

Case Study #5

Pink Dot

Section 377A of the Penal Code criminalises “gross indecency” between men in Singapore, which can be punished with imprisonment for up to 2 years. This law legitimises and perpetuates discriminatory attitudes towards LGBTQ persons. After failing to petition the Government to remove Section 377A, a group of LGBTQ activists came together in 2009 to organise the first Pink Dot at Speakers’ Corner in Hong Lim Park, a rally to advocate for social acceptance of the LGBTQ community and awareness of the struggles they face.

CATEGORY LGBTQ Issues

KEY ACTORS Pink Dot Singapore

WHO ARE THE ACTORS?

Pink Dot Singapore is a group of people concerned with LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning) issues in Singapore who come together every year to form the Pink Dot. Considered Singapore’s most prominent LGBTQ pride event, Pink Dot has been held annually at the Speakers’ Corner in Hong Lim Park, and aims to bring greater awareness and acceptance of LGBTQ issues to the Singapore general public. It is a group for everyone, regardless of identity, who supports the freedom to love. By endorsing openness and acceptance, they hope to bring LGBTQ Singaporeans closer to their family and friends¹.

¹ Pink Dot SG (Retrieved on 8 June 2019 from: <https://pinkdot.sg/about-pink-dot-sg/>)

WHAT'S WRONG?

Currently, Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code² prohibits men from committing acts of “any gross indecency” with another man. Additionally, same-sex marriage is illegal by virtue of Section 12 of the Women’s Charter³, and LGBTQ individuals face barriers in accessing healthcare, housing and employment. There is also a lack of LGBTQ representation in the national sexuality education curriculum, and public opinion remains divided on repealing Section 377A.

Healthcare is a serious issue that affects the LGBTQ community, particularly in regards to the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS. In 2017, 261 out of 408 reported cases of AIDS/HIV involved male Singapore residents who identified as homosexual or bisexual.⁴ According to advocacy group Action for Aids President Professor Roy Chan, “many men who have sex with men fear that if they go for HIV testing, they will have to reveal they engage in illegal sexual activity.” He added that Section 377A has “stifled” HIV prevention campaigns for the homosexual and bisexual male population.⁵

Housing is also a problem for same-sex couples in Singapore, as many affordable public housing schemes are reserved for married couples. As same-sex marriage is not legal, same-sex couples are ineligible for any public housing scheme requiring them to be married or eligible to marry⁶. For instance, same-sex couples are ineligible for most Housing Development Board (HDB) schemes, which are largely reserved for heteronormative married families or those eligible to marry.⁷ While same-sex couples can apply for HDB ownership, they have to be 35 years old and older.⁸ There is also an absence of

² Singapore Penal Code, Chapter 224 (Rev Ed 2008). Section 377A. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PC1871?Provids=pr377A->)

³ Singapore Penal Code, Chapter 353, Women’s Charter (Rev Ed 2009). (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/WC1961#pr12->)

⁴ Loh, V. 2018, September. *Calling for Repeal of 377A, Action for Aids Says Law Has Negative Impact on HIV Prevention*. Today Online. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/calling-repeal-377a-action-aids-says-law-has-negative-impact-hiv-prevention>)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ying, J.Y. 2018, February. *5 Legal Obstacles LGBT Couples Face in Singapore (and How to Overcome Them)*. Singapore Legal Advice. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://singaporelegaladvice.com/lgbt-couples-legal-obstacles-singapore>)

⁷ Housing Development Board. 2019. *First-Timer Applicants - Housing & Development Board (HDB)*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/residential/buying-a-flat/new/first-timer-applicants>)

⁸ Housing Development Board. 2019. *Joint Singles Scheme or Orphans Scheme - Housing & Development Board (HDB)*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/residential/buying-a-flat/new/joint-singles-scheme-or-orphans-scheme>)

anti-discrimination legislation - as such, it is not illegal for landlords to refuse to rent flats to prospective LGBTQ tenants because of their sexuality.⁹

