

## **Laughing At Each Other, Together**

### **Literature Review**

The issue of racism is so universally known today, yet it persists to remain in modern society. Today, whether a person is intrinsically racist or not, almost everybody strives their best to not appear racist; and due to the tricky racist discourse used, it is almost impossible to identify anyone as being racist. Augoustinos & Every (2007), argues that in the modern world today, race discourse-strategies often practiced, work to place the speaker`s argument as positive, rational and justified, even if the argument ultimately leads to the marginalization of minority groups. In addition to `positive self and negative other`-presentation, Augoustinos & Every explains that modern race discourse methods include the denial of prejudice, basing arguments on external reasons rather than one`s own psychology, removal of explicit racial signs in discourse, and usage of egalitarian ideals for non-egalitarian purposes (p.125).

The concept of `positive self and negative other`-presentation is supported by van Dijk (2002). van Dijk, equivalently argues that although there are many subtle forms and styles of racist discourse, the principle structure of general racist discourse is the `structure of positive self-representation and negative other-presentation`. van Dijk

(2002) points out that racism is essentially learned via discourse. Discourse, in its broad sense, which includes features like non-verbal expressions, speech acts etc. (see van Dijk 2002, p.147) functions as a tool to convey ideologies, share thoughts as well as express opinions. Racist discourse meanwhile focuses upon the conveyance of ethnic prejudice and ideologies. van Dijk explains that racist discourse is frequently observed in elite texts, which mainly consists of government- and mainstream media-sourced material. Racist discourse in elite texts are structured in the style where the dominant group's achievements are emphasized while the minority racial-group's achievements are deemphasized. The reverse strategy, which is the de-emphasis of the dominant group's weaknesses and the emphasis of the minority group's weaknesses and faults, are also frequently utilized in elite texts (p.154). This is to say that racist discourse seen in elite texts occur due to the 'control and organization of information' by authorities (Murata 2007).

In response to the issue racism and racist discourse, Hijri (2009) argues that race-based comedy offers a platform to tackle the issue of racism; and the individuals who stand at the front as representatives of race-based comedy are none other than stand up-comedians. Notable figures of race-based stand up-comedy are people such as Louis CK, Richard Pryor, Chris Rock and Dave Chapelle. Race-based comedy is any type of

comedy where its content or material is centered upon topics related to an individual's or a community's racial, ethnic or cultural background. Although comedy's principle goal is to induce laughter to those who observe it, this does not imply that the comedy itself has no power to produce a social impact. Hijri (2009) argues that stand-up-comedians, who mainly bases his material upon racial and ethnic differences, bring common racial assumptions out in the open for social redefinition and reconstruction; and hence challenging the common social stereotype ideologies.

Weaver (2010) however, argues partially against Hijri. Weaver points out that although stand-up comedians have the potential to challenge stereotypes via the performances, it is not an effective platform to tackle the issue of racism as stand-up-comedy `performances have a paradoxical seriousness that runs throughout them,` (p.44) which is the polysemic nature of race-based jokes. Race-based joke's polysemicity or polysemic nature is the possibility of a joke to be interpreted in multiple ways, positively as well as negatively. A joke which its content focuses on a particular ethnic group may be interpreted differently according to the type of audience and method of delivery of the joke. A joke which was delivered by a comedian in the hopes of subverting a racial stereotype may unfortunately be interpreted by the audience in a different fashion. Instead of the subversion of a racial stereotype, there is the possibility

that the comedian may have just strengthened the stereotype. Weaver argues that effects of discourse of stand-up-comedy acts are too unpredictable, and most of the time, race-based comedy is double-edged in its outcome.

Weaver's (2010) argument, however, is based on findings from black, African-American and Afro-Caribbean comedians only. Russell Peters, however, is a Canadian stand-up-comedian of Indian origins. Peters who does ethnic-based humor has grown to become an international phenomenon in the past 8 years. Beginning from year 2004, Peters has managed to receive a lot of positive attention from a large number of audiences. The unique thing about Peters is that, he not only has a high level of popularity among people that share the same racial background as him, but is extremely popular among people of different racial and cultural background across the globe. The main reason for Peters' tremendous success as a race-based stand-up-comedian is because he is able to deliver his jokes far and across a multicultural and multiethnic audience. From this discourse analysis of one of Russell Peters' stand-up-act, I illustrate the methods and strategies used by Peters, which allows him to tap into an ethnically diverse audience; and how his style of performance has its own unique way of tackling issues of racism.

