

The Blurred Line Between Racism and Innocent Depictions

An Analysis of “Tacos and Tequila”

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Abstract

My research explores the question “When does something stop being funny and start being racist?” by looking specifically at the “Tacos and Tequila” incident. “Tacos and Tequila” was a controversial social exchange that occurred in the Fall of 2006 between a fraternity in the Inter Fraternity Council, Zeta Beta Tau, and a sorority in the Panhellenic Council, Delta Delta Delta. The controversy arose from the way these primarily Caucasian organizations depicted Mexican/Mexican American Culture. These portrayals are viewed as malicious racism by one side and as innocent depictions by the other side; I hope to explore why the two sides disagree on when “the line is crossed” and make recommendations on how to educate both sides and construct a clearer picture of what is racist. Although a consensus is unlikely, at the very least steps can be taken toward reaching a more understanding and tolerant campus environment.

Introduction

Developing stereotypes seems to be human nature; particularly within American society, where the media plays such a large role in the lives of Americans. We live in a very diverse yet segregated society, in which people rarely make an effort to interact with people that are different. This leaves people to make judgments and assumptions of other racial or ethnic groups based on the representations of these groups that the media depicts. However, the media has long portrayed people of color in a very unfavorable light. The majority of news coverage that involves people of color is in regards to drugs, gangs, or some other illegal activity. Stereotypes are subconsciously developed by those who have minimal interactions with these groups and who view this negative media coverage.

The other depictions of racial minorities that are viewed by people of the white majority, are by minority entertainers such as Carlos Mencia and Dave Chapelle. These comedians play off of stereotypes and usually focus on their own groups' flaws or negative characteristics, as they perceive them, as a way of getting laughs. These jokes are sometimes found to be a playful exaggeration of experiences that are shared by a group. When I watch a Latino comedian perform I often times find myself able to relate to his exaggerated depictions of Latinos and I am able to enjoy the comedy fully, because I know the reality of my experiences and can understand that they are mere exaggerations. It becomes more complicated when racial lines are crossed, to a lesser

degree different minority groups find that other minorities have the “right” to join in on their humorous exaggerations of their racial or ethnic group. This is often based on a mutual understanding that they have shared similar histories of oppression or for others it is the shared social economic status. Yet even this interaction is very sensitive and some find it inappropriate when anyone that does not relate directly to the group being depicted laughs. So should comedy be segregated? Should depictions of racial or ethnic stereotypes be done away with completely in the media? Is it possible to do away with these negative depictions? Are the white privileged majority allowed to laugh at anything?

So what happens when two predominantly white greek organizations at the University of Illinois decide to have their theme for their social exchange be “Fiesta”, otherwise known as “Tacos and Tequila”. Greek organizations on this campus have had a long tradition of pushing the envelope in terms of political correctness, particularly in terms of race. These theme parties have pushed the limits of what the campus community would tolerate, but “Tacos and Tequila” was the straw that broke the camel’s back. The Mexican American community and students of color in general were no longer willing to tolerate this type of behavior. Delta Delta Delta and Zeta Beta Tau soon found themselves being protested against and at the center of a media frenzy that, a year later, has not completely subsided.

Those that participated in the event claim that their intentions were solely to have fun and not to offend, while those that have protested the event found it to be maliciously racist. The Caucasian students that portrayed these stereotypes of Mexican Americans most likely grew up in social and economically privileged communities with little interaction with Mexican Americans. When they dressed up as Mexican Americans all they knew to do is depict the stereotypes that they saw in the media. They thought they were depicting Mexican Americans the way they really are,

the way that even Mexican comedians say they are. These stereotypes are negative, but what they could not grasp is the impact that they would have when privileged white students portrayed them. This enormous disconnect is what drew me to research the question of, when something stops being funny and starts being racist. Also, I was president of a fraternity at the time of the event and understand the pressures from your peers to come up with new and fun party themes. I also identify as Mexican American and hold similar views to those I interviewed. Because of this I was drawn to researching the event and the divides between those that participated and those that protested. These same divides also seem to represent themselves more broadly along lines of racial majority and racial minority, and not along the lines of greek affiliation.

