Disarming as a tactic of resistance in Pink Dot

Pink Dot is an annual rally in support of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people in Singapore. In a country where many prefer to avoid overt displays of dissent, Pink Dot has gained significant popular support. In this article, I explore how it has done so. Through a close multimodal analysis focusing on the use of colour, layout, and typography in a Pink Dot 2017 flyer, I demonstrate how these features work together in the Singaporean context to realize meanings of positivity, warmth, and inclusivity whilst simultaneously de-emphasizing notions of claiming rights. I argue Pink Dot discursively attenuates the potentially discordant elements of its message and marshals this apparent neutrality to gather support for its ostensibly depoliticized message – a process that I term disarming. It is an assimilationist strategy deliberately made for Singapore's particular sociopolitical context and it has proven effective in securing mass popular support amongst Singaporeans.

1. Introduction

1.1 Singapore, Speakers' Corner, and Pink Dot

In 2000, modelled on Speakers' Corner at London's Hyde Park, Singapore introduced Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park. Speakers' Corner is an open space roughly the size of an American football field within Hong Lim Park – a public park that is located centrally in Singapore. When it was set up, legislation was passed in Parliament exempting the space designated as Speakers' Corner from the country's public speaking laws that require anyone wishing to speak in public to first obtain a license. With these legislative amendments, Speakers' Corner became the only place in Singapore where one could deliver a speech in public without needing a license. The one caveat was that speakers had to ensure they did not broach topics on race and religion – a condition that is the result of the Singaporean government viewing race and religion as potentially volatile fault lines that could engender widespread disorder and violence if not carefully managed (Sinha 2005; see also Benjamin 1976). Then, at the 2008 National Day Rally, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong signalled the government's intention to further amend the laws governing the use of Speakers' Corner when he remarked that:

> we should allow our outdoor public demonstrations, also at the Speakers'
> Corner still subject to basic rules of law and order, still stay[ing] away from
> race, language and religion [and …] we will manage with a light touch. (Lee
> 2008)

Soon after, the amendments were formally proposed and passed in Parliament. These changes to the law meant that outdoor public demonstrations which, prior to 2008, could only have been organized with a police permit were now legal at Speakers' Corner. Taken together, the

amendments of 2000 and 2008 meant that – for the first time in the country's history as an independent nation – there was a space in Singapore where public assemblies could freely be held without organizers having to first apply for a license or police permit.

Local LGBT[1] activists were quick to realize that because public assemblies could now be held without first requiring state sanction, it would finally be possible to organize a public event in support of LGBT people in Singapore – a country that, despite being known as cosmopolitan and well-developed, "remains one of the few countries in Asia that has yet to decriminalise homosexuality" (Yue 2012:1). Section 377A of the Singaporean Penal Code, a colonial-era law that criminalizes gay sex, continues to remain on the books – albeit in an unenforced form (Radics 2015; Radics 2019). The state frames this policy of nonenforcement as a compromise between respecting the "current social mores and attitudes" of a conservative Singaporean society and recognizing that "the lives of […] LGBT citizens are often difficult" (Phillips 2020:6). The Prime Minister formally articulated this in Parliament in 2007 when he stated that whilst the government would not repeal Section 377A because "the tone of the overall society […] remains straight, and we want it to remain so", neither would it be "proactively enforce[d]" (Lee 2007).[2] At the time of writing, this continues to be the state's stance. Lee's comments also spoke to the deeply heteronormative nature of Singaporean society. The Singaporean government consistently valorises the nuclear heterosexual family in official policy discourse as the "basic social unit" (Tan & Lee 2007:186) of society; and this is usually deployed together with notions of identity because the nuclear heterosexual family is held up as crucial in the sustenance of "traditional Asian

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[1] I use *LGBT* throughout this article because this is how most LGBT Singaporeans and Pink Dot activists refer to themselves and their movement (see Chua 2014; Phillips 2020; Yue 2012). The only exceptions are when I directly quote scholars using the term *queer*. For readers interested in the history of the term and its meanings, see, for example, Bell and Valentine (1995) and Jagose (1996).
[2] See (Hor 2012) for a detailed discussion on the (non)enforcement of Section 377A in Singapore.

values" which the state holds up as "markers of national identity" (Tan & Lee 2007:186). For LGBT activists, then, there was – and remains – plenty of work to be done in advocating for LGBT people in the country. After the 2008 legislative changes were announced, two well-known and seasoned local LGBT activists organized a "town hall meeting" for other activists to come to and "brainstorm ideas" (Chua 2014:121) where they discussed how they could take advantage of this reconfiguration of Singapore's legislative landscape to chart different forms and avenues of activism to increase the visibility of the LGBT community. This was the first step and the "impetus for Singapore's first public gay rally, Pink Dot, can be traced back to these changes that took place quietly in November 2008" (Chua 2014:119).

1.2 Pink Dot and resistance through assimilation

First held in 2009, and then every year since, Pink Dot is a "free-to-all carnival-like rally, aimed at social cohesion and mobilising mass support" (Lazar 2017:426) for the "freedom to love" (Pink Dot SG 2019). One of the most distinctive features of Pink Dot is how it deliberately aligns itself with the nation and national symbols to call on "Singaporean society to be open and inclusive of *all* citizens" (Lazar 2017:439, emphasis in original). Thus, in a bid to garner mainstream public support, it highlights, for instance, how pink is relevant to the nation because it combines the red andst white of Singapore's national flag. A second particularly distinctive feature of this is that despite being organized by LGBT activists and in support of LGBT people in the country, it is "not an outright proclamation of [LGBT] interests in Singapore. While there is certainly representation by the LGBT community, the organisers pitch the event as being about love rather than sexuality" (Ramdas 2013:121). In other words, despite being an event borne out of a need to engage with the politics and inequalities of sexuality in Singapore, it is the distinct absence of overt discourses of sexuality that is quite characteristic about Pink Dot in Singapore.