## Methodology Section

To analyze the discourse strategies of the standup comedian Russell Peters, I structured my method of data analysis based on the 'general inductive approach' as illustrated by Thomas (2006). The general inductive approach is a simple structured-style of evaluating qualitative data, which is basically constructed by three steps – trimming and focusing of data, theme coding and conclusion drawing (p.239) – which are executed in sequence. In the case of the discourse analysis of Peters' stand-up show, I first observed the data collected, adjusted the focus upon a smaller scope of data, categorized the data into salient features, and finally derived conclusions from the observed data. Different from the deductive approach of analysis, I am interpreting the raw collected data, without the aim to test out any prior assumptions or hypotheses.

Firstly, I watched through three of Peters' officially released live standup shows – *Outsourced* (2006); *Red, White & Brown* (2008) and *The Green Card Tour: Live from the O2 Arena* (2011) – as well as the 46 minute long-Youtube video of one of Peters' live performances that he did on the Canadian Television comedy series *Comedy Now!* in 2004. After going through all the four videos, I selected his act that he did on the comedy series *Comedy Now!* based on the reason that the video was the one that went viral on Youtube and functioned as the turning point of Peters' career. I was

interested in getting to know the reason that particular stand up-routine was so positively received by a very large number of people across the globe.

Next, I closely watched and listened to the whole video multiple times. For each observation, I focused on the discourse strategies presented by Peters – such as lexicon usage, rhetoric usage, topic choice and arrangement, non-verbal signals etc. (Fukuda 2006; Murata 2007; van Dijk 2002) – and took notes for further categorization afterwards. I then overviewed the collected data to identify frequent and salient themes. As a result, I observed that there were notable themes related with race- or ethnicity-related lexicons; as well as race-based topic choice and its arrangement. I also identified a frequent strategy used by Peters in presenting his jokes, which is racial-profiling. I coded the salient themes into three small groups, which eased the process of interpreting probable discourse meanings and their influence towards the audiences (Thomas 2006).

To analyze the race-related lexical choice, I observed the stand-up act once again carefully, but this time noting down the all the words that `indexed` (Dong 2009) directly towards a particular racial or ethnic group. Words and phrases such as `Indian people` or `White Canadian men` which clearly points out to an individual`s or group`s racial or ethnic background are noted down. The lexicons written down are then

grouped according to the four main and large ethnic groups that Peters addresses in his performance, which are White, Black, Brown and Asian people. There were also words and phrases that pointed to more than one particular ethnic and racial identity. I grouped these lexicons in one group named 'Multicultural'. One example is the word 'Hollapinos' which was created and mentioned by Peters during his act to index an individual of which has Dutch and Filipino cultural origins. I then summed up the frequency count of words and phrases in each main group and tabled the findings. Finally, to analyze the findings, I compared and contrasted the frequency count of lexicons between groups.

Next, I attentively watched Peters' performance video once again, but this time, taking care to jot down the topics being addressed by Peters and the racial group(s) at focus. The topics and racial group(s) in focus were noted down on a minute scale-timeline. I then proceeded to analyze the data by paying attention to how the racial group(s)-focus was changing as the performance moved forward in time. In other words, I focused upon the overall structure and flow of the act performed by Peters in terms of the racial group(s) at focus.

To analyze the presentation method of racial-profiling often adopted by Peters throughout his act, I first identified and watched the instances when Peters were carried

out the racial-profiling method to express his jokes. For each part, I paid attention and recorded all the strategies used by Peters to profile a certain ethnic group – such as his non-verbal gestures, usage of accents etc. I too observed the audience's response towards Peters' racial-profiling jokes and jot down his response when the audience reacted positively, as well as negatively. I then, compared the two cases and identified the difference in Peters' methods of dealing with the audience's respective responses.

## **Findings**

### Diffusion by Diversity

Deriving from the vocabulary used by Peters in his act to describe and a person's racial or ethnic background, Peters throughout his act addresses four main groups, which are Asian, Brown, Black and White people. Although in a section of his act Peters points out that Brown people actually fall under the Asian categorization, in the rest of his show, Peters suggests to the audience over and over again that people from the Brown category mainly as people of Indian ethnicity. Among these 4 main groups, lexicons which indexes (Dong 2009) towards the White community were most frequent. The second most frequent race-indexing lexicon group is the Black group,

which came at a frequency of 48 times. The Brown-lexicon group lost to the Black group by only 1 frequency count, which is at a total frequency count of 47. The Asian group followed after; and finally the Multicultural group which only turned up to be addressed by Peters 14 times only.