Sex education also remains lacking in its coverage of LGBTQ identities and experiences. As Professor Chan states, “school-based sexuality programmes do not provide information that discuss homosexuality in a sensitive and unbiased manner. They do not include accurate or useful information on same-sex relationships and safer sex practices relevant to (male homosexuals). This has resulted in young (male homosexuals) being especially vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection compared with their heterosexual peers.”¹⁰ According to the Ministry of Education’s website on Sexuality Education, “Sexuality Education teaches students what homosexuality is, the importance of respect and empathy, and the law concerning homosexual acts in Singapore.”¹¹ Minister of Education Ong Ye Kung has also previously alleged that the LGBTQ community experiences “no discrimination at work, housing (and) education.”¹²

Public opinion on whether Section 377A should be repealed has become more positive over the years and is now evenly split. A public survey by independent market research company Ipsos Public Affairs in 2018 showed that 55% out of a sample of 750 Singaporeans expressed support for retaining Section 377A¹³. Government officials are cognisant of this social divide on the issue. Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam acknowledged that the nation is “deeply split” on the issue, with a “growing minority” of Singaporeans who wish to have Section 377A repealed. This social stalemate has also influenced the

⁹ Chew, S. 2019, July. “For LGBTQ People, The Singapore Dream Remains Frustratingly Out of Reach.” RICE. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from

<https://www.ricemedia.co/current-affairs-features-lgbtq-people-singapore-dream/>)

¹⁰ Loh, V. 2018, September. *Calling for Repeal of 377A, Action for Aids Says Law Has Negative Impact on HIV Prevention*. TODAYOnline. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from

<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/calling-repeal-377a-action-aids-says-law-has-negative-impact-hiv-prevention>)

¹¹Ministry of Education. *Scope and Teaching Approach of Sexuality Education in Schools*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from

<https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/social-and-emotional-learning/sexuality-education/scope-and-teaching-approach-of-sexuality-education-in-schools>)

¹²Mokhtar, F. and Loh, V. 2018, September. *No discrimination against LGBTQ community at work, in housing and education here: Ong Ye Kung*. TODAYOnline. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from

<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/no-discrimination-against-lgbtq-community-singapore-ong-ye-kung>)

¹³ Ng, G. 2018, September. *55 Per Cent of Singapore Residents Support Section 377A: Ipsos Survey*. The Straits Times. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/55-per-cent-of-singapore-residents-support-section-377a-ipsos-survey>)

Government's decision to maintain the status quo; Ong Ye Kung said that the topic of repeal was best left "to society to decide over time".¹⁴

TIMELINE OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

In **2007**, the Government embarked on a review of the Penal Code with plans to repeal Section 377 which criminalises "[whoever] voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature"¹⁵. Section 377A, however, was not slated for repeal. To urge Parliament to repeal Section 377A, a group of activists collected over 2,000 signatures for a parliamentary petition, which was presented by Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Siew Kum Hong. The petition was not successful, though Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sought to reach a compromise by keeping Section 377A on the books but promising that it is "not to be enforced against gays in consensual, private situations"¹⁶ - a stance which former attorney-general Walter Woon views as a "very dangerous precedent" that enables political authorities to instruct the supposedly-independent Public Prosecutor not to enforce select laws.¹⁷

In **2008**, the government announced changes to the Public Order Act that would exempt licensing requirements for exhibitions and performances in Hong Lim Park. Organisers need only register with and abide by certain stipulations to hold a lawful public demonstration¹⁸. This inspired a group of people, who would later become the inaugural Pink Dot committee, to hold Singapore's first Pink Dot rally in Hong Lim Park in **2009**.¹⁹

¹⁴Mokhtar, F. 2018, September. *The Big Read: With a house still divided over 377A, time to seek common ground*. TODAYOnline. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.todayonline.com/big-read/big-read-house-still-divided-over-377a-time-seek-common-ground>)

¹⁵ Singapore Penal Code, Chapter 224 (Rev Ed 1985). Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PC1871/Historical/19870330?DocDate=19870330&ValidDate=19870330&Provs=pr377-#pr377->

¹⁶ Chua, L. J. 2015. *Mobilizing Gay Singapore: Rights and Resistance in an Authoritarian State*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. pp.114

¹⁷ Sim, W. 2014, September. *Walter Woon, Tommy Koh differ on 377A anti-gay sex law at NUS forum*. The Straits Times. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/walter-woon-tommy-koh-differ-on-377a-anti-gay-sex-law-at-nus-forum>)