This is part of a conscious, deliberate, tactic of "amassing a visible support base of non-gay allies and demonstrating that their cause promotes social harmony" (Chua 2014:118) in a country where direct, open confrontation is, to say the least, very poorly received both by a "reactionary government" and a general public that views protests as "disruptive" (Chong 2019:159). The public's antipathy to open confrontation is in large part the result of the Singaporean government constantly reminding citizens of the nation's vulnerability owing to its small size and touting "social harmony as essential to economic survival, framing the two together as paramount to the nation's security" (Chua 2014:29). It is in this context that Pink Dot emerged and this is why when initially conceptualizing the event in 2009, organizers decided not to model it on a protest or pride parade – because of concerns that such an approach would come across as too antagonistic and would not be able to secure mass public support. Instead of a protest-based event, they aimed for a different approach – "something that could still show strength in numbers but would not be associated with a demonstration" (Chua 2014:121). This sentiment is explicitly and emphatically expressed on its website where it insists "[Pink Dot] is NOT a protest" (Pink Dot SG 2019, caps in original). Instead, it positions itself as a casual and informal event for straight and LGBT people alike to simply hang out together at Hong Lim Park. Thus, when it was conceptualized,

> [t]he idea was for anyone to simply show up at a designated time in the park attired in pink, for a picnic, some entertainment and speeches by LGBTQ ambassadors. The highlight of the event was the formation of a giant human Pink Dot, to be photographed aerially from a nearby hotel for a visual record of collective solidarity. (Lazar 2017:426)

Eschewing a protest and styling itself this way is a strategy that has worked well for Pink Dot and in the ten years since its launch this concept has not changed significantly. Its success is

evident from the fact that it has steadily drawn larger crowds. From an estimated turn-out of around 1,000 when it was first held in 2009, it has grown to attract 20,000 the most recent iteration in 2019 (Sim 2019) – an increase that represents a significant rise in terms of public support.

Every year, in the run up to Pink Dot, its organizers produce a set of publicity material to promote the event to the general public. Robert Phillips (2013:132) points out that "[r]ather than staging the event as a protest, the organizers took a different approach and framed the event as one that promoted the freedom of all Singaporeans, including queer Singaporeans, to choose whom to love." This move "reassures potential participants that they will not be placing themselves in any legal danger by taking part in the event" and "underscores the fact that the event is not about "rights"" (Phillips 2013:132). Natalie Oswin (2014) echoes this and makes clear that Pink Dot has "played a pivotal role in putting issues of equity into mainstream public debate" and has "doubtless helped many LGBT Singaporeans to re-envision their everyday lives" (Oswin 2014:414). At the same time, however, even as she acknowledges that "these are no small feats", she highlights that because "LGBT organizations like Pink Dot exist precariously in the city-state, their actions are highly circumscribed and they have little choice but to adopt an assimilationist […] stance" (Oswin 2014:414). Michelle Lazar (2017:439) extends this line of argument to suggest that instead of construing assimilationism as a limitation of resistance, by "strategically passing as normative, on the one hand, [Pink Dot has] simultaneously opened up a space for non-normative presence and recognition, on the other." Thus, it deliberately orients its messages to themes valorised by the Singaporean state such as its call "for national unity and interests to be prioritised above the rights and prerogatives of any individual or subgroup", the "importance of family ties" and the resolution of social issues "through consensus instead of contention" (Lazar 2017:429–35). Through such an orientation, it manages to attract support

from a broad base of Singaporeans and in this way increases the visibility of LGBT people in Singapore.

In this article, I build on the existing body of work by focussing on the discursive process through which it "strategically pass[es] as normative" (Lazar 2017:439) to demonstrate how the formal features present in a Pink Dot flyer function to attenuate its discordant elements. In addition to analysing an instance of Pink Dot discourse, I interrogate the frame within which it is produced by situating it in the larger socio-political context within which such a tactic is rendered necessary. Here, a Foucauldian heuristic, where resistance is understood to occur within rather than external to the regime of power that it is challenging (Foucault 1982), helps situate the analytical findings within Singapore's context. For Foucault (1982:792), power relations "constitute modes of action upon possible action, the action of others." Power thus has the capacity to configure and restrict the possibilities of resistance. In this way, both a principle of "non-confrontation" and the state's preoccupation with "social stability" function as informal albeit powerful Singaporean social norms (Chua 2014:33–35, Chua 2017) that dictate the nature of viable resistance. Viewing Pink Dot through this lens helps make sense of why even though outdoor public demonstrations and protests were formally legalized, Pink Dot chooses not to position itself as one. Instead, it deliberately attenuates itself in its bid to gain and maintain mainstream public support. Its deliberate construction of itself as a movement that promotes positivity, inclusivity, and warmth works together with a refusal to mobilize discourses of protest and rights and effectively strengthens its cause because of the particularities of the Singaporean socio-political context. I suggest that despite being a movement that is fundamentally built on dissent and a rejection of the current status quo, Pink Dot actively seeks to mask that show of dissent as a means of achieving its long-term goal to expand public space for the LGBT community in Singapore.

Whilst a number of scholars have made the argument that activists and movements in various constituencies tactically mobilize the discourses that they figure will find resonance with the state – particularly authoritarian states – to avoid state repercussion (see, for example, Adam, Duyvendak & Krouwel 1999; Currier 2009; Hildebrandt 2013; Spires 2011), there has been considerably less attention paid to *how* this has been done. This article demonstrates how Pink Dot discursively attenuates itself to accomplish its form of resistance. Within the field of discourse studies, much of the work on Pink Dot so far has tended to attend to lexis and grammar (see Lazar 2017; Phillips 2013). As such, to expand the bounds of analysis, I have chosen a promotional flyer that is sparse in terms of written language – which compels one to consider the communicative work that is being done multimodally through non-written features. The point of focus in this article is the online promotional flyer that was used to promote Pink Dot 2017 (Fig. 1). It is publicly available and was collected from the Pink Dot SG Facebook page (Pink Dot SG 2017b). With the aid of the online software Colorizer[3] that was used to generate the relevant numerical values in Figs. 2-4, I undertake a close multimodal analysis that specifically attends to the semiotics of colour and typography as well as the layout of the flyer to show how these features work together with the few words that are present to communicate qualities of positivity, diversity, and inclusivity that serve to attenuate Pink Dot's attempt to disrupt the status quo.