Literature Review

Most of what has been written on the “Tacos and Tequila” event has been within the campus newspaper, the Daily Illini. This has served as a medium through which the entire campus community can express their opinions in regards to the event itself, protests, apologies from the organizations, and official responses from campus administrators. Even within this newspaper dialogue the seriousness of the ZBT and Tri Delt’s actions was greatly debated. One student was quoted as saying, “I didn't think the theme was anything out of the ordinary” while another was quoted as saying, “that the costumes mocked Latinos” (O’Kelly 2006). The divide on how people perceived the severity of the actions of these organizations seemed to fall along racial lines. People from the majority group felt that their actions were not very serious while minority students expressed outrage toward the participants of “Tacos and Tequila”.

Many found the idea of their entire culture, national pride and even religious beliefs being paraded around and summed up by a few negative stereotypes to be degrading and even oppressing. One student is quoted as saying, “the stereotype of what it is to be Mexican is embodied in these parties, in these parties, to be Mexican means to be a gang member, pregnant or a farm worker” (O’Kelly 2006). Having your entire identity summed up by an outsider in such an offensive way is a big part of why there was such a large public outcry against “Tacos and Tequila”. This resentment toward a person of privileged background carrying out these acts is commented on by another student, “I just don't think that the campus community completely

understands why it is wrong to make money and entertain yourself through a culture” (Pierce 2006). This idea that minorities are nothing more than sources of entertainment to the majority is key to the debate of who has the right to portray what stereotypes. As previously stated, the media further complicates this question by airing minority comedians playing off of stereotypes of minorities in their acts. However, these comedians are not only watched by minorities, what is to stop a white person from retelling a joke about a Mexican, when it is culturally acceptable for a Mexican to tell this same joke. These comedians do not address the complexity of their craft and do not define the lines of political correctness, we are left to define those lines for ourselves. Brian Pierce, in his column for the Daily Illini, addresses the problem of the media’s backward message by saying, “In the widespread national outrage over ‘political correctness,’ we defend negative stereotypes as ‘jokes’ and can thus claim anybody who doesn't like them simply doesn't have a sense of humor” (Pierce 2006). After all we do have Freedom of Speech protected under the Constitution’s first amendment to allow us to voice our opinions as we see fit. Yet does this give us the right to denigrate another group’s culture?

Chancellor Herman wrote a letter in response to the event on campus, in which he expressed that he was saddened and disappointed and found the actions of those involved to be, “insensitive, thoughtless and, quite frankly, juvenile” (Herman 2006). The Chancellor’s hands were tied by limitations of the University’s Student Code and by the First Amendment rights of every student. Chancellor Herman implored students to coexist:

“We can have strong and differing opinions about culture, politics and policy, but we must never lose touch with granting everyone the kind of respect and dignity we would like others to grant to us. Everyone of every background is welcome at Illinois, and I want them to feel welcome” (2006).

The Chancellor's suggestion maintains the status quo but he does not address the problems racism and the belittling of minority cultures.

The ZBTs and the Tri Delts responded to this backlash through methods of damage control. "The Wednesday after the event, Emma Miller, Tri Delta president, received permission to present a formal apology to the United Greek Council, the student governing body for culturally-based organizations on campus. ZBT president, Brandon Keene, who initially had planned to submit a written apology, joined Miller in speaking at the regularly scheduled meeting" (O'Kelly 2006). Many students on campus felt that these apologies were too little too late. Several protests were organized on campus in response to "Tacos and Tequila". In Susan Kantor's article in the Daily Illini on the protests, one student expressed his frustration and need for change:

"We will no longer be disrespected on this campus. Our cultures will no longer be mocked. We will no longer be made fun of. We will no longer be told that we don't deserve to be here. And it all starts with one step. And that is unifying ourselves" (2006).