¹⁸ Paulo, D. A., & Ng, E. 2008, August. *A more open field*. TODAY. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/today20080826-1.2.8>)

¹⁹ Singam, C. and Thomas, M. 2017. *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books. pp. 171

In **2010**, a constitutional challenge to 377A was put forward by Tan Eng Hong. In **2012**, 377A's constitutionality was also challenged by partners Lim Meng Suang and Kenneth Chee. Both were ultimately rejected. Lim and Chee were later introduced as flag bearers at the 2014 Pink Dot.²⁰

In **2014**, Ustaz Noor Deros - a Muslim teacher - set up the **Wear White** Facebook page and website. He urged Muslims not to attend Pink Dot and to wear white to prayers on the night of the start of Ramadan. Noor said that holding the Pink Dot event on the eve of Ramadan showed the organizers' "disdain for Islam and the family"²¹. Consequently some Wear White Supporters began using a white droplet campaign symbol in their Facebook profile pictures.²²

In the same year, over 6,000 Christians dressed in white on Sunday afternoon to attend a special "family worship" service conducted by Singapore's Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC), according to organisers.²³ This was led by Lawrence Khong, chairman of LoveSingapore, a network of about 100 churches in Singapore, as well as head of the FCBC. "We cannot and will not endorse homosexuality. We will continue to resist any public promotion of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle," said Khong in a Facebook post²⁴. Mr Khong had attempted to organise a Red Dot family day event at the Padang on Pink Dot day, but the application was rejected by the authorities. We note that the organizers rejected all suggestions that "the event was pitted against Pink Dot", according to TODAY Singapore.²⁵

In **2015**, the LoveSingapore network called on about 100 churches to encourage their members to turn up for weekend services dressed in white.²⁶ Khong espoused the following during a sermon the day after Pink Dot 2015: "I want to pray that we will continue to wear white as long as there is pink, and we will

²⁰Radics, G. B. 2013. *Decolonizing Singapore's Sex Laws: Tracing Section 377A of Singapore's Penal Code*. Columbia Human Rights Law Review. Vol. 45, No. 1. Pp. 96

²¹Au Yong, R. and Nur. A. M. S. 2016, January. *Religious Teacher Launches 'Wear White' Online Campaign*. The Straits Times. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/religious-teacher-launches-wear-white-online-campaign>)

²²Ibid.

²³ Yahoo Newsroom. 2014, June. *Thousands of Singaporean Christians wear white to protest Pink Dot gay rally*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/thousands-of-singaporean-christians-wear-white-to-protest-pink-dot-gay-rally-143235694.html>)

²⁴TODAYOnline. 2014, June. *Wear White to Protest Singapore Pink Gay Rally, Religious Groups Say*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.todayonline.com/world/wear-white-protest-singapore-pink-gay-rally-religious-groups-say>)

²⁵Fang, J. 2014, May. TODAYOnline. *Refusal to allow pro-family event at Padang puzzling: Lawrence Khong*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/refusal-allow-pro-family-event-padang-puzzling-lawrence-khong>)

²⁶ Zaccheus M. and Tai, J. 2015, June. *Christians to Don White for Services as Hong Lim Park Hosts Pink Dot*. The Straits Times. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/christians-to-don-white-for-services-as-hong-lim-park-hosts-pink-dot>)

wear white until the pink is gone, and even if the pink is gone we will continue to wear white.”²⁷ Khong subsequently launched the movement known as **We.Wear.White**. He encouraged members to wear white on the 4th and 5th of June 2016 as a “pro-family, pro-Government, pro-Singapore message”²⁸.