I characterize this process of discursive attenuation as a disarming process that functions as a tactic of resistance that Pink Dot takes up that achieves two specific goals at once. First, it helps it to avoid retribution from a state that views contentious, confrontational, movements unfavourably; second, it enables Pink Dot to attract popular support from the larger Singaporean public. The notion of disarming is thus relevant in two ways. In one sense,

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[3] Colorizer can be accessed at: http://colorizer.org/

it speaks to laying aside any appearance of hostility and disengaging from confrontation. It might come across as somewhat odd to suggest that disarming might could be considered a tactic of resistance. However, given that the Singaporean state emphasises the importance of "consensus instead of contention" (Lazar 2017:435; see also Chua 2014), disavowing any semblance of hostility and appearing non-confrontational becomes salient in this context. In the second sense, one should not forget that to be disarming is also to be charming, seductive, and charismatic. It suggests a certain allure and ability to draw others in that could be construed as a performance aimed at winning people over. Pink Dot does this by positioning itself as an inclusive, welcoming, movement advocating for everyone to have the freedom to love whomever they want – a stance that has demonstrably attracted mass public support. It is for these reasons I suggest it is useful to think of disarming as a tactic of resistance. Through an integration of formal features in its publicity material, Pink Dot disarms by performatively neutralizing potentially discordant elements of its rhetoric whilst simultaneously using that state of apparent neutrality to draw in support from LGBT individuals and straight allies alike for its ostensibly depoliticized message. Such a tactic could legitimately be critiqued as an assimilationist move that only succeeds in reproducing and reinforcing the established order rather than remaking the social order in a more meaningful way (see, for example, Brown 1995; Duggan 2003; Stein & Plummer 1994). However, in a country where the space for dissent is already radically restricted, this particular tactic ought not to be dismissed – it works insofar as it allows Pink Dot to achieve its limited goal of growing its support base and increasing LGBT visibility in Singapore.

[insert Figure 1 here]

2. Theoretical approach: undertaking a multimodal analysis

2.1 Multimodality: a brief background

As a concept, multimodality proceeds from an understanding that texts "create meanings not only through language but also through visual features and elements such as images, colour, the layout of pages, even through material objects and architecture" (Machin 2013:347). Its beginnings can be traced to semiotic theory that suggested verbal and visual elements in a text work together to co-create meaning (Barthes 1973; Barthes 1977). Building on this, a number of scholars working in applied linguistics began to study how visual images functioned as a meaning-carrying semiotic mode (see, for example, Hodge & Kress 1993; O'Toole 1994) before Kress and van Leeuwen published *Reading Images* (1996) – arguably the first systematic framework with which to describe formal visual elements present and how these features contributed to the visual construction of meaning.

Adapted from Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1978), Kress and van Leeuwen's model offers a visual grammar that accounts for the meaning potential of specific elements in an image which is then narrowed down and realized by the specific context within which it appears. The point about context is worth emphasizing because "semiotic code only becomes interpretable in context by virtue of being embedded within an unfolding discourse" (Bateman 2011:21); thus, the meaning potential that is contained multimodally in a text is only fully realized within a particular social context. It is clear that there is now a much greater appreciation for how meaning is communicated multimodally rather than monomodally through written language alone. This is reflected in the increasing research output within the field where the scholarship and literature on multimodality has grown to encompass approaches that explore the semiotics of colour (see Koller 2008; Kress & van Leeuwen 2002), typography (see van Leeuwen 2006; van Leeuwen 2008), sound (see van Leeuwen 1999; Way & McKerrell 2017), and even architecture (see Abousnnouga & Machin

2013). Koller (2008) notably operationalizes the semiotics of colour to explore gender and sexuality and in terms of studying sexuality specifically in the Singaporean context, Lazar (2017) stands out as the most prominent study in recent times to have approached the topic from a multimodal perspective.

2.2 Analytical framework

The analytic toolkit used in in this article brings together Kress and van Leeuwen's (2002) framework analysing the semiotics of colour, van Leeuwen's (2006) framework for analysing typography, and Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) account of layout. The terminology used in Section 3 follows the terminology used in these frameworks. Whilst I integrate most of the details pertaining to the analytical framework with the analysis itself, I briefly unpack the terms used and summarize them here.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) suggest the meaning potential of colour is the sum total of the colour's position on the scales of value, saturation, purity, modulation, differentiation, and hue. The scale of value runs from "maximally light (white) to maximally dark (black)" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:355). Saturation refers to the nature of the colour's manifestation and runs on a scale from its "most intensely saturated […] to complete de-saturation, to black and white" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:356). The scale of purity refers to whether a colour is a primary colour or composed of mixed colours (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:356). Modulation runs on a scale from "fully modulated colour" such as "a blue that is richly textured with different tints and shades" to "flat colour" in a single shade (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:357). Differentiation refers to the degree of variety in the palette of colours used (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:357). Finally, hue, is simply "the scale from blue to red" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:357).

van Leeuwen (2006) proposes a semiotics of typography that creates meaning potential based on specific features such as weight, expansion, slope, curvature, connectivity, orientation, and regularity (van Leeuwen 2006:147–50). Weight refers to the thickness of a typeface, and can be seen, for example in "the difference between bold typefaces […] and regular typefaces" (van Leeuwen 2006:148). Expansion refers to the spread of a certain typeface and whether spaces are narrow or wide between the letterforms (van Leeuwen 2006:148). Slope is "the difference between cursive, sloping, 'script'-like typefaces and upright typefaces" (van Leeuwen 2006:148). Curvature refers to the degree of roundedness as opposed to angularity in a typeface (van Leeuwen 2006:148–49). Connectivity indicates the degree of connection both within and between the letterforms of a typeface (van Leeuwen 2006:149). Orientation refers to whether a particular typeface is oriented "towards the horizontal dimension" and "comparatively 'flattened'" or "towards the vertical dimension" and "comparatively elongated" (van Leeuwen 2006:149). Lastly, regularity refers to the consistency of features within the typeface and whether letterforms are consistently rendered the same way or if they have "an apparently random distribution of specific [irregular] features" (van Leeuwen 2006:150).