The two organizations found themselves to be the target of the campus community's pent up frustration with racism.

Lindsay Kordik, a member of Delta Delta Delta, wrote a letter to the Daily Illini saying, "Every day, our hearts are re-broken by the barrage of shame we feel upon seeing ourselves bashed - in the latest news article, opinions column, letter to the editor, cartoon, as the top story on the channel 15 news - we are emotionally drained" (Kordik 2006). Her letter acknowledges that they made a mistake but shows more concern for the impact the protests are having on her sorority than the impact the exchange had on Mexican American students at UIUC. Kordik goes on to say, "If you continue to judge me and my sisters and our character as members of a sorority, continue to place stereotypes on the Greek system, then you are no better than anyone else on this campus who

plays into stereotypes and prior judgment” (Kordik 2006). The role of power relations comes into play when considering her complaint. Can students of less privileged minority groups have the same impact in terms of reverse racism on a privileged member of the white majority?

NaaAmerley Badger, responded to this letter with a letter of her own:

“Having your house ding-dong ditched is so much worse than having your house burned down. Maybe now the tri-Deltas have but a small taste of the injustices and experiences of those who ‘a few’ of them and their peers so easily mock. Your impatience with the condemnation you and your sisters are experiencing was clearly conveyed in your pathetic plea for it to stop. Now you have a tiny glimpse into what we as minorities and our ancestors have been going through for years, and now you know the hurt of being judged, just as you judged those you portrayed during your ‘Taco and Tequila’ party. Having your house ding-dong ditched is so much worse than having your house burned down. Maybe now the tri-Deltas have but a small taste of the injustices and experiences of those who ‘a few’ of them and their peers so easily mock. Your impatience with the condemnation you and your sisters are experiencing was clearly conveyed in your pathetic plea for it to stop. Now you have a tiny glimpse into what we as minorities and our ancestors have been going through for years, and now you know the hurt of being judged, just as you judged those you portrayed during your ‘Taco and Tequila’ party” (2006).

Being from the majority group it is hard to comprehend the feeling of not being welcome and that underlying understanding of the history of oppression your ethnic or racial group has faced.

The sanctions posed on the two organizations basically denied social privileges for the remainder of the fall semester and prevented them from rushing new members in the spring semester. Those that had protested the event to begin with, were very dissatisfied with this

punishment. Tri Delts said these were punishments they intended to self impose and that their nationals would be further disciplining their chapter (Carino 2006). What protestors found most disappointing was that the punishments came, primarily, in response to underage drinking, not the racism that took place.

My research focuses on the threshold at which something stops being funny and starts being racist. “But where is the joke? Where is the biting satire, the witty observation, the clever pun in a group of privileged, predominantly white college students playing ‘dress-up-like-a-person-with-darker-skin-than-you’? How exactly can that be interpreted as funny?” (Pierce 2006). I hope to explore why the two sides of this debate disagree on the intentions of the “Tacos and Tequila” event.

Research Questions

The following are the basic questions I asked of the people I interviewed, with some variation based on involvement in the event and their status at the university as either a student or administrator. Of these questions, the question that is central to my research is 9.c.

- 1.) Would you be willing to disclose your ethnic or racial identity?
 - 1.a.) If so, how do you identify yourself?
- 2.) Are you affiliated with any greek organization on campus?
 - 2.a.) If so, which council does your organization belong to?
 - 2.b.) Do you currently hold any position within the organization?
- 3.) How do you define racism?
- 4.) What is a stereotype, in your opinion?
- 5.) How did you first hear about the “Tacos and Tequila” event?
- 6.) Did you see any of the events first hand?
 - 6.a.) Were you in any way a participant?
- 7.) Please state the sources through which you gained knowledge of the event. (ex. Classroom discussion, social networking website such as facebook, speaking to a friend,...)
- 8.) Did you participate in any form of protest in response to this event?
- 9.) From your knowledge of the event, was anything said or done by participants that you found to be offensive?
 - 9.a.) Are there any examples you saw or heard about that you would classify as “innocent portrayals of stereotypes”?
 - 9.b.) Are there any examples you saw or heard about that you would classify as racist?
 - 9.c.) In your opinion, when does something stop being funny and start being racist?
- 10.) Would your perception of that event been different if it had been carried out by Mexican participants?