2017’s iteration of Pink Dot would be affected by recent changes in government regulation aimed at preventing foreign influence in domestic issues^{29,30}. What this meant for Pink Dot was that non-Singaporean firms would be barred from organising and contributing financially to the event and non-Singaporean and non-PR actors would also be banned from participating in the event itself.³¹ In response, 99.co CEO Darius Cheung initiated the **Red Dot for Pink Dot campaign** with the goal of bringing 100 Singaporean companies onboard as sponsors for Pink Dot 2017. Consequently, more than 120 local companies stepped forward as sponsors.³²

In **2019**, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that Section 377A “will be around for some time” and will not impede Singapore’s ability to attract foreign talent in the tech industry. This was in response to a question at the Smart Nation Summit 2019 asking if Singapore’s regulations can be made more inclusive towards tech talent of diverse sexual orientations. He is quoted to have said, “Whatever your sexual orientation, you are welcome to come and work in Singapore. But this has not inhibited people from living, and has not stopped Pink Dot from having a gathering every year.”³³ Pink Dot issued a statement outlining

²⁷ Andanari, K. and Ng Y.S. 2015, June. *Pastor Lawrence Khong: ‘We will wear white until the pink is gone’*. Mothership. (Retrieved on 4 October from <https://mothership.sg/2015/06/pastor-lawrence-khong-we-will-wear-white-until-the-pink-is-gone/>)

²⁸ Lee, R. M. 2016, May. *Traditional Values’ Wear White Campaign Returning on Pink Dot Weekend*. TODAYOnline. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/network-churches-revives-campaign-wear-white-pink-dot-weekend>)

²⁹ Yuen, S. 2016, June. *MHA says foreign sponsors not allowed for Pink Dot, or other events, at Speakers’ Corner*. The Straits Times. Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mha-says-foreign-sponsors-not-allowed-for-pink-dot-or-other-events-at-speakers-corner>)

³⁰ Public Order (Amendment) Bill 2017 (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from [https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/press-releases/public_order_\(amendment\)_bill_2017.pdf](https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/press-releases/public_order_(amendment)_bill_2017.pdf))

³¹ The Online Citizen. 2017, May. *MARUAH expresses concern over amendment of Public Order Act*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2017/05/20/maruah-expresses-concern-over-amendment-of-public-order-act/>)

³² Red Dot for Pink Dot (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://reddotforpinkdot.sg/about-us/>)

³³ Ng, J.S. 2019, June. *377A will be around ‘for some time’, will not inhibit how S’pore attracts tech talent: PM Lee*. TODAYOnline. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/377a-will-be-around-some-time-will-not-inhibit-how-spore-attracts-tech-talent-pm-lee>)

their disagreement with PM Lee’s claims and extended an open invitation to him to attend Pink Dot and “learn from the community”.³⁴

In November **2019**, Johnson Ong Ming, Roy Tan Seng Kee and Bryan Choong Chee Hoong (former executive director of LGBT non-profit organisation OogaChaga) put forward challenges to Section 377A to the High Court, claiming that the law was unconstitutional³⁵. In March **2020**, the High Court dismissed all three challenges³⁶. Following the High Court’s announcement, Pink Dot released a statement expressing their disappointment at the decision and reiterated that Section 377A is discriminatory towards LGBT Singaporeans.³⁷

WHAT STRATEGIES WERE USED?

Generally, the organisers were careful in the way they framed and situated Pink Dot within the local sensibilities and cultural context, employing what Professor Lynette Chua describes as the strategy of **pragmatic resistance**³⁸ - “a strategy of operating carefully within the boundaries of both the law and sociopolitical norms. The idea is to garner and preserve as much legitimacy as possible, while finding more subtle ways to push the limits.”³⁹

1. Ensuring cultural resonance using a distinct visual vocabulary

Conscious about the common misconception that LGBT identities are “Western” concepts, organisers were conscious in constructing and advertising Pink Dot as a **local** event. They wanted to ensure that the

³⁴ Pink Dot SG. 2019, June. *An Open Invitation to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://pinkdot.sg/2019/06/an-open-invitation-to-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong/>)

³⁵ Lam, L. 2019, November. Channel News Asia. *Three court challenges to Section 377A: A summary of key arguments*. Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/three-court-challenges-to-section-377a-a-summary-of-key-12114196>

³⁶ Kurohi, R. 2020, March. *High Court dismisses challenges against law that criminalises sex between men*. The Straits Times. Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/high-court-rejects-all-three-challenges-against-section-377a>

³⁷ Pink Dot SG. 2020, March. *Statement in Response to the Dismissal of Constitutional Challenges to Section 377A*. Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://pinkdot.sg/2020/03/statement-in-response-to-the-dismissal-of-constitutional-challenges-to-section-377a/>

³⁸ Chua, L. J. 2012. “Pragmatic Resistance, Law, and Social Movements in Authoritarian States: The Case of Gay Collective Action in Singapore” in *Law & Society Review*, Volume 46, Number 4. pp 26.

