

**Costume Checking at 4Floors  
Report to Council  
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SSMU Equity Commissioners 2013-2014**

**Introduction**

This year, SSMU instituted a pilot project of costume checking at the doors of '4Floors', an annual Halloween event in the SSMU Building, in adherence to the Society's mission and commitment to equity.

Section VI of the SSMU Preamble on Leadership:

*All Students' Society endeavours shall be undertaken with full respect for human dignity and bodily sovereignty and without discrimination on the basis of irrelevant personal characteristics that include but are not limited to race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, gender identification, age, mental or physical disability, language, sexual orientation or social class.*

Section 2.6 of the SSMU Equity Policy:

*The SSMU will actively support projects and policies that aim to end discrimination or to promote accessibility and inclusiveness in the McGill community. In accordance with this, the SSMU and its affiliated Clubs and Services will not affiliate or collaborate with organizations known to promote or engage in the previously mentioned discrimination or harassment.*

This report addresses the development and implementation of this project, and provides recommendations for the next year's Legislative Council, Executives and Equity Commissioners.

**Background**

On October 25th, 2012, several students attended the event wearing racially demeaning costumes, such as blackface and cartoonish depictions of Mexican/Japanese/Native American cultures. An equity complaint was filed, on the premises that more preventative efforts could have been made by SSMU in the planning process and also during the event.

The complaints resolution, and its recommendations were approved by Council on January 24th, 2013:

*The recommendations for SSMU staff are:*

1. *The VP Internal should:*
  - a. *Decide the theme of the event in consultation with the Equity Commissioners.*
  - b. *Ensure that, on all media communications, it is advertised that anyone wearing discriminatory costumes will not be allowed into the building, providing some basic guidelines and examples (listed below).*

- c. *Integrate Equity into the event debriefing report, especially in the case that the Equity Policy is violated.*
2. *The Equity Commissioners should:*
  - a. *Working in conjunction with the VP University Affairs, be in charge of a team of individuals who will be at the door observing costumes and having constructive conversations with those who show up at the event wearing oppressive or discriminatory costumes, based on the guidelines and examples as advertised by the VP Internal.*
  - b. *Act as a resource for the event planning committee, and also for students who might be confused as to what constitutes an oppressive costume.*
3. *All other execs and SSMU staff present at the event should:*
  - a. *Be aware of the costume guidelines, and notify the VP Internal, the VP University Affairs or the Equity Commissioners if they see costumes that are oppressive or discriminatory.*

*We believe that is absolutely essential to approach in good faith, an individual who is wearing an oppressive costume. A constructive conversation is key to ensuring that the outcome is both educational and enforceable. This conversation should take place in a separate area of the SSMU building, and not at the door. We believe that in order to allow such individuals to enjoy the event regardless, SSMU should provide a limited quantity of clothing, such as black t-shirts and pants for example, to allow individuals to change out of their oppressive costumes. Also, any oppressive objects can be stored and returned to the individuals later.*

*The basic guidelines drafted by the Equity Committee regarding what makes a costume oppressive are (note that this is not a finite list, and should be reconsidered/expanded by the new Equity Committee next year):*

- a. *Mocks or condescends historically oppressed peoples and/or cultures.*
  - b. *Includes painting one's face to match the skin colour of a specific person/people.*
  - c. *Incorporates sanctified objects/clothing of others' cultures.*
  - d. *Caricatures oppressive historical and/or current conditions of marginalized groups or persons in a way that may serve to trivialize them.*
  - e. *All of these apply to "characters" from media include TV and/or films.*
- Common examples of oppressive costumes are: native princess, blackface/yellowface, religious attire, geisha, "mexican", terrorist.*

## **Prior to the event**

### **1. Theme**

The Equity Commissioners were consulted after a preliminary theme was decided by the student event planning committee. This year's theme was "Happily Never After | 4Floors: The Most Haunted Place On Earth". It was later revealed that the theme was originally going to be Disney, but because of copyright it was changed to fairytale/fantasy.

## **2. Online advertising**

The Facebook event description included the following blurb:

*This event is hosted, funded and promoted by the Student's Society of McGill University, and follows SSMU's guidelines of safer spaces. Individuals who arrive in offensive or disrespectful attire will not be allowed to enter, and individuals who partake in offensive or disrespectful behaviour during the event will be asked to leave the premises immediately. If you're unsure of your choice of costume, or have any questions, please e-mail the VP Internal at [internal@ssmu.mcgill.ca](mailto:internal@ssmu.mcgill.ca), or refer to the SSMU Equity Policy available online.*

*Here are some guidelines as to what constitutes an offensive/disrespectful costume, and applies to "characters" from media, including TV or films. Does your costume:*

- a. Mock or condescend historically oppressed people and/or cultures?*
- b. Include painting one's face to match the skin colour of a specific person/people?*
- c. Incorporate sanctified objects/clothing of others' cultures?*
- d. Caricature oppressive, historical and/or current conditions of marginalized groups or persons in a way that may serve to trivialize them?*

Students who had questions regarding their costumes were asked to e-mail the VP Internal. E-mails were then directed to the Equity Commissioners.

## **3. Poster campaign**

The VP Internal spearheaded a poster campaign, inspired by the 'We're a culture, not a costume' campaign at Ohio University. These posters depicted individuals dressed in problematic costumes, with slogans such as "Say NO to Racism" and "Say NO to Cultural Appropriation".

