

HOW TO: COSTUME AND THEME SELECTION GUIDE

Themes and costumes may intentionally or unintentionally appropriate another culture or experience.



The University of Texas at Austin
Sorority and Fraternity Life
Office of the Dean of Students

During the pandemic, large in-person events risk the health and safety of our community. Please consider virtual or small-group events instead.

Please review the [University Guidance on Meetings, Events and Mass Gatherings](#), and the [Student Organization Responsibilities for Meetings, Events and Mass Gatherings](#) to make events as safe as possible.

CHECKLIST QUESTIONS FOR THINKING ABOUT THEMES AND COSTUMES

○ WHY ARE WE CONSIDERING THIS THEME?

Is there something specifically powerful or engaging about the 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 is more likely to be respectful and fun for everyone (e.g. rather than a “jungle” theme, try a “Texas Spirit” theme).

○ 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? Using generic store-bought costumes or decorations can 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?

○ 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? Has our national organization provided guidelines?

For several years, the Office of the Dean of Students at The University of Texas at Austin has offered voluntary guidelines to educate students about costume and party theme selection.

UT Austin does not place limits on students’ freedom of expression. We do not regulate their speech or enforce costume guidelines as rules. Our philosophy is to educate students and remind them that they are accountable to each other and that their actions can negatively impact other members of the university community.

We offer these voluntary guidelines in that spirit.

○ 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).

○ WHAT IS 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

- ✓ Ensure your organization leadership (i.e. Exec, Social Chair, Risk Management Chair, New Member class officers/social chairs, etc.) understand the importance of creating themes that are appropriate and fun for all.
- ✓ Review this information 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 EVENT

- ✓ 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.

ASK THESE QUESTIONS:

- Are we encouraging members to dress in a way in which they may not feel comfortable?
- 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 administrator?
- What will we do if the theme causes harm we didn't think of, or if attendees interpret the theme in ways we find offensive?

IN YOUR INVITATION

- ✓ 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 or offensive costumes will not be permitted to attend the event.

PLANNING YOUR COSTUME

- ✓ Brainstorm costumes with friends and organization members or hold a costume check-in session for your group.
- ✓ **Ask yourself:** Am I comfortable in this costume? Is this an outfit that represents my values?
- ✓ **Ask yourself:** What's the joke? Why would someone laugh at my costume/who are they laughing at?

HARMFUL THEMES OR COSTUMES

- ✗ Painting or tinting your skin to be a different skin tone, race, or culture (e.g. blackface)
- ✗ Generalized representation, stereotypes or parts of a culture as a costume
- ✗ "Cowboys and Indians"/anything "Squaw" or generalized depiction of an Indigenous people or identities
- ✗ "Gypsies" or "Geishas"
- ✗ "South of the Border"/"Fiesta"
- ✗ "Hawaiian"/"Tropical"/"Leied"
- ✗ "Ghetto Fabulous"/"Urban"/"G'd Up"
- ✗ "Pimps & Hoes"/"Golf Pros and Tennis Hoes"
- ✗ "Trailer"/"White Trash Bash"/"Hobos"
- ✗ "Chicks and Hicks"/"Rednecks"
- ✗ "Around the World"

THEMES TO CONSIDER

- ✓ Decades/Time Period (90's, 60's, early 2000's)
- ✓ Super Heroes and Villains
- ✓ Sports/Rep Your Favorite Team
- ✓ Catalina Yacht Mixer or "Preppy"
- ✓ Zombie Apocalypse
- ✓ Prom (e.g. 80's Prom)
- ✓ Red Carpet
- ✓ 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.)