- 10.a.) Would it have been different if it had been carried out by non-Mexican Latinos?
- 11.) What do you believe were the intentions of those that organized the event?
- 12.) If you in fact felt there were racist portrayals, who do you believe is responsible for those portrayals?
- 13.) Do you believe the organizations were adequately disciplined?
- 14.) How should the University respond to similar situations in the future?
- 15.) How has this situation impacted your view of the campus, if at all?

Methodology

I interviewed administrators and students inside and outside the greek community. I approached a combination of those that participated and those that did not participated in “Tacos and Tequila”, however, I was turned down by those that participated. The majority of interviewees were acquired through my knowledge of their level of interest in the subject; the remainder came through referrals. Ultimately, I interviewed nine students and one administrator. Of the nine students, six were male and three were female. All of their identities were kept private; the administrator chose to keep their identity private as well. My participants were asked if they were willing to disclose ethnic or racial identity and how they defined themselves along those lines. I asked them if they were greek and if so, which council their organization belonged to. The following is a list of those that participated’s pseudonym, racial/ethnic identity, and greek affiliation:

“James”, Mexican American, Greek in IFC

“Eddie”, Mexican American, Non-Greek

“Laura”, Mexican American, Greek in Panhellenic

“Rick”, White, Greek in IFC

“Robert”, Mexican American, Greek in IFC

“Jane”, Latina, Non-Greek

“Jacob”, No Comment, Greek in IFC

“Gloria”, Puerto Rican/ Peruvian, Panhellenic

“Steve”, Black/ Italian, Greek in IFC

“Administrator”

I only interviewed one administrator whose identity will remain anonymous and who will be referred to only by the name “administrator”.

My questions inquired into the participant’s identity, definitions of race and stereotypes, involvement in the event, how they were impacted, and where they personally find that the line between humor and racism is crossed. Those that were greek affiliated were from the two councils involved in the incident. This was done intentionally by me, so that interviewees would understand the context under which the event was planned and to minimize the argument as being greek vs. non-greek.

Findings

Everyone I interviewed, I asked to define two words: racism and stereotypes. I did this to get a context of within what underlying definitions their drawing of the line between humor and racism would be situated. Some variety existed within the definition of both of these terms and I will include some examples of their responses. “Administrator” defined the word racism as, “a power relationship where actions and words are used against a group of people based on race”. This definition incorporates the power dynamic in racism that some argue is why minorities cannot be racist against the majority group. “Jacob” defined racism as, “treating someone as an inferior based on race”. Stereotypes were defined by “Gloria” to be, “generalizations of a group in a negative way to isolate or discriminate those people”. “Eddie” defined stereotypes as, “images of what a group of people do or should look like based on an essentialized idea of race”.

Most people heard about the event in a similar way, through friends, class discussion, facebook, and campus email list servers. Only the female participants attended protests and discussions for reasons other than classroom extra credit or “random curiosity”. “Robert” when referring to his participation in protests said, “I came along to one but decided to leave early. I disliked that the biggest focus was on the Tri Delts and not the ZBTs as much”. Perhaps “Robert” was not there long enough for the focus to switch to the other organization or perhaps their predominantly Jewish membership played a role. As an oppressed religious minority some have may have been more forgiving of their role in “Tacos and Tequila”.

A similar question, in terms of who has the right to portray these stereotypes was asked in saying, “Would your perception of that event been different if it had been carried out by Mexicans...what if it had been non-Mexican Latinos?” The majority of people answered “no” that their perceptions would not have changed. “James” said, “If it had been Mexicans it would have

been different...it's so different. Stuff like pregnant women would have been ok". I found it interesting that "James" believes that the characterization of Latinas as "always pregnant" or as simply "child bearers" is only problematic along racial lines and did not make any mention of its implications along gendered lines.