In terms of layout, Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) demonstrate how information can be structured in particular ways through layout and how this might potentially communicate a certain set of meanings. In a horizontal layout, for instance, "elements placed on the left are presented as Given, [and] the elements placed on the right as New" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:181) which relates to information that is positioned as established and newly-salient in any given text. It is worth reiterating once more at this point that what this type of multimodal analysis surfaces is only meaning potential which is then realized by its surrounding context. Interpreting the analysis therefore necessarily requires a "situated discourse interpretation" (Bateman 2011:22). Thus, I articulate the formation of meaning by situating the analytical

findings within the context of a movement that is looking to end the discrimination that LGBT people in Singapore face and calling for greater acceptance of them without coming across as disruptive or confrontational by emphasizing positivity, diversity and inclusivity.

3. A multimodal analysis of a Pink Dot 2017 flyer

3.1 Semiotics of colour

3.1.1 Value

[insert Figure 2 here]

The high value levels of the significantly represented colours in this image are immediately evident from the dominant pink in this text – the people are all dressed in pink tops; they are all holding various pink accoutrements; and all the words are set in pink except the slogan "supporting the freedom to love" which is set in grey. This is reflected in the very high value levels marked out in Fig. 2 where almost all the shades of pink in the image have value levels higher than 90%. Relatively lower value levels are provided by the grey slogan, and the jeans worn by the people pictured. The slogan has a value level of 50.2%, and two of the individuals are dressed in jeans with value levels of 57.65% and 67.84%. Whilst these levels are not high, they are also not by any means low. The only relatively low value level, 22.35%, comes from the dark blue jeans on the left. The influence of moderate and low value colours in this image is limited – the image is cropped at knee-level; and the slogan occupies relatively less space compared to the other words with high value levels. Coupled with the fact that all of this is set against a white background, the colours in the image rank highly on the scale of value which has the potential to signify positivity and optimism (van Leeuwen 2008:132–33).

It is worth pointing out the relatively lower value level of the date and time (85.1%). The date and time are the most relevant details of Pink Dot – after all, they tell viewers exactly when the event is happening and when to show up, and we could read the slightly lower value levels here as signifying the relative importance of that information. Taken as a whole and in relation to the other very high value levels, the lower value levels of the date and time could be read as signifying a message that in spite of the overall backdrop of cheer, there remains an element of gravity and seriousness to the event itself.

3.1.2 Saturation

[insert Figure 3 here]

The saturation levels throughout the flyer range from 28.34% - 82.91% except for the small amount of grey from the jeans (4.08%) and the grey in the slogan (0%). Saturation relates to "emotive temperature" and "intensity of feeling" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:356) and the relatively high saturation levels work together with the high value levels to realize the meaning potentials of warmth and positivity. At the same time, the relatively lower saturation levels add a degree of subtlety to the flyer and, together with the lack of extremely high saturation levels, this ensures the meaning potentials of warmth and positivity are not realized as an overbearing projection of optimism. Different degrees of saturation also afford different degrees of prominence to the words in the text. The date and time have higher levels of saturation (71.43%) – together with the gravity suggested by the value levels, this marks them out as the more salient components of the flyer and draws the viewer's attention to them. Just as the relatively greater degree of saturation foregrounds the date and time of Pink Dot 2017, the lack of saturation in the slogan (0%) reduces its prominence and backgrounds its message. The "subtle" quality (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:356) that is created as a result

works together with its reluctance to come across as an "outright proclamation of [LGBT] interests" (Ramdas 2013:121) to modulate the call for greater acceptance of LGBT people in Singapore and allows that message to be carried indirectly and implicitly.

3.1.3 Purity

There is a high degree of hybridity – as opposed to purity – in the colours used for the flyer. This primarily comes from the dominant pink throughout – the colour pink, of course, being a hybrid of red, white, and sometimes blue. This degree of hybridity is compounded by the fact that there are various shades of pink throughout the flyer. Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) point out that, as a concept, hybridity is positively viewed in contemporary times (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:356) and the high degree of hybridity in the flyer thus draws on this quality of positivity and associates it with Pink Dot. The hybridity in the flyer also works together with the positivity indexed through value and saturation (see 3.1.1 and 3.1.2) to lend a degree of optimism to Pink Dot's call for greater support for a plurality of sexualities and identities in Singapore.

3.1.4 Modulation

[insert Figure 4 here]

The variances in RGB colour composition levels in Fig. 4 show that there is a high degree of modulation in the pink used in this flyer. All the t-shirt colours and the assorted props being held on the left are of different shades. The shades of pink used for the words, too, vary. The highly modulated colour here indexes nuance that works together with the saturation levels (see 3.1.2) to reinforce the effect of subtlety (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:357) in Pink Dot's call for greater acceptance of LGBT people in Singapore. In contrast, however, the slogan for

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the event is presented in flat colour – a grey of a uniform shade. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) postulate that modulation is related to modality and therefore the absence of modulation could be read as suggesting that the statement "supporting the freedom to love" should be taken as an uncontested, self-evident, statement. In addition, read together with the absence of saturation in the slogan's colour, this subtly presents the message that everyone, including LGBT people, should have the freedom to love whomever they want as "simple and bold in a positive sense" and something that ought to be considered an uncontested "abstract truth" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:357).

3.1.5 Differentiation

Even though many shades of pink are used (Fig. 4 shows their R-levels range between 214 - 248), there is a lack of differentiation across the palette of colours. Besides pink, the only other significant colour represented is the grey in the slogan whilst some other colours (dark and light blue) are minimally represented by the Pink Dot ambassadors' jeans. Overall, however, pink and its associated shades dominate and there is a distinct lack of differentiation amongst the colours reflected in the flyer. Where there is a lack of differentiation, one of the "key semiotic affordances […] is the restraint involved" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:357). Together with the effect of subtlety realized through modulation and saturation (see 3.1.2 and 3.1.5), the sense of restraint that is invoked here works to complement and reinforce the overall subtlety of Pink Dot's message to end discrimination of LGBT people in Singapore. In this way, Pink Dot's call for greater acceptance of LGBT people carries through with a minimal degree of antipathy.