Group	Lexicon count	%
ASIAN	29	15.03
BROWN	47	24.35
BLACK	48	24.87
WHITE	55	28.5
MULTICULTURE	14	7.25
Total	193	100

**Table 1 Lexicon Count According to Main Groups**

To my surprise, the frequency of words used to address the white and black community topped the words used to address Peters' own racial group. The trend within race-based comedy is that stand-up comedians utilize their own race or culture as material for a majority their jokes (Weaver 2010). For example, Black comedians such

as Richard Pryor and Chris Rock structure their whole stand-up act based on issues centered upon their own ethnic group. In Rock's stand-up shows, Rock takes advantage of his social identity as an African American individual to create jokes that is centered upon issues familiar to Black communities. Race based-jokes told by Rock would not be received well and may even be deemed blatantly racist if it were to be told by comedians of different ethnicity (Park; Gabbadon & Chernin 2006).

In the case of Peters, however, the Indian community was not addressed most frequently, which makes Peters act unique within the platform of race-based comedy. Peters instead, addresses a broad range of ethnic groups in his act. Looking closely at the words used to point to the White group, I discover that Peters addresses a diverse group of people such as the White people in England, Italy and Canada etc. The same observation can also be said for the Black group. In addition to addressing the aforementioned 4 main groups, a diverse group of people from different racial and ethnic communities are also found to be addressed by Peters in his act. In other words, Peters practically 'attacks' anyone from any ethnic background in his jokes. As a result of his making jokes about a diverse group of people, Peters diffuses the sense of racism in his jokes. Peters' attacking of anybody and everybody in his act suggests to his audience that nobody is safe from being stereotyped and being made fun of, which

consequently validates his race-based jokes, even if it is not about his own ethnic group. Different from the case of Pryor and Rock, through this method of diffusing the sense of racism in his jokes – by addressing a diverse group of people – Peters puts himself in a unique position that enabled him to make fun of any racial group. This unique position is lightly established at the start of his show when Peters introduces his act by saying `It is nice to see all different kinds of people...`. Although brief and simple, the phrase which points out to the idea of plurality holds a strong `symbolic value` (Backhaus 2007) which aids to create an atmosphere that welcomes the ideology of multiculturalism, and hence helps to place Peters in the unique position to be able to address any culture or race in his act. This position gradually strengthens as Peters continuously proceeds to tell jokes about all different kinds of people.

### Racial Profile-Toning

A part of Peters` jokes that he delivers during his performance on stage is the profiling of racial groups. Peters often expresses the salient characteristics of a particular racial group in his jokes simply by stating the characteristics or by the usage of non-verbal gestures and accents. Judging from the audience`s response, a favorite racial profiling made by Peters is of his own ethnic community, which is the Indian

community. In his act, Peters expertly changes his speech accent to mimic a typical Indian guy, who has a thick Indian accent when speaking English. In addition to that, to emphasize that he is now playing the part of a typical Indian guy, Peters occasionally shakes his head to the sides, mimicking a general stereotype of an Indian person. Peters' audience almost always gives a hugely positive response to the racial-profiling Peters does towards his own personal racial group. The same positive response was also observed when Peters did a racial profiling of Chinese, Jamaican and White Canadian people.

There are, however, instances where racial profiling-jokes told by Peters were not received positively by the majority of the audiences. In instances where jokes were not received well, I observed that a large section of the audience either remained quiet or reluctantly let go of nervous laughter. In response to the audience's negative reaction, Peters immediately attempts to tone down the joke told. Peters tones down his joke by rationalizing and naturalizing the context of the joke. For example, in the 14th minute of his stand up-act, Peters commented about the black people among the audience;

'Good to see Black people in the audience too. That's nice...because it's bright. I' just kidding, I'm just kidding. (*Laughter*) What suddenly you all

sensitive black people now? What`s up with that?`

`...I grew up around Black people. You don`t scare me.`

Immediately after mentioning the joke about being able to see Black people among the audience, Peters clearly stated twice that he was `just kidding` around and then gave out a short nervous laughter. Noticing that his joke was not received well by the audience in comparison to his previous jokes, Peters proceeded to naturalize his joke by directly challenging the audience, with focus upon the Black audience, about their response towards the joke. By saying `What suddenly you all sensitive black people now, what`s up with that?`, Peters argues against the audience that their decision of not laughing at the joke, and hence implying that the joke is socially inappropriate and racist in nature, is actually biased. Peters points out that as the audience were already laughing at jokes related with other racial and ethnic groups, it is biased and not justified that they do not laugh at jokes related with a particular ethnic group, which in this case is the Black community.