³⁹ Han, K. and Ho, J. 2020, January. The New Naratif. *Growing a Movement in Activism-Averse Singapore* (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://newnaratif.com/journalism/growing-a-movement-in-activism-averse-singapore/share/xuna/4297ef5f39f4aeb86d80ec9744cd2990/>)

event challenges the idea that it was “imported”, so that locals would be able to resonate and relate more with the message: rather than calling it a “gay Pride Parade” and using rainbow flags, they created their own visual vocabulary.⁴⁰

‘Pink’ – a colour already associated with the LGBT community, as it evokes the image of the pink triangle (a symbol for various LGBTQ identities, the pink triangle was originally branded as a badge of shame in Nazi Germany but later reclaimed by the community). Pink is also a blend of the red and white colours of the Singapore flag and the colour of the Singaporean NRIC.⁴¹ Likewise, their mascot Pinkie was intended to evoke the “joy and innocence that they wished for Singaporeans to associate with the movement.”⁴²

By selecting a distinct visual vocabulary, this conscious “localisation”⁴³ of the event aimed to convey that the LGBTQ community was long-embedded in the fabric of Singapore’s society, and that the community’s claims were that of belonging and acceptance on the basis of equal citizenship.

2. Reclaiming the language of family and Asian values

Pink Dot also actively reclaimed the Asian notion of family and pro-family values in light of how anti-LGBT movements have depicted same-sex relationships as a moral threat to the traditional family unit, and thus by extension, to the stability of the nation.

Detractors of Pink Dot, and more broadly anti-LGBT movements, do so on the basis of upholding what they call the “natural family”⁴⁴. Mr Khong claims the We.Wear.White campaign “promote[s] traditional family values”, and defends his church’s stance on heterosexual marriage as being congruent with the social norms of “Singapore’s conservative majority”⁴⁵.

Anticipating such rhetoric, Pink Dot proactively reclaims the meaning of family in its campaign and emphasizes that “families should be built on love and understanding, rather than exclusion.”⁴⁶ The second iteration of Pink Dot honoured “kinship and family”, and emphasized the role that strong familial ties play

⁴⁰Singam, C. and Thomas, M. 2017. *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books. pp.174

⁴¹ Pink Dot SG (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://pinkdot.sg/about-pink-dot-sg/>)

⁴² Singam, C. and Thomas, M. 2017. *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books. pp.173F

⁴³ Ibid, pp.174

⁴⁴ Lee, R. M. 2016, May. *Traditional Values' Wear White Campaign Returning on Pink Dot Weekend*.

TODAYOnline. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from

<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/network-churches-revives-campaign-wear-white-pink-dot-weekend>)

⁴⁵Ibid

⁴⁶Ibid

in one's emotional and psychological well-being, as well as in "affirming who we are as a community and as a nation: cohesive and compassionate."⁴⁷ By defining the family not in terms of its gender composition but through the moral acts of love and acceptance, Pink Dot attempts to re-position support for the LGBT community as integral, rather than antagonistic, to the family.

From the very start, Pink Dot promoters conceptualized the event as a family-friendly one, utilizing the image of the family in branding and promotional materials whilst encouraging youths to bring their relatives along.⁴⁸ Apart from enabling diffusion of support for the movement, elevating the value of family is intended to highlight that every LGBT person is part of an existing family, and that accepting sexual diversity only helps to strengthen family cohesion⁴⁹ - a sentiment congruent with Singapore's family-centric nation building narrative.

This family-friendly approach is not without its detractors. Pink Dot has been accused of respectability politics, referring to an approach where "instead of confronting injustice head-on, a marginalised group polices its own members so they can appear more acceptable to the dominant group".⁵⁰ In order to preserve their conservative, family-friendly image, Pink Dot was initially hesitant to allow sex worker advocacy group Project X to have a presence at Pink Dot. Similarly, non-governmental organization Action for Aids was purportedly not allowed to distribute condoms at Pink Dot. According to Vanessa Ho, Project X's then-project coordinator, Choa had initially responded to her suggestion that Project X hold a booth in Pink Dot with hesitance, stating that Pink Dot wished to "brand [itself] as a family-friendly event". Mr Choa himself would later attribute this decision to his concerns over Hong Lim Park regulations, which barred the display of obscene signs. Ultimately, Pink Dot would allow Project X to hold a booth, and it has since done so annually. Ho notes that in their first year at Pink Dot, the organizers would "ask to see the flyers that she was planning on distributing beforehand... Their reason was that they didn't want haters to come in, take photographs of my collaterals and be like, 'oh Pink Dot is promoting promiscuity and immorality.'"