3.1.6 Hue

The red end of this scale is associated with "warmth, energy, salience and foregrounding" whilst the blue end is associated with "cold, calm, distance, and backgrounding" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:357). The range of R-values in Fig. 4 (214 – 248) that comes close to the maximum possible value of 255 shows the predominance of colours on the red end. Colours with low R-values are minimally represented and of those colours, the primary contributor is the grey that comes from the slogan; this falls in the middle of the red-blue scale and is close to neither the red nor the blue end. Overall, therefore, the hue of the colours in this flyer work together with the high value levels and saturation (see 3.1.1 and 3.1.2) to realize the meaning potentials of positivity and warmth and portray Pink Dot as a movement that is inclusive, welcoming, and open to all. In this way, it aligns itself with the Singaporean norms of emphasizing unity and non-confrontation in furthering its cause.

3.2 Semiotics of typography

3.2.1 Weight

The distribution of weight in the way words are rendered simultaneously distributes salience across a text or image (van Leeuwen 2006:148). On the left of the flyer, the caption next to the image that details the names of the three people depicted is set in a regular typeface and is much smaller compared to the rest of the written text. Its relatively low salience here can be attributed to the fact that the people in the picture are Singaporean celebrities who are generally well-known to the wider public. The important message – their endorsement and support of Pink Dot – is already communicated by the fact that they are all dressed in pink as well as through layout (see section 3.3). The specific details conveyed in the caption – their names – are the smallest and have the least weight. This can be attributed to the fact that this

particular detail of their names is not very materially relevant to Pink Dot and as such does not require much textual prominence.

Far more prominent are the date and time on the right which are given increased weight by being set in bold font and a much larger size. Together with their colour and placement, this ensures maximal salience in comparison to the other words in the flyer. Pink Dot 2017 was the ninth iteration of the event – its name and slogan were already familiar and recognizable to Singaporeans by then. Furthermore, Hong Lim Park is where it has been held ever since it began in 2009 – as well as the only place in Singapore it can legally be held – which diminishes the degree of salience this piece of information needs to be given. The information that is relatively most salient is the actual date and time that people need to show up – and accordingly, it is given greatest weight. In this way, the importance of the material act of attending Pink Dot to visibly demonstrate solidarity and one's support for the LGBT community is highlighted.

Another element given an increased degree of salience through greater weight is the letter *o* in *pinkdot*. Its much higher weight comes from it being rendered as a solid dot instead of being rendered more conventionally with a hole in its centre. It is a literal pink dot, as it were. The greater weight draws attention to it and could be read as a rhetorical manoeuvre that emphasises and reiterates the name of the movement through graphical iconicity. In addition, and more significantly, this literal pink dot also functions as an intertextual reference that echoes and foreshadows the performance of Pink Dot itself. For, the defining moment of Pink Dot is when all the participants present at Hong Lim Park come together to form a human pink dot – a moment that is "highly significant as a visual symbol of Singaporeans uniting as a singular body politic" (Lazar 2017:430). Rendering the *o* as a pink

dot function as a reference to this moment and its increased weight gives this constitutive feature of Pink Dot a higher degree of salience.

3.2.2 Expansion

The meaning potential of this typographical feature "relates to our experience of space" and how one might respond to being in wide, open spaces or small, constrained spaces (van Leeuwen 2006:148). It is notable that the typeface used in the flyer is consistent throughout and the generous space between letters and words tends towards the wide and expanded end of this continuum. In tandem with the positivity and subtlety indexed through the use of colour, the meaning potential here could be realized as giving sufficient "room to breathe" (van Leeuwen 2006:148) and helps to communicate the call for greater acceptance of LGBT people by suggesting there is sufficient space in Singaporean society for everyone, including LGBT people, to live comfortably.

3.2.3 Slope

The meaning potential carried by the slope of letters relates to the degree of formality of a message and, where there is a distinction, could indicate a contrast between formal and informal registers (van Leeuwen 2006:148). The typeface used throughout the flyer is consistently straight and upright throughout. However, it is notable that there is a contrast between the formality and seriousness indexed by the upright typeface and the informality and light-heartedness of the people in the image who are beaming and in good spirits. Here, in the same way that the contrastive differences between some elements of colour (value and saturation) lend a degree of gravity to Pink Dot amidst a general backdrop of cheer and optimism, the contrast between the upright typeface and the upbeat nature of the image achieves a similar effect. Against the general buoyancy from the image, the slope of the

letterforms indexes a serious register and thus serves as a reminder that the issue in question –
ending the discrimination that LGBT people in Singapore face – is a significant and
important one.

3.2.4 Curvature

The rounded joints and edges of letterforms used throughout stress curvature and eschew
angularity. This feature has experiential meaning potential based on the contrastive
experiences of producing straight and round forms. Straight and angular forms require a
"brisk, decisive" movement whilst a rounded typeface requires "more gradual" movement
(van Leeuwen 2006:149). Roundedness can also suggest softness and smoothness whilst
angularity retains the potential to come across as harsh and abrasive. In this way, the
roundedness in the typeface, together with the saturation and modulation in colour (see 3.1.2
and 3.1.4) which index a reluctance to place the activist component of the event front-and-
centre, helps construct Pink Dot as a gentle, cohesive, movement that is not disruptive to the
status quo. It symbolically soothes the viewer (van Leeuwen 2006:148–49) to reinforce the
notion that Pink Dot is not proposing something socially divisive or radical by promoting
greater LGBT visibility and calling for acceptance.

3.2.5 Connectivity

Most of the typeface used has a high degree of internal and external disconnection. The
meaning potential in external disconnection – which is realized here together with the
diversity emphasized in the image – could signify "the distinctive individuality of the
elements of the whole" (van Leeuwen 2006:149), referring to the myriad diversity of people
that make up both the Singaporean LGBT community and Singapore itself. Internal
connection could be read as a sign of cohesiveness of Pink Dot and simultaneously gestures

towards the social cohesion that it is keen to stress it promotes. The typeface used for *pinkdot* has a high degree of internal disconnection as well as external disconnection. Taken together with the light-hearted, warm tone that is set up in the rest of flyer through layout and colour, this feature realizes the meaning potential of a "sense of not being 'buttoned up' and being 'easy-going'" (van Leeuwen 2006:149) and accentuates the feelings of warmth and positivity associated with the movement.