Peters further naturalizes and rationalizes his joke by stating that he had grown up within a Black community, and that he is `not scared` of Black people. By identifying himself as someone who has lived and grew up with Black people, Peters

carefully tries to convince his audience that he is in the privileged position to tell such jokes. As an individual who has had personal interaction and experience with Black people, Peters convinces his audience to validate the joke, that before would otherwise be labeled as a racist remark.

Peters' effort to rationalize his otherwise sensitive joke did not go fruitless as the majority of the audience burst to laughter when he mimicked a Black audience member who responded sensitively to the joke aforementioned. The change of the audience's response from being negative to positive, shows that Peters succeeded in toning down his sensitive joke, and also in convincing his audience to change their perception about the joke.

In the case where the joke is positively received by the audience, even if the content of the joke is based on a negative stereotype of a particular racial group, Peters allows the joke to move forward as it is validated by the audience's overall positive response. As an example, during his act, after explaining his admiration of Jamaican people when he was young, Peters orally lists down the things that are representative of a typical Jamaican individual;

'When I was a kid, I wanted to be Jamaican so bad, I started dressing like

a Jamaican, I started wearing a little yellow, red, green belt, I started talking like a Jamaican. I started listening to reggae music. I started having kids I did not know about. I did everything I possibly could...

The punch line of the joke is the last characteristic said by Peters, which is 'having kids I did not know about'. In contrast to the first few characteristics listed by Peters, the last characteristic suggested by Peters as a joke has a negative connotation to it. From this joke, Peters is actually suggesting to the audience of the stereotype of Jamaicans being irresponsible when it comes to taking care of their own children. Although content wise, the joke is demeaning in nature, this joke is positively taken by the audience with a heap of laughter. As Peters did do anything to withdraw or deny his statement about Jamaican people, and proceeded unto the next joke, Peters had actually contributed to the strengthening of that stereotype about Jamaican people. In other words, whatever the content of the joke may be, Peters decides to, or sees the need to tone his racial-profiling jokes only if the audience responded negatively to the joke. If the audience responded positively to the joke made, Peters would proceed with the following act even if he did contribute to the negative profiling of a particular ethnic group.

### Negative me, Natural you

One apparent feature of Peters stand up-act's structure is that Peters juxtaposes topics about the Indian community with jokes about other racial groups. Throughout the show, I observed that at least one joke related to the Indian community will precede or succeed jokes which are focused upon non-Indian racial groups. For example, before performing a scenario to describe how a Chinese person will always try his best to maximize his profit when dealing business, Peters introduces the concept of how Indian people are simply 'the cheapest people in the world'. Peters nicely tied the two concepts, which is that 'Indian people cannot live without a bargain, and Chinese people can never give you a bargain', by acting out a scenario about an Indian man trying to negotiate the price of a bag sold by a Chinese businessman.

Another example to illustrate the changing of racial group focus-method adopted by Peters is the topic about accents which was brought up from the 27th minute of the act. Peters first introduced the topic about accents by speaking about how Indian people are aware of how they sound like, and how Indian men, like Peters himself, are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the Indian accent. After finishing the joke

centered on the Indian accent, Peters follows up with another joke, which is still related with accents, but centered upon a totally different racial group – White Canadians. Peters explains from his personal point of view about how he notices that White Canadians are not aware of the accent that they actually have; and then continues to `reveal` that White Canadians sound a bit like `donkeys` when they begin to use swear or curse words.

It is also valuable to note that most of the race-based jokes made by Peters are of self-deprecating in nature, which is common among comedians. Self-deprecating humor is a derived application of the rhetorical concept `pathos` (Cook 2009), which is practiced to help the audience identify with the comedian`s position. Throughout the stand-up-act, Peters, like many stand up-comedians, countlessly pokes fun at the the community that he is ethnically affiliated to, the Indian community, by pointing out the funny perspectives of the Indian community especially in the context of a multicultural country such as Canada.

The only point that separates Peters from a common stand up-comedian is that Peters too makes depreciating jokes about other cultures and races. The interesting thing here is that his jokes, whether it be about his own culturally linked-community or about other racial groups, are most of the time positively responded by the audience. This is

due to the fact that Peters juxtaposes jokes about the Indian culture with jokes about other cultures. By initially making self-depreciating jokes about the Indian community, Peters indirectly manages to convince the audience to accommodate tolerance towards his depreciating jokes about other cultures. By this method, Peters delivers a very strong rhetorical message to his audience that `if I can learn to laugh at my own race, why cannot we all learn to laugh at our own racial groups? `.

