

# Igniting a 'Pink Dot': Legal Pragmatism and Cultural Resonance in Singapore's First LGBT Movement

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## ABSTRACT

In contrast to Western democracies, rights mobilisation under authoritarian regimes manifests in profoundly different ways. Using the emergence of 'Pink Dot,' a Singaporean social movement that advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals' "freedom to love," this article investigates how activists deploy strategic resistance to advance their cause in a country that criminalises homosexuality and suppresses dissent. Drawing from qualitative interviews with activists who promoted 'Pink Dot 2009' via social media, I contend that both legal pragmatism (careful selection of resistant strategies that do not overtly challenge the ruling party's regime) and cultural resonance (weaving activist messages with existing socially accepted national narratives) were integral to the success of the event and the longevity of the movement in Singapore.

**Keywords:** *homosexuality, LGBT, social movement, authoritarian, Singapore*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On 16 May 2009, 2,500 Singaporeans congregated in Hong Lim Park, Singapore's designated Speakers' Corner, to demonstrate their

support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals' "freedom to love." Those who attended the event donned pink, partook in a picnic, enjoyed performances put up by a variety of cultural groups, and ultimately assembled to form the inaugural human 'Pink Dot.' As a first of its kind, both domestic and international gay rights activists deemed the movement and event a historical milestone for the advancement of LGBT rights in authoritarian Singapore, where colonial laws criminalising same-sex conduct remain intact (Ramdas 2013; Offord 2014).

Those familiar with Singapore's political regime would contend that the accomplishment of Pink Dot is no easy feat. First of all, orchestrating a public movement around social causes has historically been challenging for Singaporean activists, inasmuch as it is illegal to organise public demonstrations in the country without a valid license approved by government officials.<sup>1</sup> In addition, given the state's conservative stance on homosexuality and its domineering control over mainstream media, promotion of the event had to be done almost exclusively online. As such, Pink Dot organisers had to find strategic ways to frame, advertise and execute the nascent movement, all while navigating around a circumscribed legal and social configuration.

Through a discourse analysis of qualitative interviews with four Singaporean youths who volunteered their time to promote the inaugural Pink Dot, this paper will explore the workings of social media framing and its functions in mobilising a gay rights movement in a city-state where "civic-political rights and democratic processes are limited" (Chua, 2014, p. 4). By emphasising strategic ways of resistance, I argue that rights mobilisation in regimes that suppress dissent demands higher levels of legal pragmatism (careful selection of resistant strategies that do not overtly challenge the ruling party's regime) and cultural resonance (weaving activist messages with existing socially accepted national narratives).

## 2. RESISTANCE IN AN AUTHORITARIAN STATE

The dialectics of resistance under authoritarian regimes rest on the fact that conditions which limit civic-political liberties often serve as the very impetus for rights mobilisation (Schneider, 1991). In fact, based on

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1. Hong Lim Park is the only open space in Singapore where licensing requirements for public assemblies are exempted. This was only introduced by the government in 2008, a year before the inaugural Pink Dot gathering. Even with the exemption, the state continues to carefully monitor the use of this space.

historical events such as the overthrowing of Indonesian dictator Suharto in 1998, we witness how regimes that rely on “little else but repression” to sustain themselves “often end up radicalizing ... and creating revolutionary oppositions” (Aspinall, 2005, p. 2). Similar configurations have led to other momentous movements and events in Asia, such as the Tiananmen Square protests (as part of the 89’ Democracy Movement), as well as the Saffron Revolution (a Burmese movement that arose from increasing anti-dictatorship sentiments).

In contrast to the aforementioned authoritarian regimes, rights mobilisation manifests in profoundly different ways in Singapore. Despite being perennially lambasted for its archaic anti-homosexuality regulations, limited freedom of speech, and the state’s predilection for using law to restrict citizens’ rights and quell political dissent, revolutionary sentiments in Singapore remain low (Leong, 2000). As such, democratic participation, alongside vibrant and activist-oriented public discourses commonly found in neighbouring countries, remains largely absent in the city-state (Leong, 2012). This unique phenomenon could be ascribed to the ruling party’s masterful engineering of legal structures that give rise to a culture of fear in the present-day social order.

Since Singapore’s independence in 1965, the state government has deployed a web of institutionalised tools to prevent public articulations of dissent in order to preserve ‘social harmony’ in the country (Ooi, 2008; Chua, 2014). Today, laws such as the Public Entertainment and Meetings Act and the Public Order Act render any unapproved public gatherings or demonstrations illegal (Rodan, 2003). The punishments to those who offend these laws are harsh, and they serve as deterrence for those who seek to instigate open protests. Furthermore, strategies commonly deployed by western gay rights activists, such as engagements in “legislative, judicial and electoral campaigns,” as well as pressuring “businesses, churches, professional associations and other organisations to adopt non-discriminatory policies,” simply would not work for activists lobbying for rights under authoritarian conditions (Staggenborg, 2012, p. 122).