Everyone except "Rick", who identifies as white, and "Jacob", who declined to comment on ethnic / racial identity, felt something was said or done by participants in "Tacos and Tequila", to their knowledge, that they found to be offensive. This question led into the basis of my research, of exploring the blurred line between racism and innocent depictions. When asked if they classified anything as "innocent depictions of stereotypes", "Rick" and "Jacob" both responded by saying "all of it". "Robert" answered, "this is an oxymoron. It's a nice way of saying you are racist. Boundaries were pushed". "James" said, "dressing like Pancho Villa and drinking tequila was funny". However, many other participants that classify themselves as Mexican Americans found these both troubling. Figures of national pride depicted were troubling and the link to tequila "as if all Mexicans were alcoholics" was troubling to many. "Steve", who identifies as Black / Italian, said, "I think the people dressed as gangbangers were innocent because that's kind of true of Mexicans and black people". He reinforces a negative stereotype of people of color to have violent tendencies and be involved in gang activities while he himself is an exception to the rule he affirms.

When asked if they would classify anything as racist, those that did cite examples almost unanimously mentioned the girls that dressed up as pregnant Latinas and many others found the use of symbols of national pride, such as "the Mexican flag torn into pieces to form a dress", according to "Laura". "Jane" found "The depiction of the Virgen de Guadalupe to be most offensive. Mexicans consider her like a mother and she is one of the most important figures of

Catholicism”. Again, both “Rick” and “Jacob” answered in similar fashion, that none of it was racist. “Administrator” felt that the depiction of pregnant Latinas most troubling and said, “The flag was not racist... it was an ignorant and insensitive use of an identity. It is dehumanizing the group of people and taking away their dignity as a people”. The “Administrator’s” interpretation most closely aligns with my perspective. To use symbols of national pride in a derogatory manner strips away their humanity, it says they are not entitled to feel pride for who they are and where they come from.

I followed this with a question that was absolutely critical to my research, “When does something stop being funny and start being racist?” Some people responded by saying that it depended on the context and that it was too hard to answer. “Steve” responded, “Only when you absolutely mean for something to be racist, otherwise it’s just a joke”. It is interesting to see that his determining factor is the intentions of the person in question and not the impact that person’s action have. “Jacob” responded, “never, it’s always funny” and that people should stop taking things so seriously. Again, he does not take into consideration the impact these potential words or actions may have. “Robert” responded, “when you are trying to portray something you don’t understand and it is offensive to others”. “Robert’s” response brings into consideration who has the right to represent others, he suggests you need an understanding of the group or practice and the other group needs to not feel offended, otherwise it’s no longer funny and starts being racist. “Eddie” responded, “When images are used in stereotypical ways by anyone, regardless of race, in the portrayal of a minority... that’s when its racist.” Interestingly, “Eddie” makes it clear that you can only be racist against minorities. He brings into consideration the power dynamic between the majority and minorities as well.

In regards to the intentions of those that organized the event, the majority of interviewees felt that the intentions of those planning were originally, at the very least in the earliest stages, just to have fun and not offend anyone. Some, such as “Eddie”, disagree, “I would like to think they were innocent but I believe they knew what they were doing was hurtful”. “Administrator” felt “their intentions were not to be racist but because many don’t understand racism and don’t have to think about it on a daily basis like students of color. The impact is what is important, not the intentions necessarily.” This brings up an interesting interpretation of the argument that they didn’t know any better. The “Administrator” argues that they do understand racism but do not hold the same level of awareness, in regards to racism, as students of color are forced to have. Perhaps this contributed to their actions, in hindsight it is clear that their actions were at the very least inappropriate but at the time it didn’t occur to them.

