because it directly represents our organization's values or mission? Would we feature members in costume on the homepage of our website? Would we be proud to report this social to our national organization or campus advisor?

☐ **Is the theme or costume referring to a living culture or people?**
If so, there are people who are continuing to live or practice that culture. Anything less than a serious representation of the culture is likely to be harmful. In order to select a respectful theme, it's important to understand the difference between native peoples and people from a place (e.g. being born in Hawai'i doesn't make you native Hawaiian).

☐ **Is it about a current subculture?**
Is the theme or costume likely to be reflective of a certain racial group, gender, and/or economic class? Is it stereotyping, oversexualizing, or sensationalizing women or transgender people, homeless or low-income people, people of color, etc.?

☐ **Have we consulted with "experts?" Is it educational?**
If a theme regarding a culture persists, have we talked to community leaders or faculty about the theme and event? Have we done research on the culture? Utilizing generic store-bought costumes or decorations may be a hint that the representation is not authentic. Is our event educational? Could a non-social event, such as service, speaker, or tabling event, be a more effective way to educate?

☐ **Think and talk about our plan.**
If we're afraid of someone's reaction, then we probably shouldn't do it. Consider consulting our organization's national office or university staff, in advance. We understand that we are responsible for our theme, our attendees' participation, and our personal costumes. If we are unconcerned about the potential for negative reactions, and choose not to take these considerations seriously, we are fully prepared to deal with the consequences.

Preparing Your Organization for Success

- ✓ Assure your Exec, Social Chair, Risk Management Chair, New Member class officers/social planners, and other leadership understand the importance of creating themes that are appropriate and fun for all.
- ✓ Review this sheet every semester with new members and the general membership, and remind members, out loud, of your organization's expectations.
- ✓ Remind members that they can speak to you if they see an issue with the theme.

Intent versus Impact: Planning Your Social

- ✓ No matter your intent, what will be the impact or outcome of the event idea? How could it be perceived by others?
- ✓ Run your theme idea by a university or national organization advisor.
  - ○ Are we encouraging members to dress in a way in which they may not be comfortable? Are we providing fun and safe alternatives for all of our members?
  - ○ Does the theme "make fun" of a particular people, culture, campus group, gender, income status, or life situation? What's the joke—if someone laughed at our costumes, who are they laughing at?
  - ○ Could our theme be interpreted by attendees in a different way than our intention? Does our theme encourage harmful costumes? What do I think folks will wear to our event?
  - ○ Would we be willing and proud to send photos of our event to our parents, national office, campus newspaper, or campus administrators?

In Your Invite

- ✓ Share a statement in your party invitation requesting attendees follow tips from this sheet.
- ✓ Provide examples of fun costumes and clarify expectations.
- ✓ Remember: Attendees will represent your organization even if they *aren't members.* Alert attendees that those arriving in harmful costumes will not be permitted to attend the event.

While Planning Your Costume

- ✓ Brainstorm costumes with members during a meeting or host a costume check-in session.
- ✓ Ask yourself: Am I comfortable in this costume? Is this an outfit I feel represents my own values?
- ✓ Ask yourself: What's the joke? Why would someone laugh at my costume/who are they laughing at?

Harmful Themes or Costumes

- ✗ **Any time you paint or tint your skin in attempt to appear to be a different skin tone, race, or culture (e.g. Blackface)**
- ✗ **Generalized representation/stereotypes of Asian cultures**
- ✗ **"Cowboys and Indians"/anything "Squaw" or generalized depiction of an Indigenous person or peoples**
- ✗ **"Gypsies" or "Geishas"**
- ✗ **"South of the Border"/"Fiesta**
- ✗ **"Hawaiian"/"Tropical"/"Leied"**
- ✗ **"Ghetto Fabulous"/"Urban"/"G'd Up"**
- ✗ **"Pimps & Hoes"/"Golf Pros & Tennis Hoes"/Trophy Wives**
- ✗ **"Trailer Trash"/"White Trash Bash"/"Hobos"**
- ✗ **"Chicks and Hicks"/"Rednecks"**
- ✗ **"Around the World"**

Themes To Consider

- ☑ **Seemingly harmless themes can be carried out incorrectly if you don't provide information about costuming. Always fully consider your entire social, theme and guest expectations. (e.g. picking a "western/country" theme, but guests arrive as harmful stereotypes of Indigenous peoples.)**
- ☑ **Decade/Time Period (90's, 60's, early 2000's)**
- ☑ **Comic Book Heroes & Villains**
- ☑ **High School Heroes/Re-live Your Glory Days**
- ☑ **Sporty & Rep Your Favorite Team**
- ☑ **Catalina Yacht Mixer or "Preppy"**
- ☑ **Alphabet Theme (Dress as a certain letter you select)**
- ☑ **When I Grow Up**
- ☑ **Rubix cube or Memory Match Game**

Sources: Process Questions for Culturally-Based Theme Parties (J. Murakami) & What's Wrong with Cultural Appropriation? These 9 Answers Reveal Its Harm (M. Johnson)