

# 'Blackface' controversies: Why do they keep happening?

A framework to assess whether a particular event is racist can provide useful guidance.

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Blackfacing has happened in Singapore again and we are still wondering if it is racist.

The latest incident, surfacing on Tik Tok, involved a recent event where a group of attendees at a corporate dinner and dance event in Singapore were seen wearing Afro wigs and painting their faces black. Undoubtedly, this image has sparked debate about whether such behaviour is unacceptable, or if people are simply being too sensitive.

This incident follows a series of "blackfacing" or "brownfacing" controversies over the years. Just this year, during the Racial Harmony Day celebrations in July, a student wore a pink uniform resembling that of a platform worker, paired with a mask of a man with dark skin.

In 2020, a photograph from 2016 resurfaced, showing a student of South Asian descent surrounded by peers wearing "black beauty" face masks. In 2019, local influencer Preeti and rapper Subhas called out brownfacing in an e-payment advertisement, sparking a wider conversation about the history of blackfacing in Singapore.

Despite these precedents we are

still debating if blackfacing is, indeed, racist. This highlights that people in Singapore continue to find it hard to identify acts of racism and determine what behaviours are unacceptable.

### SEVEN FACTORS THAT CONSTITUTE RACISM

A 2021 CNA-IPS survey on race relations found that overt racist behaviours – such as making public jokes about another race or producing advertisements that invite people to laugh at someone based on their race – are widely seen as unacceptable. However, there is less consensus about more indirect acts of racism, such as mocking the language associated with a particular race or avoiding sitting next to someone of a different race. In these cases, Singaporeans are somewhat divided on whether such actions are racist.

When considering incidents like the dinner and dance event, we at the IPS Programme on Race, Religion, and Intergroup Cohesion, use a framework called H4IPS in our workshops to help participants better grasp how they can evaluate different acts in terms of how racist they are. This framework outlines seven factors to look at – comprising historical context, instinctive response, intentionality, impact on the individual, impact on the community, power dynamics, and stereotypes.

First of all, the historical context of this behaviour must be considered. While Singapore does not share the same history of

blackfacing as the United States, the act still carries significant historical weight globally. It is a common misconception that behaviours rooted in other countries do not apply to us, which may explain the repeated occurrences we see today.

Blackfacing in the US is tied to broader, institutionalised racism. Historically, the practice of painting one's face black and exaggerating stereotypes of black people, for the entertainment of a predominantly white audience, reinforced harmful and inaccurate caricatures. Despite the abolition of slavery, such depictions persist, reminding us of entrenched mindsets that continue to view people of darker skin as objects of entertainment.

Although the geographical context differs, these acts are linked to racism that still affects the present. They offer us an

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opportunity to reflect on the biases embedded within Singapore's own social systems, prompting us to examine how racial prejudices and colourism persist in our society today.

Next, the framework encourages us to trust our instinctive response – our immediate sense that the behaviour is an unfair treatment or prejudice based on someone's race or ethnicity.

We also need to examine the intentionality behind the act, considering whether the behaviour was meant to harm, demean, or discriminate against a particular race. Even actions intended as harmless jokes can be perceived as malicious.

The fourth and fifth factors assess the impact on the recipient and their community, regardless of the original intent. The impact may be physical, psychological, or emotional, and it is crucial to consider the harm caused.

At times, the impact is compounded by other forms of discrimination, such as gender, socioeconomic status, religion, or nationality. The intersection of these identities can exacerbate the harm experienced. While this blackfacing incident may not have directly affected members of the audience, its spread on social media has undoubtedly hurt individuals from racial groups with darker skin tones.

The next factor addresses whether the act perpetuates outdated stereotypes that marginalise certain groups. This is particularly harmful when the stereotype has negative

undertones – such as depicting a particular race as lazy, stingy, or overly materialistic. Incidents that rely on, or reinforce, these negative stereotypes can exploit both unconscious and conscious biases.

The severity of the event is also influenced by the power dynamics involved. Power dynamics refers to the social, economic and political relationships between the parties involved, highlighting positions of authority or influence. If a person in a position of power engages in blackfacing, the consequences are far greater than if a group of people at a dinner and dance do so.

As societal norms shift, and the boundaries between what is sensitive and insensitive become less clear, the H4IPS framework provides a useful guide for navigating these issues.

Ultimately, such evaluations not only help us understand our individual actions, but also show how far we have come as a society in recognising sensitivities. They highlight areas that require ongoing reflection and suggest ways we, as individuals, can help prevent incidents that hurt others from happening in the future.

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