Finally, I asked people this may have impacted their view of the campus. Most felt this had a strong impact on their view of the campus. Their eyes were opened to the degree of racism that goes on and the ignorance in regards to the subject by those in the majority. “Jacob” responded by saying, “It made me realize how overly sensitive people can be... I hate having to tip-toe around to avoid offending someone”. “Gloria” responded, “It made me realize we still have issues... not many people found it offensive. Panhellenic didn’t take it seriously”. “Administrator” shared the deep effect it had, in saying, “it impacted my view of campus tremendously, it pointed out contradictions and paradoxes present in the University that I had not been aware of. Many students made claims of no progress and ‘Tacos and Tequila’ in many ways justified these claims. Things like cultural houses, ethnic studies, and so on... made it seem as the needs of students of color were being met. Then I saw these theme parties and saw why students held these beliefs.” On campus these last few decades have shown progress in terms of the overt problems students of

color face, but the underlying discrimination and racism continues to hold a presence. Minority students can sense, an unwelcoming feeling to this campus. Every time someone decides to express their first amendment rights at the expense of others the campus climate worsens.

Analysis

I believe the problem arises from the fact that there are many different definitions of racism and students find it difficult to define it for themselves. Racial stereotypes are offensive to some and comedy to others. The media complicates the issue by airing people like Carlos Mencia that portray offensive stereotypes in a humorous manner but makes no attempt to comment on the impact these portrayals may have on society. People within the privileged white majority can go a long time without taking into consideration the impact of racism. People within minority groups experience it on multiple occasions within a single day. Every time a minority with a foreign accent opens their mouth they think about racism. Every time a black student sits down in a class he thinks about racism. White students have the luxury of not having to think about it, therefore, when they do something that is racist they may not even realize the impact of their actions. Those minorities that understand the history of oppression and exclusion they are facing and their families have faced in this country are less tolerant of people's ignorance. For them, "we were just trying to have a little fun" is not good enough. When you take what little minorities have, such as symbols of cultural pride or cultural icons, and you use them in order to entertain yourself, you are dehumanizing that group and saying they are not entitled to take pride in who they are. In my opinion something stops being funny and starts being racist when the group represented is in some way a minority or at a disadvantage to the group depicting it. One example would be as in the "Tacos and Tequila" incident in which organizations that are predominantly from the white majority depicted a group that is under-represented on campus. If the tables were turned it would be offensive but would not carry the same weight, in my opinion the power relationship plays a large role in defining racism. However it is unfair to lay the blame on the two organizations involved... I believe they are a part of a larger campus ignorance when it comes to race. I believe it falls on the shoulders of the University to promote a safe and tolerant environment through

integrated and mandatory courses on issues of diversity and tolerance on campus. This is something that is being developed and is being integrated into the requirements for incoming freshmen but in the past similar programs have not received adequate support. This should not be limited to LAS majors as it currently is, because intolerance exists throughout the entire University, perhaps more so in other majors. Also the current General Education requirement of a U.S. minority should be required and not a choice amongst other courses, and again it should be done campus wide.

Limitations

Some of the limitations I felt my research had were based largely on my sample size and the fact that people that participated in the “Tacos and Tequila” event did not interview. It is understandable that approximately a year later these organizations want to put the mistakes of the past behind them, however, their side of the story was not told to the depth the opposing side was. This may have created bias within my paper, particularly within my interviews. I also was limited by my own biases that may not have balanced out as much as I would have liked. I did find many of the details of the “Tacos and Tequila” event to be offensive, and although I tried to put my own perspective aside, my biases may have had an impact on the balance of my research.

Two other limitations were the timeline of the course in which I completed this research project and the fact that it was institution specific. With more time I could have expanded my research and possibly incorporate a survey related to the subject to try and get quantitative results of where people draw the line between innocent depictions of stereotypes and racism. Also theme parties and controversial depictions as a whole are not limited to the University of Illinois. I would have liked to have expanded my research to other Universities that have experienced similar situations and compare and contrast my results to gain a better grasp of what causes the disconnect between the way people interpret these actions.

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