3.2.6 Orientation

The typeface appears to be moderately oriented along the vertical axis. The meaning potential of this feature is based on the human "experience of gravity" where an upward vertical orientation suggests an aspirational attitude reaching for something but also a certain instability because of this shift (van Leeuwen 2006:149). In this context, the ascendance here indexes an aspiration for a change in the status quo where LGBT people continue to be discriminated in Singapore in various ways. At the same time, the moderation in its vertical orientation suggests that this aspiration is tempered by a degree of restraint as well as a reluctance to cause a great deal of instability in realizing this aspiration. In this way, the moderate ascendance here works to construct Pink Dot as a movement very much promoting social harmony that is looking to effect gradual change instead of anything very radical – something that is complemented by curvature in typography as well as saturation and modulation in colour.

3.2.7 Regularity

All the typefaces exhibit a high degree of regularity and follow the prescribed norms of a word-processed text – there is equal spacing between letters, an absence of decorative flourishes, and so on. Here, we should remember that irregularity has the "potential to signify

a kind of rebellion" (van Leeuwen 2006:147) against established norms. Thus, even though Pink Dot is indeed challenging things as they stand in Singapore where same-sex relationships are cast as illegitimate and not normal, the regularity in the typefaces throughout the flyer signifies a limitation of this rebellious dimension, ensuring it remains "neatly contained by the controlled symmetry of the overall layout" (van Leeuwen 2006:147). This is reinforced and realized together with the subtlety indexed by saturation and modulation in colour, as well as the backgrounding of activism achieved through curvature and orientation in typography. Distancing itself from coming across as rebellious here is consistent with Pink Dot's overall reluctance to be associated with openly confrontational forms of resistance (cf. Chua 2014).

3.3 Layout and information structure

[insert Figure 5 here]

In the flyer, which is oriented along the horizontal axis, the white space in the middle traced out in Fig. 5 serves as a demarcation between the left and right, and thereby marks the regions that offer the viewer Given and New information. What is on the left is thus depicted as something the viewer should already know and is familiar with whilst what is provided on the right is depicted as salient information which the viewer needs to pay attention to (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996:181).

On the left, familiar information comes in the form of the three Pink Dot ambassadors – Ebi Shankara, Nathan Hartono, and Theresa Goh. All three are Singaporean celebrities: Ebi Shankara is a local television host and actor; Nathan Hartono is a very popular, well-known, singer; and Theresa Goh is a multi-Paralympic gold medallist and one of the country's most successful athletes. Within the Singaporean context, then, they constitute readily recognizable

faces and featuring them reflects an orientation towards the local. In addition to the caption on the right of the image that explicitly identifies them as ambassadors, the connection between the trio and Pink Dot is further strengthened by all three celebrities dressing in pink tops and the words being rendered in pink resulting in a visual sense of cohesion being achieved between image and text through the consistent use of colour (van Leeuwen 2008). It is also worth highlighting that the Pink Dot ambassadors are of different ethnicities. This is significant because emphasizing diversity, multiculturalism and racial harmony has long been a recognizable trope of official state narratives in Singapore (see, for example, Benjamin 1976; Chua 2003; Chua 2009). The well-known and oft-repeated state policy of "official multiculturalism" (Chua 2005:1) means that the image of people from different ethnic backgrounds effectively signifies not just the local but metonymically functions as a signifier of Singaporean society itself. The trope of diversity is further accentuated in other ways beyond ethnicity – in terms of gender, one woman and two men are depicted; and people with disabilities are also represented through Goh who is photographed in her wheelchair.

It is possible to read a secondary Given-New information structure embedded within this section for potential viewers who do not recognize the three public personalities. For them, the image of the three people on the left would still serve as the point of departure; however, instead of seeing and recognizing the three Singaporean celebrities, more likely they would simply see them as a representation of Singaporean society because of an abstract depiction of ethnic diversity. In this case, the caption on the right would provide New information and could possibly aid their construction of meaning by allowing them to place faces to names that might be familiar to them. The celebrities themselves are pictured looking directly at the viewer which "demands the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2002:118) with them. The warm, radiant smiles on all their faces orient the viewer towards a social relation of affinity and, by extension, Pink Dot. This,

together with value and hue in colour (see 3.1.1 and 3.1.6), reinforces the message of positivity and inclusivity that is carried through in the flyer.

On the right of the flyer, we are presented with the name, date, time, and place of the event – this is new information the viewer is expected to pay special attention to. Visual cohesion between the image and written language is realized through the consistent use of pink, and a different colour, grey, is used to set the slogan apart from the rest of the logistical details communicated in the text. It expresses the overarching aim of the event: "supporting the freedom to love." This is information that is "contestable" and "at issue" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002:181) because it is the very reason for Pink Dot's existence – precisely because LGBT people in Singapore lack the freedom to love whomever they want. Together with the greater levels of saturation (see 3.1.2) and weight (see 3.2.1) it is rendered in, the date and time of the event is given specific textual prominence by its placement in the centre of the section – all of which work to direct the viewer's gaze towards it as the most salient component of New information.

4. Contextualizing Pink Dot's discursive attenuation

Having described how Pink Dot discursively attenuates itself and foregrounds its non-confrontational posture, it would be useful to lay out what makes such an approach a viable one. This requires situating it in the Singaporean context within which it is embedded and operates. Pink Dot visibly orients itself towards this local context not only through the various discursive features described above but also by prominently featuring Singaporean celebrities in this flyer. Whilst this accentuates the overall feeling of positivity and warmth by appealing to familiarity, it could also be read as a signifier of the mainstream public realm and signalling a degree of propriety. In other words, this is "a classic example of

respectability politics: an attempt by the oppressed to demonstrate their compatibility with mainstream values" (Ng 2017:238). The association with well-known public personalities suggests they support and endorse the movement and conveys the message that Pink Dot is similarly appropriate for Singaporeans to associate themselves with. This is part of a broader emphasis that Pink Dot places on the local by highlighting its connection to it. Part of this is because it actively "avoid[s] being seen as having foreign influence" (Chua 2014:21) lest it attract state backlash with regard to foreign intervention in local matters. Another part of it is because Pink Dot 2017 was the first time it was operating under amendments made to the Public Order Act. According to the government, the change in legislation was to ensure "that Singapore [was] not used as a platform by foreigners to further political causes, especially those that are controversial or divisive" (Ong 2017) and it meant that "only Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents [were] permitted to assemble at the Speakers' Corner" (Pink Dot SG 2017a). The amendments also meant that "foreign firms would no longer be allowed to sponsor or participate in Pink Dot. Previous corporate sponsors of the event [had included] Google, Apple and Facebook" (CNA 2017). As a result, there was a much greater imperative for Pink Dot to demonstrate and reiterate that it was a local event, organized by and for Singaporeans, and distinctly free of any foreign influence.