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⁴⁷ Pink Dot SG. 2010, February. *Love, Kinship and Families take Centre Stage at Pink Dot 2010*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from

<https://pinkdot.sg/2010/02/love-kinship-and-families-take-centre-stage-at-pink-dot-2010/>)

⁴⁸Wang, S. 2016. "Igniting a 'Pink Dot': Legal Pragmatism and Cultural Resonance in Singapore's First LGBT Movement." in *Sojourners*, Volume 8, pp. 4-14. Retrieved from

<http://www.skylerwang.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Wang-Skyler.-2016.-Igniting-a-Pink-Dot.pdf>

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰ Han, K. and Ho, J. 2020, January. *The New Naratif. Growing a Movement in Activism-Averse Singapore* (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from

<https://newnaratif.com/journalism/growing-a-movement-in-activism-averse-singapore/share/xuna/4297ef5f39f4aeb86d80ec9744cd2990/>)

⁵¹ Ibid

While activists like Vanessa Ho and Stephanie Chan have expressed their desire for Pink Dot to improve in terms of diversity and representation, they have also affirmed the importance of supporting the event and its long-term goals.

3. “Freedom”, and not a “right”

The organisers were also careful to distance themselves from the rhetoric employed by similar movements in the West. They called for the “freedom to love” rather than the “right to love”, as utilising the word ‘right’ insinuates that the government has deprived a certain population of a de jure entitlement, and could therefore be construed as a direct challenge to the current legal structure.⁵²

Additionally, a common belief held by many conservative Singaporeans is that homosexuality is a Western-imported concept that erodes communitarian Asian values. Therefore, to avoid reinforcing such a perception, the social media team decided that it was more pragmatic to go with ‘freedom’, a term that they considered to be more nuanced, neutral, and culturally appropriate.⁵³

Their enduring tagline “supporting the freedom to love”, conveys their conviction that a message based on love would always triumph.

4. Adapting to evolving national sentiments - from picnic to protest

4.1 The Early Years

“Since 2009, use of Hong Lim Park has been very normalised, but back then this wasn’t at all so. Any sort of political agitation was very taboo,” - Alan Seah, member of the original Pink Dot Organizing Committee.⁵⁴

Committee member Clement Tan noted that in 2009, public protests were widely still considered a transgressive mode of civic participation by Singaporeans. In light of this perception, the Pink Dot Committee would spend its early years depicting Pink Dot as a family-friendly picnic instead of a political protest as part of a deliberate strategy to “soften the edges of political protest and steer public perception

⁵²Chua, L. J. 2012. “Pragmatic Resistance, Law, and Social Movements in Authoritarian States: The Case of Gay Collective Action in Singapore” in *Law & Society Review*, Volume 46, Number 4. pp 26.

⁵³Wang, S. 2016. *Igniting a ‘Pink Dot’: Legal Pragmatism and Cultural Resonance in Singapore’s First LGBT Movement*. (Retrieved on 4 October 2019 from <http://www.skylerwang.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Wang-Skyler.-2016.-Igniting-a-Pink-Dot.pdf>)

⁵⁴Singam, C., & Thomas, M. 2017. *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books. pp.172.

away from... associations of divisiveness and confrontation".⁵⁵ To this end, the first Pink Dot had volunteers distributing pink fans, balloons and flyers to attendees, and included performances such as a musical item from a Malay ensemble and a showcase by a Chinese lion dance troupe. These served to foster a celebratory and welcoming atmosphere.⁵⁶