When political norms hamper open demonstrations, activist groups have to rely on a different set of tactics. This typically necessitates the strategic management of every move and decision so that emerging movements can both advance and survive in the long run (Chua, 2014). Part of the art involves ‘toeing the line,’ where activists “nimble adjust,

escalate or scale back” their tactics all while ensuring that none of their manoeuvres flagrantly break the law, nor risk the chance of being perceived as blatant challenges to the existing regime (Chua, 2014, p. 4). Transgressing the two conditions above would almost incontrovertibly lead to coercive measures taken by the government and the eventual demise of a movement.

The legal constraints of gay rights mobilisation in Singapore are compounded by the prevailing cultural norms of the country. For the longest time, Singaporeans are known to be passive conformists to social policies and legislations enacted by the ruling state (FitzPatrick, 2015). Two quotidian colloquial expressions, *kiasi* (afraid to die) and *kiasu* (afraid to lose), encapsulate the general population’s attitudes towards overt resistance (Ho, 2012). *Kiasi-ness* emblematises a fear of ‘death,’ either in the sense that participation in oppositional movements could lead to physical imprisonment, or social ‘death,’ where one risks losing their job or social standing after being marked as a public rebel. *Kiasu*, which directly translates to being ‘afraid to lose,’ exemplifies the ‘free rider’ or ‘collective action’ problem that is rife in social movements. For many Singaporeans, participating in social activism entails a seemingly irrational investment of time, energy, or money. Because the goal of collective action is to achieve “a collective good,” which means that even those who do not contribute can enjoy equal benefits (Staggenborg, 2012, p. 34), members who actively provide resources to assist with the coalescence of social movements are judged to have made a poor economic decision, which leads to a perception of ‘losing’ (Bartlett, 1995). Such ways of thinking undergird Singaporeans’ apathy towards rights mobilisation and illustrate the difficult conditions in which activists in the country have to traverse.

That said, the proliferation of social media in the past decade has fuelled the evolution of social activism in authoritarian Singapore (Skoric, Ying, & Ng, 2009). Not only do social media platforms offer activists a virtual space that is significantly less regulated than the material world, they serve as an impetus for the transformation of cultural norms surrounding the expression of political dissent in the country. From the perspective of resource mobilisation theory, taking advantage of the Internet is a rational move for activists as it affords an avenue for grievances to be expressed and resources to be gathered (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter give

activists a communication infrastructure to recruit members across large distances, “achieve intergroup-collaboration,” seek donations, and most importantly, spread their cause (Lim, 2012; Breuer, Landman, & Farquhar, 2015, p. 769). As such, within the existing legal framework, the emergence of social media has enabled activists to skirt institutionalised barriers and better their chances at attaining their goals. At the very same time, given the Internet’s inherent ability to democratise, more and more Singaporeans are turning to social media to express their discontentment (Skoric et al., 2009). Furthermore, with increasing anonymity and more convenient ways to participate, the virtual space has also somehow dissipated notions of *kiasi* and *kiasu-ness*. Given these changing terms, activists in Singapore are confronted with the need to strategically harness newly available resources to instigate social movements that not only meet legal requirements, but are culturally resonant with Singaporeans as well.

### 3. METHODS

This study consists of four semi-structured interviews conducted in October 2015 with volunteers who helped plan, promote and execute the inaugural Pink Dot event in 2009. Through conducting interviews, my hope was to gain insight into how legal and cultural configurations impacted the team’s decision-making processes vis-à-vis promoting the movement via social media. To mitigate the effects of retrospective bias (given that the interviews were conducted six years after their involvement), I developed an interview protocol that guided respondents to reflect on specific events that marked their involvement. Much time was allocated to questions on how social media framing was conceptualised, designed, and accomplished. My first interviewee is a personal contact of mine. After the interview, she put me in touch with three others she thought might be interested in participating. Owing to the fact that all four interviewees resided in Singapore during the course of the study, I had to conduct the interviews transnationally via video calling.