This insistence on constructing itself as a locally grounded, Singaporean movement is further evident in how it makes sense of the colour pink. Whilst the liberal use of pink has the potential to function as a visual signifier of sexuality (Koller 2008) and draw on the transnational currents of the larger, global, LGBT movement (Altman 2001), Pink Dot does not gesture towards this, preferring to highlight the local meanings of pink and orient itself towards them instead. Mirroring its orientation to the local through the depiction of Singaporean celebrities, the global meanings of pink are largely forsaken in favour of local,

national, significance (Chua 2012) in the way it makes sense of pink and this is foregrounded on Pink Dot's website where it describes pink as:

> […] the colour of our [identity cards]. It is also the colour when you mix red and white – the colours of our national flag. Pink Dot stands for an open, inclusive society within our Red Dot, where sexual orientation represents a feature, not a barrier. (Pink Dot SG 2019)

It is telling that there is no mention made at all about the transnational LGBT movement. This non-mention reflects a distinct preference for emphasizing locally relevant meanings of pink to communicate that it is a Singaporean movement. It is also part of a commitment to pre-empting accusations of undue foreign influence by ensuring that symbols that might be construed as originating from outside Singapore are deliberately localized and grounded in the Singaporean context (Bob 2009; Merry 2006). In fact, the very name of the event – Pink Dot – is a reference that harks back to a comment made in 1998 by then-Indonesian President Jusuf Habibie when he disparagingly labelled Singapore a little "red dot" compared to Indonesia (Borsuk and Chua 1998). Shortly after, Singapore's political leaders reclaimed this term as a badge of honour and it has been used positively ever since as an informal moniker of sorts. Pink Dot's re-appropriation of the term in naming itself thus draws on all this local history and national significance to "[align] the movement with the nation, with a creative twist in hue" (Lazar 2017:430). This alignment with the nation and its local orientation is made doubly clear in its enunciation that "Pink Dot stands for an open, inclusive society within *our* Red Dot" (Pink Dot SG 2019, emphasis mine) which reflects how it sees itself as belonging to, and a part of, Singapore.

Lynette Chua (2014) argues this is part of a strategy to eschew an event modelled on gay pride parades around the world because such a movement would run the risk of being perceived as too politically confrontational in Singapore. Within the Singaporean context, such an approach would be counterproductive as it would greatly limit the amount of mainstream support for the movement – something that Pink Dot has identified is crucial in its attempts to increase the visibility and acceptance of LGBT people in the country. Thus, Pink Dot pitches itself as a non-confrontational, all-inclusive, event calling on the entire nation to celebrate and support the right for everybody to love whomever they choose. As a movement looking to create "openness and acceptance [of LGBT people]" (Pink Dot SG 2019) in Singapore, Pink Dot has had to undertake "a mode of pragmatic resistance [and tactically manoeuvre] around the illiberal pragmatism of governance" (Lazar 2017:425) through an approach that "toe[s] the line, while pushing boundaries" (Chua 2014:20). Part of such an approach entails discursively attenuating itself in a number of ways as well as aligning itself with national symbols. This flyer provides an example as to how the process of attenuation is discursively performed such that Pink Dot manages to construct itself and the cause in a non-confrontational, positive, way that is marshalled specifically to meet the limited affordances for resistance allowed within Singapore's socio-political context.

It is certainly true that instead of mounting an expansive critique that seeks to challenge the foundations of heteronormativity in Singapore, Pink Dot has a far more limited goal in seeking to increase the visibility and acceptance of LGBT people in mainstream Singaporean society by demonstrating their compatibility with "a pathway centred on nationalism, social harmony, normative family-orientedness, consensus-building and forging alliances with the heterosexual mainstream" (Lazar 2017:439). Its assimilationist tactics thus leave it open to criticisms of homonormativity where homonormativity denotes propagating "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but

upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 2003:50). From this perspective, one could legitimately make the argument that Pink Dot is a movement that does not seek "liberation *from* [but …] assimilation *into* the cultural mainstream" in Singapore (Phillips 2020:9 emphasis in original). Thus, for example, it focuses heavily on demonstrating the compatibility of LGBT people with what Oswin (2014:415) terms the "proper family" in Singapore and foregrounds qualities like kinship and love whilst communicating them in a non-confrontational manner that emphasises a social consensus. However, instead of critiquing the nature of Pink Dot's resistance, I prefer to focus on the frame within which Pink Dot operates and the kind of resistance that is rendered necessary as a function of the field of power within which it is embedded.

Michel Foucault (1978:95) argues that "[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." In other words, resistance does not exist as an *a priori* phenomenon; because it is in a relationship with power, it is also necessarily a response to power. This is why "[e]very power relationship implies, at least *in potentia*, a strategy of struggle, in which the two forces are not super-imposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused" (Foucault 1982:794). From the perspective of a marginalized group that is undertaking resistance, then, this means the manner and nature of their resistance hinges and turns upon the affordances it is given through the configurations of power itself. The particular difficulty of the Singaporean socio-political context is that power is configured such that challenging it directly is itself a challenge. Before Speakers' Corner was exempted from the formal prohibitions on protests and public assemblies in 2008, it was, to all intents and purposes, impossible to organize one. Framed as economically disruptive and a potential threat to social cohesion in the country, applications for permits to protest the government were "typically

denied" (Chua 2014:30). Instances like the detention of journalists in the 1960s and 1970s purportedly because of their alleged trade union and opposition party links and the detention of social activists in the late 80s have yet to fade from memory (George 2012). This adds to a general hesitation to publicly voice critical opinions and openly display dissent. Whilst George (2007:133) does point out that in contemporary times, "there has been a shift from more spectacular punishments, such as imprisonment", plenty of Singaporeans still remember the coercive capacity of the state – and this tempers the willingness of a large majority of the population to be associated with anything resembling a protest. This is why even though Lee declared that demonstrations at Speakers' Corner would be "manage[d] with a light touch" (Lee 2008), it was not enough to undo the reluctance of the vast majority of people to be involved in anything resembling a demonstration or a protest. For, the promise of 'light touch' regulation nonetheless invokes "the memory of the heavy hand" (George 2007:142).