Members of the community expressed discomfort in the fact that SSMU in promoting anti-racism, inadvertently perpetuated microaggressions.

## **During the event**

### **1. Organization**

Due to building capacity issues and the availability of volunteer passes, only 12 volunteers in addition to the VP University Affairs and the two Equity Commissioners were allowed to be in the building at any time.

Three teams were assembled and assigned to three locations: main entrance, Gert's entrance and Room 108.

Those at the entrances were responsible for identifying potentially problematic costumes, and escorting individuals to Room 108 where a discussion took place regarding the nature of their costumes.

## **2. Costume evaluation**

A red-yellow-green system was used:

Red: explicitly problematic costumes, such as those involving the painting of one's skin to depict the race of another e.g. blackface.

Yellow: problematic costumes that required an understanding of systemic oppression and marginalization, e.g. Princess Jasmine.

Green: non-problematic costumes, e.g. Shrek.

Individuals wearing red/yellow-light costumes were escorted to Room 108 where a discussion took place regarding the nature of their costume.

Those wearing red-light costumes were asked to remove parts of their costume that were offensive. Those wearing yellow-light costumes were asked to consider how their costumes could be problematic, and see what can be done. They were not necessarily asked to remove/change their costumes.

Problems:

1. Yellow-light costumes were extremely difficult to address, even though a discussion took place. Some individuals identified with the culture that their costumes depicted.
2. Some individuals took the whole process as a joke, and did not take the volunteers seriously.
3. It was difficult to have conversations with individuals who were drunk and aggressive.
4. Not all volunteers were well-trained, and found it difficult to explain why certain costumes were problematic or not.
5. It was difficult to see all the costumes entering at the door, given the large number of people attending the event.

## **Recommendations for next year**

### **1. Continue checking costumes at the door**

The SSMU is committed to creating safer spaces and protecting the marginalized. Although the costume-checking system is far from perfect, it is an attempt to make the event a safer and enjoyable space for everyone. In continuing the project, and learning from what goes well and what doesn't, it is our hope that the project will have a constructive and educational impact on the community.

### **2. Dedicate institutional support**

All SSMU events must be inclusive and equitable. The student planning committee should take part in anti-oppressive/equity training. As event planners, they need the knowledge to plan events that are fully accessible to all students.

Furthermore, the costume checking project needs to be respected as a core element of 4Floors. We need to fully support the work of volunteers; building capacity issues should not limit the number of volunteers, as this can be better accounted for prior to the event. Some volunteers felt that the 12 person limit was frustrating and devalued the work they were doing.

### **3. Institute better support and training for volunteers**

There should be more comprehensive training further in advance for all the volunteers so that there is consistency in how we discuss costumes with people. This is particularly relevant in group discussion situations where consistency is important for keeping the space supportive for volunteers in asserting their opinions and also for ensuring that individual partygoers don't feel targeted. A scenario-based workshop will allow them to deal with more difficult conversations, especially ones regarding the yellow-light costumes. More specific guidelines for volunteers will facilitate the costume-checking process.

### **4. Be mindful of volunteer power dynamics**

Discussions might want to be kept one on one to keep the addressed people feeling safe(r). We should also keep into consideration the problematic aspects of a white person telling a person of colour (POC) that they have internalized racism, especially given that the experience this year was such that most of the people who were "yellow light" ambiguous territory costumes were POC who mentioned that they had a connection to the cultures they were "wearing".

### **3. Choose a theme that has less potential for problematic costumes**

This year's theme could have stayed away from Disney fairy tales, which have a history of cultural stereotyping. For example, a fantasy theme such as Lord of the Rings would have been a more appropriate alternative.

### **4. Continue the focus on education**

If all students were mindful of oppression and marginalization, the costume-checking project would be redundant. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and we need to continue educating students. The discussion element of this year's costume-checking project was an attempt to educate, rather than police. This needs to continue, and could even be expanded into a workshop prior to the event for anyone who wishes to attend.

The idea was brought up at committee to ask people to optionally share their email to follow up on how they feel in the situation / so that we can send them resources about the education that we want to but cannot provide about cultural appropriation in the short span that we have during that night.

### **5. Advertise more**

Although the poster campaign was not particularly successful, this can be improved for next year. Posters need to be made and printed earlier, and clearly displayed in the SSMU Building. Facebook advertising was successful and it was clear to many people that the event was going to be a safer space. For next year, small handouts with guidelines can be given to those purchasing tickets.

## **Other issues**

### **1. Gendered lines for security inspection**

Volunteers noted that the lines to be searched by security were gendered, which is very problematic. When individuals were considered to be in “the wrong line”, security would send them to the other line. This is extremely limiting to an individual’s freedom to gender identification and expression.

### **2. Nudity**

There has been a general policy in place to not allow individuals into the building who are considered “indecent”.

However, in 1996, the Ontario Court of Appeal found that exposing breasts in public was not indecent. The prosecution did not end up appealing this decision to the Supreme Court of Canada because it was widely assumed that they would lose such an appeal. Despite this decision being made at the Provincial level, it is now accepted that toplessness is legal throughout Canada.

SSMU has the right to enforce a dress code, but it needs to apply equally to all. If we were to prohibit toplessness for certain individuals, then we would have to prohibit it for everyone.