Further, the committee recognised the importance of sustaining the Pink Dot movement through ensuring its existence and garnering momentum. In this view, Pink Dot has maintained a cooperative relationship with the Singapore authorities, demonstrating respect for rule of law and social norms. The committee expressed that authorities have "developed a sense of respect for our work" which led to a "smoother administrative process". Even when the committee and the government did not see eye-to-eye, the committee worked within the parameters accorded and adapted their approach accordingly. When instructed to set up barricades and checkpoints around the park during the event, and to bear its cost, the committee acquiesced to the government's requirements.⁵⁷ Supporters of the movement were just as adaptive, as could be seen in the public support for the Red Dot for Pink Dot fundraiser in 2017, which was a response to tightened regulations on foreign corporate sponsorship.^{58 59}

As Pink Dot began to attract bigger turnouts, it also attracted larger opposition. When faced with the 2014 Wear White movement, the organisers deployed security personnel for crowd control. However, the committee maintained a message of welcome and community. Organisers also reiterated their openness to dialogue with those who oppose their event.

"If (those who oppose the event) do come down, we will welcome them with open arms." - Paerin Choa, spokesperson for Pink Dot.⁶⁰

4.2 "This is a Protest"

⁵⁵ Singam, C. and Thomas, M. 2017. *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books. pp. 171-173

⁵⁶ Ibid. pp. 171

⁵⁷ Ibid, 177.

⁵⁸ Pink Dot SG. 2017, March 31. *Red Dot for Pink Dot Launches with 50 Local Corporate Sponsors*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://pinkdot.sg/2017/03/red-dot-for-pink-dot-launches-with-50-local-corporate-sponsors>)

⁵⁹ Singam, C., & Thomas, M. 2017. *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books. pp.176

⁶⁰Kok, X.H. 2014, June. *Pink Dot Organisers to Deploy Security Personnel*. TODAYonline. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/pink-dot-organisers-deploy-security-personnel?singlepage=true&fbclid=IwAR1WTPYpwpjfmOdJzA6kVodvTeBg90QsqS2fplxlo32SeZdxzP8kQjdkrjA>)

While the Pink Dot movement has maintained its emphasis on love and its cooperation with the authorities, it has evolved to adopt a stronger political stance in response to changing circumstances in its later years. In 2019, the emcee declared that “Pink Dot isn’t just a picnic. Pink Dot is a protest!”⁶¹, which is the first time Pink Dot had openly acknowledged that it was an act of political demonstration.

Journalists Kirsten Han and Joy Ho noted that over the years, Pink Dot has gradually sharpened its stance to become more direct with its demands. Spokesperson Paerin Choa attributes this partially to the “wave of courage” that emerged after the 2011 watershed elections where PAP received its lowest vote share since independence. He believes that it emboldened the people to be more vocal in their political views and that deviating from the PAP line became more normalised. He also noted that after the Wear White movement, “Singapore’s Pink Dot wasn’t as happy-clappy as before. There was actually a purpose in the agenda.” As Wear White was a direct challenge to Pink Dot’s messaging, it was no longer enough to focus solely on love and family and togetherness⁶².

Furthermore, Pink Dot began attracting a much larger crowd than it had in the early years - it became increasingly difficult to deny that it was a protest. Organisers leaned into this, nudging attendees into more explicit expressions of their demands. 2016’s Pink Dot asked the crowd to hold up pink placards where they could write their own individual messages of support, emulating the style of a more conventional protest instead of a picnic.⁶³

When new regulations were introduced in 2017 that banned foreigners from being present in the park during the event⁶⁴ and required the Pink Dot committee to set up a barricade around the park (with security performing identity and security checks, at their own expense), supporters of the movement appeared to be incensed. As Mr Choa expresses, “The barricade year [2017] was a total retaliation to the government. People who left Pink Dot came back that year because of that”. He added that it “matured the community, matured the discourse”.⁶⁵

⁶¹Han, K. and Ho, J. 2020, Jan. *The Limits of Singaporean Activism?* The New Naratif. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://newnaratif.com/journalism/the-limits-of-singaporean-activism/share/xuna/93eb9cfb64391c4ee20ac49e72216fa4>)

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴Ungku, F. 2017, July. Reuters. *Singapore gay pride rally draws thousands amid new curbs*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-lgbt-pinkdot/singapore-gay-pride-rally-draws-thousands-amid-new-curbs-idUSKBN19M3GD>)