The interviews, averaging 45 minutes each, were recorded and later transcribed. Each transcript was then systematically reviewed, coded, and similar ideas were sorted based on emerging themes. Following that, I engaged in a round of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013), where I scrutinised language choice, examined the ways in which my interviewees framed their narratives, and unearthed the embedded

meanings behind their reflections. The names of all participants are presented as pseudonyms in this paper.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 Social Media and Adapting to Constraints

When asked about their role as movement promoters, every interviewee recalled being briefed about the significance of social media during their first team meeting. Sarah, who was a 22-year-old college senior in 2009, remembered vividly the assertion of a leader who expressed that “the success of Pink Dot was fully contingent on how well the movement and event were going to be promoted online.” To Sarah, this belief resonated with her own convictions:

We didn't have anything. The budget was tight, and you know that the government isn't ever going to let you post anything related to Pink Dot in the public, since it was perceived as 'sensitive.' So no TV, magazines, *Straits Times* (Singapore's highest-selling newspaper), all those are out. Going on social media was our only option. And I know from the start that that is what we are going to be focusing our energies on. Also, really, that's the only thing that we could afford.

Sarah's reflection expounds the totalising control the Singaporean government has on traditional mainstream media. As such, anything deemed “sensitive,” which could be interpreted as ideas, beliefs or practices that run contrary to mainstream ideology, is to be kept away from public discourses. This circumscribed the team's promotional efforts solely to online means, and incidentally limited the demographics that the activists had access to. However, the promoters employed strategic resistance to alleviate the cost of institutional constraints by harnessing cultural resonance through utilising the image of the family:

We knew that most of the people who were on social media were from the younger generation. We needed to think of a way to take advantage of this and not let this hinder our movement ... What we ended up doing was, we decided to go with [the] family. We used a lot of familial images in our online promotional materials, including posters and YouTube videos. We wanted to persuade youths and young people to bring their parents and even grandparents to the event. So you know, it's not just a pro-gay movement for young people who support [homosexuality], it's a family-centred event that promotes love for all. It's supposed to be something that everyone can enjoy.

(*Benjamin, 27*)

Benjamin's reflection underscores how strategic resistance in midst of adversity can often lead to creative responses. By working around

barriers and elevating the value of family in the promotion of Pink Dot, the movement automatically becomes incorporated into Singapore's historically family-oriented nation building narrative. This framing technique achieves a dualistic effect. First, it mobilises young Singaporeans to encourage their family members to attend the event with them, which could result in a diffusion of more tolerant attitudes towards LGBTs amongst the older generation. Second, it sends off a culturally resonant message that every LGBT person is part of an existing family, and that accepting sexual diversity would only help create more cohesive families. By doing so, Pink Dot strategically positions itself as pro-family instead of simply pro-gay. Pinning the movement to existing values that have already been espoused by the general population not only legitimises the vision of Pink Dot, it concomitantly advances the movement by preventing it from being perceived as radical or socially divisive.

#### 4.2 Freedom vs. Right

Keeping in line with strategic resistance, promoters of Pink Dot had to avoid coming off as confrontational towards the existing regime in order to prevent coercive retaliation from the state. Although it is implicit that the inception of the movement is a direct response to Section 377A, a Penal Code that criminalises sexual conduct between men in the country, Pink Dot's rhetoric had to distance itself from human rights discourses. Michael, an immigration lawyer who volunteered with Pink Dot, sheds light on this:

You see, our slogan is 'supporting the *freedom* to love' and not 'supporting the *right* to love.' This is important because it affected how we did our videos and how we worded our [Facebook] updates ... In our celebrity campaign videos, there were only personal anecdotes, stories about their LGBT friends and stuff. No anger, no politics (emphasis his).



Image source: <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2015/05/pink-dot-concert-2015-set-to-brighten-hong-lim-park>

By differentiating “freedom” from “right,” Michael discursively alludes to a deliberate decision to refrain from using ‘human rights’ as a master framework for the movement. For one, deploying the word ‘right’ insinuates that the government has deprived a certain population of a *de jure* entitlement. This might be construed as a direct challenge against the current legal structure, which could in turn cause the movement to be perceived as overly confrontational. This notion is similarly implicated in Michael’s assertion that the campaign videos contained “no politics.” Such an expression appears to be ironic, since all social movements are inherently political. When asked to clarify, Michael mentioned that “no politics” could be reconciled with the absence of overt, “militaristic expression of political viewpoint” towards the issue.

Furthermore, even though the term ‘gay rights’ was frequently used internally by the organisers, they were afraid that the expression would result in allegations that the movement was rooted in Western ideologies, causing the movement to lose its cultural resonance:

Yeah in Singapore, as you know, a lot of people think that homosexuality and gay rights are things we got from the States, or from the West. A lot of people here somehow believe that being gay is selfish, and that it only serves your own, and that it will one day destroy our country. (Sarah, 28)

Sarah’s comment evinces a common belief that many conservative Singaporeans hold—homosexuality is a Western-imported, individualistic way of living that erodes communitarian values in the Asian city-state. As such, to avoid evoking such a perception, the social media team decided that it was more pragmatic to go with ‘freedom’ than ‘right.’ To them, the former is more nuanced, neutral, and culturally appropriate.