This method utilized by Peters in his act is a direct opposite of the common structure observed in many racist discourses. As Augoustinos & Every (2007) and van Dijk (2002) argue, racist discourse is usually structured in the way to create a positive image of self, to validate the discrimination of other. In contrast, Peters, in his act, creates a negative image of self, to promote the naturalization of other. It is to say that Peters continuously depreciates his own community`s image, to reach out to his audience and convince them to take a more open stance when looking back at their own racial communities. Although Peters makes the Indian community`s customs, practices and image vulnerable for criticism by the general public via his act, by sharing with the crowd that there is something humorous about his own cultural group promotes cross-cultural understanding, and hence the naturalization of stereotypes within the multicultural and multiracial society.

## **Implication**

Hijri (2009) points out that there is a deep craving among members across many racial and ethnic groups to have their own cultural communities exposed in its 'totality' (p.582), and to be able to laugh at their own selves. Stand up-comedian such as Russell Peters functions as an adept mediator to fulfill this craving. By addressing practically anyone and everyone from a diverse array of racial and cultural background in one single act, Peters creates an environment that accommodates much room for cross-cultural tolerance and interracial understanding. In exchange for positioning the his own community in a very vulnerable spot for criticism, Peters invites members of the audience to take upon a more open mindset when facing differences and similarities across racial groups. As a result, Peters promotes the naturalization of common stereotypes among the audience members. Peters encourages his audience to perceive common social stereotypes as something which is natural or ordinary within a society, and not something which is socially constructed. Even in Peters' performance, his jokes still hold their intrinsic polysemic nature, as pointed by Weaver (2010); and would still be interpreted differently by each individual audience member. The social stereotypes put forward in the act are not challenged by Peters, and the strengthening of negative

social stereotypes, as a possibility, could still occur; but rather, as Hijri (2009) pointed out: comedians such as Russell Peters are the people who are able to build platforms to allow stereotypes to be socially reconstructed. In this case, stereotypes mentioned throughout Peters act are not socially reconstructed to lose their positive or negative connotations. Instead, stereotypes are redefined within the society to be something that is of normality and natural. If stereotypes are perceived by audience members to be something normal and inherent to smaller racial groups within a society, it would be easier for audience members to adopt and digest the idea of diversity within a society. Ultimately, from his act, Peters stimulates the concept of plurality via the naturalization of social stereotypes among a racially diverse audience.

**Notes:**

Minutes	Topic	Racial group at focus
0	Introduction	Indian
1	Indian homosexuals	Indian
2	Indian men should not be gay	Indian
3	Arranged marriage issue among Indian families	Indian
4	Arranged marriage issue among Indian families	Indian
5	African language	African
6	African language	African
7	Indian slaves in South Africa	Indian, African
8	Indian slaves in South Africa	Indian, African
9	Indian athletes, Indians` and Jews` cheapness-comparison	Indian, Jews

10	Cheapness of Indian people	Indian
11	Business between Chinese and Indian people	Indian, Chinese
12	Business between Chinese and Indian people	Indian, Chinese
13	Business between Chinese and Indian people	Indian, Chinese
14	Growing up among black people	Black
15	Jamaican people are cool	Jamaican
16	Jamaican will not act like an Indian	Jamaican, Indian
17	Jamaican-Indian `punani` joke	Jamaican, Indian
18	African names: !XOBile	African
19	African names: !XOBile	African
20	Italian`s use of hand gestures	Italian
21	Indians in Italy	Italian, Indian
22	Indian and Italian hand motion-comparison	Italian, Indian
23	Chinese names	Chinese
24	Chinese names	Chinese
25	Chinese in Hong Kong speak good English	Chinese
26	Local Chinese comedian	Chinese
27	Funny Indian accent	Indian
28	Good use of Indian accent	Indian
29	Canadian White accent	White
30	Canadian White accent	White
31	Swearing White people joke	White
32	Everybody is going to be `Beige`	Multiculture
33	Everybody is going to be `Beige`	Multiculture
34	Indian-Chinese wedding	Indian, Chinese
35	Indian dad becoming a Redneck	Indian
36	Immigrant parents beat their kids	Multiculture
37	Indian parents, Chinese parents	Indian, Chinese
38	Indian parents, Jamaican parents	Indian, Jamaican
39	Ryan, the angry White kid	White
40	Taking white kid`s advice, Indian parent	White, Indian
41	Taking white kid`s advice, Indian parent	White, Indian
42	Taking white kid`s advice, Indian parent	White, Indian

**Table 2 Topics and Racial group(s) at focus-timeline**

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