⁶⁵Han, K. and Ho, J. 2020, Jan. *The Limits of Singaporean Activism?* The New Naratif. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://newnaratif.com/journalism/the-limits-of-singaporean-activism/share/xuna/93eb9cfb64391c4ee20ac49e72216fa4>)

In light of these circumstances, the needle started to shift - Pink Dot ceased presenting itself solely as a picnic - it was an activist group, pushing for change in Singapore.⁶⁶

In 2018, the 10th anniversary of Pink Dot saw ambassadors from the past decade read out 10 Declarations for Equality on stage. This was a noticeably bold step, with demands such as the ability for LGBT organisations to register themselves under the Societies Act. They also called for the repeal of Section 377A.⁶⁷ Furthermore, at the annual light-up that year, the message that was formed said, "We Are Ready".⁶⁸ This was a clear challenge to the PAP government's rhetoric, which had focused on how Singaporeans were not ready to repeal Section 377A.⁶⁹

In 2019, the light-up spelled out the message, "Repeal 377A", now a direct demand towards the government. The Pink Dot committee had originally planned to present the word "Unity" at the year's event. However, prior to the day, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had made a statement at a conference that Section 377A did not in fact affect the lives of the LGBT community in Singapore, citing its lack of enforcement. Further, PM Lee had cited the existence and success of Pink Dot as one of the examples that showed how the lives of LGBT peoples were unaffected by the law. It was these statements, viewed as misunderstanding and misappropriating the struggle of the LGBT community, that unsettled members of the movement.⁷⁰

"And so Pink Dot set out to make sure that Lee and his government got the point. The theme for the 11th Pink Dot was about taking a stand against discrimination, and they'd planned for volunteers to spell the word "UNITY" during the Dot. After Lee's comments, the decision was made to change the Dot's message to 'REPEAL 377A'."⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Pink Dot SG. 2018, July. *10 Declarations for Equality*. Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://pinkdot.sg/2018/07/10-declarations-for-equality/>

⁶⁸ Han, K. and Ho, J. 2020, January.. *Growing a Movement in Activism-Averse Singapore*. The New Naratif. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://newnaratif.com/journalism/growing-a-movement-in-activism-averse-singapore/share/xuna/4297ef5f39f4aeb86d80ec9744cd2990/>)

⁶⁹ The Straits Times. 2007, October. *Full parliamentary speech by PM Lee Hsien Loong in 2007 on Section 377A*. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/full-parliamentary-speech-by-pm-lee-hsien-loong-in-2007-on-section-377a>)

⁷⁰ Han, K. and Ho, J. 2020, Jan. *The Limits of Singaporean Activism?* The New Naratif. (Retrieved on 21 June 2020 from <https://newnaratif.com/journalism/the-limits-of-singaporean-activism/share/xuna/93eb9cfb64391c4ee20ac49e72216fa4>)

⁷¹ Ibid.

This resulted in the new message of that year - an explicit response to the Prime Minister's statements. In essence, Pink Dot had shifted from assuring the public that this isn't a protest to declaring that it was.

CONCLUSIONS

Pink Dot has remained one of the most iconic movements in Singapore, growing in support and attendance numbers over the past decade despite numerous challenges along the way.

It has contributed to a more accepting Singapore that has also helped spawn other LGBTQ activist initiatives such as the #Ready4Repeal movement, which saw many members of the general public petitioning their Members of Parliament to raise the repeal of Section 377A to the government.

What originally started as a ground-up initiative in Singapore has continued to even make ripples in associated movements abroad. In the past decade, we have seen Pink Dots spawning especially in other Asian countries/prefectures/cities. Some of the organisers explicitly cite the success of the Pink Dot movement in Singapore as their inspiration for holding similar events in their local communities.

READING LIST

To mark the 11th anniversary of Pink Dot, CAPE compiled a collection of 11 essential reads on the LGBTQ experience in our sunny, closeted Singapore. In these 11 texts, from the cold, hard steel of academic analysis to heartfelt poetic rumination, immerse yourself in an ode to the love, struggle, pain, loss, hope, and liberation of our dreams of a Pink Singapore.

Check out our reading list here: <https://bit.ly/CAPEpinkreads>

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