### 4.3 The Politics of ‘Pink’

The colour pink was integral to the success of the movement. Not only did it give Pink Dot a strong, iconographic online presence, it was also strategically selected to provide both legal legitimacy and cultural resonance. The social media campaign videos produced by the team were important in delivering this message:

You see, when people first look at Pink Dot, they are going to be like ‘wow of course it’s pink, it’s the gay colour.’ We picked pink not because of that. Rather, pink is the colour of our ICs (identification cards), which denotes us, Singaporeans. Also, what colours make pink? Red and white! It’s the colour of our flag ... But like, people aren’t going to get it if you don’t tell them explicitly so ... Which is why we had to ask the influencers in our videos to explain this so

that the message gets across. We even made the title of the YouTube video 'RED + WHITE = PINK (2009 Campaign)'. I don't think it could get any clearer. (Zeyi, 26)

Tying the movement's colour to the Singaporean identification card served as a reminder to the public that the event was made for Singaporeans. This had legal significance because Hong Lim Park's regulations state that only citizens and permanent residents are allowed to participate in events held in the park (Chua, 2014). That said, it was fine for foreigners to watch and observe. To ensure the success of the event and the longevity of the movement, organisers made sure that information like this was disseminated in advance through social media outlets so as that everyone attending the event could learn about the rules.

In addition to legal concerns, the incorporation of red and white, which are the colours of the Singaporean flag, strategically bolstered the movement's cultural significance. By doing so, the organisers made a bold statement—that acceptance (pink) lies in the core of all Singaporeans (red and white). It sends off a powerful message that the creation of an inclusive country rests on the hands of its people, and that it is every citizen's civic duty to uphold that.

## 5. CONCLUSION

By strategically navigating legal barriers and being sensitive towards the cultural configurations of Singapore, the Pink Dot movement has enjoyed longevity and success. Pink Dot, currently in its seventh year, was graced by 28,000 people in 2015, more than ten times the number recorded for the inaugural gathering (Shen, 2015).

Such levels of success cannot be attributed to random chance. Compared to oppositional movements in democratic regimes, resistance under authoritarian leadership requires higher degrees of pragmatism, flexibility, and discretion. In recognition of what Singaporean queer activists lack—role-modelling of previous movements' success, veterans to offer advice from earlier experiences, and a sense of certainty pertaining to whether or not replicating strategies commonly employed by western activists would work in a country like Singapore—Pink Dot's organising team assiduously assessed their options and cleverly capitalised on however little was made available to them. The success of Pink Dot was of great significance to the zeitgeist of social activism in Singapore because the outcome of the movement shapes the tonality of future mobilisation in the country. From the interviews with event

promoters, we catch a glimpse of the intricate decision-making processes that mould and shape how a social movement is fashioned in a country where public resistance is deemed an anomaly. We further explored how social media was strategically utilised by activists to negotiate legal configurations, create cultural resonance, and ultimately promote a carefully framed event to the masses. Together, under the guidance of perspicacious and forward-thinking leaders, the Pink Dot team blazed a trail for Singapore's first ever LGBT movement. The lessons we learn from this group of inspiring activists could be pertinent to other gay rights activists who wish to affect change in their respective countries, especially for those living under authoritarian or oppressive regimes.

Today, Pink Dot has extended its outreach to countries like Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, where sexual politics can be just as precarious as Singapore's. With impressive turnouts recorded for the international versions of the event, the organisers of the inaugural Pink Dot event can find comfort in the thought that their efforts did not go in vain. Lastly, I wish to conclude with a quote that Sarah, the first interviewee introduced in this paper, shared with me near the end of our interview. When asked about why a movement like Pink Dot matters so much to Singapore, she summed up the spirit of the movement with this impassioned sentiment:

This movement is ours. We gave birth to it, nurtured it, and are now seeing it fly. Decades down the road, when Singapore becomes a more equitable place, we are going to be reminded that in 2009, only 2,500 people showed up to the first Pink Dot. We are going to celebrate how much the country, its laws and culture, have changed, and grieve for those who could not live till that day to see those changes. Maybe we won't remember it all, but there is one thing that we will never forget, and that is—we might be the ones who started the movement, but it was Singaporeans who gave it its life. ▀

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