One might say this comes across as somewhat of an overreaction or an unwarranted fear – particularly in the aftermath of the country's Prime Minister publicly providing assurances of very light regulation. Such a perspective misses the historical delegitimization of protest as a mode of resistance in Singapore (see, for example, Mutalib 2000; Rodan 2003; Tan 2012). Those who are involved in actual critical enterprise tend to "treat the subtlest political signals seriously because experience tells them not to doubt the authorities' preparedness to use greater force if less is not enough"(George 2007:142). Working within these terms of engagement which have been made normal in Singapore, it is possible that Pink Dot activists have even come to internalize these terms of engagement as part-and-parcel of 'doing' activism in Singapore and regulate themselves along those lines as a result (Fernandez 2008). Therefore, even if some of the formal restrictions on demonstrations and protests have been removed in Singapore, the informal prohibitions – that is to say, social norms that render open confrontation and spectacles of social instability untenable as a means

to gain mass public support – continue to influence the tactics that Pink Dot adopts in order to ensure that it achieves a measure of cultural resonance with the general public.

5. Conclusion

In this article, through a close multimodal analysis, I show how Pink Dot's decision to avoid the language of rights whilst seeking to promote the acceptance of LGBT people in Singapore and encourage social acceptance is not limited to written language but is also evident and embedded in micro-discursive visual features. Focussing particularly on colour, typography, and layout, I demonstrate how these visual elements interact and work together with written language to communicate the call for greater acceptance of LGBT people in Singapore in a manner that highlights positivity, warmth and inclusivity. Visually, the meaning potentials of warmth and positivity are realized by the elements of value, saturation, and hue in the colours used in the flyer and complemented by the type of image used. The meaning potential of diversity is realized through the connectivity in typography and interacts with the diversity represented by the three celebrities in the image. Saturation and modulation work together to give Pink Dot's message a degree of subtlety and attenuates the directness of its message; and this indirect quality is complemented by the typographical elements of expansion, connectivity, orientation, and regularity which work to characterize Pink Dot as a non-confrontational movement.

In terms of written linguistic detail, it is quite obvious that the flyer is extremely light on words. This could be ascribed to Pink Dot's familiarity in the public consciousness and a reflexive self-awareness on the part of the text producer that, having been staged nine years in a row, there is less of an imperative to explain Pink Dot in great detail. The lack of written text thus indicates an assumption that most readers accessing this text would already be

sufficiently familiar with it. In the limited written text that is present, the non-confrontational nature of Pink Dot is linguistically realized and reinforced through the slogan "supporting the freedom to love". There is no explicit reference to the LGBT cause or even a reference to the discourse of equal rights in it. Freedom to love is an abstract notion that could apply to anybody and everybody – and this is precisely the point. The universality of the idea means it comes across as all-encompassing, applicable to everyone in society, and not at all divisive. It is important to acknowledge that were the slogan rendered in more direct terms specifically referencing LGBT rights, it might be more effective in (rightly) spotlighting the difficulties and discrimination that LGBT people in Singapore face. However, such a move would also strike a very different tone and might run the risk of being perceived as far too confrontational and socially divisive thus compromising its ability to attract support from the larger Singaporean public. Pink Dot's slogan is thus reflective of its broader strategy of adopting a posture of non-confrontation and deliberately avoiding the language of rights so as to secure mainstream public support (Chua 2014; Phillips 2013) for its cause. In this way, the written linguistic detail works together with the various visual features in this flyer to subtly reinforce and communicate the call for greater acceptance of LGBT people in a non-confrontational manner that emphasizes consensus instead of conflict.

Even though, nominally, Pink Dot is not a protest, it is still a movement that is built upon a dissatisfaction with the current status quo in Singapore, a sense that things as they stand are not good enough for LGBT people in Singapore, and ultimately aims to modify the existing and established order such that LGBT people in Singapore are not discriminated against and are more readily accepted in society. It is therefore curious that it plays down the discordant elements of its rhetoric and deliberately constructs a portrayal of positivity, warmth, and inclusivity. This speaks to the particular socio-political context in Singapore where, unlike "places where rights mobilization is accepted and mainstream, […] exercising

and claiming rights are nonconformist behaviours" (Chua 2014:7). As a function of this particular Singaporean norm, in addition to their cause itself and whatever they are advocating, activists and movement organizers have to pay attention to the nature of their advocacy itself and ensure it does not come across as disruptive or divisive if they are at all interested in securing mass public support. For LGBT activists in Singapore, this entails

> [struggling] with the state and their opponents over not only the meanings of equality but also the basic civil-political liberties that enable those challenges, rights that activists in liberal democracies often take for granted in their collective organizing work. (Chua 2014:7)

What this means for Pink Dot as a movement is that its work is not only confined to the message of LGBT equality that it looks to deliver but also extends to the delivery of that message itself. Thus, in a number of ways, through multiple modes, Pink Dot attempts to communicate its message in a manner that conveys positivity, warmth, and inclusivity to create a non-confrontational environment such that the viewer is persuaded into adopting a position of engagement both with the text and the movement itself and is more likely to view Pink Dot favourably and participate in it. This mode of resistance has been described as "pragmatic" (Chua 2012; Chua 2014) and an example of assimilationist discourse being strategically appropriated in its service (Lazar 2017). Whilst I do not necessarily disagree with either of these characterizations, I suggest that thinking of the process through which Pink Dot attenuates itself as a disarming process helps one better appreciate how Pink Dot's discursive attenuation is, in fact, a way of strengthening itself through a purported show of attenuation to achieve its larger strategic goals.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1. Pink Dot *2017*'s promotional flyer.

Figure 2. Value levels in Pink Dot *2017*'s promotional flyer.

Figure 3. Saturation levels in Pink Dot *2017*'s promotional flyer.

Figure 4. RGB levels in Pink Dot *2017*'s promotional flyer.

Figure 5. Given-New information structure in Pink Dot *2017*'s promotional flyer.