

AIPS Short-Term Research Grants Abstract- Ahmed Afzal

2023

Ethnographic Study of the Uses of Mobile Social Networking Apps in Urban Pakistan Ahmed Afzal (Associate Professor of Anthropology, California State University, Fullerton)
Proposal/Research Statement, AIPS Short-Term Grant:

The research project is an ethnographic study of the uses of Grindr, a mobile social networking app, among gay and bisexual men in Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Lahore. With an estimated 27 million users in 192 countries, Grindr is among the most popular social networking apps for gay, bisexual, trans and queer men globally. Reflecting its global popularity, Grindr is among the most subscribed social networking apps in Pakistan. Scholarship on Grindr has found that sex-seeking is the primary use of Grindr (Whitefield et al. 2017) giving credence to conceptions of Grindr as a “hook-up app” (Wortham 2013), a “modern-day gay bar” (Miller 2015), a space for “digital cruising” (Brubaker et al. 2016) and a “meat market” (Bonner-Thompson 2017). Other uses of Grindr include socializing, seeking friendship and networking (Race 2015). Despite the increasing ubiquity of smartphones globally and a steady growth in interdisciplinary scholarship on social networking apps such as Grindr, most scholarship has focused on gay and bisexual men in the United States and Europe (e.g. Alhm 2016; Albury et al. 2016; Andreassen 2018; Penny 2014; Shield 2019) with scant attention paid to the uses of Grindr in the non-west, especially in Muslim societies. The research attempts to fill such gaps in existing literature through a case study of Grindr users in Pakistan. The research contributes to interdisciplinary studies of emerging queer communities in the Global South and anthropology of contemporary Pakistan. The study utilizes engagements with networking apps as a lens to explore the increasing entrenchment of neoliberal consumption in a rapidly globalizing Pakistan. I have carried out research for this project in Pakistan since 2017. My identities as a native of Pakistan and as an openly gay Muslim man have contributed to my access to gay and bisexual men and have greatly facilitated research in Pakistan (Afzal forthcoming; 2016; 2005) and among gay Pakistani Muslim Americans (Afzal 2020; 2015; 2014) during the past two decades. The research utilizes participant observation, i.e., online interactions with men on Grindr, and in-depth interviews and targeted conversations. I have interviewed 35 men and interacted online with an additional approximately 150 men to learn more about their lives and experiences on Grindr. A research article drawing on this data is forthcoming as a chapter in a peer-reviewed edited volume, *Pakistan Desires* (Afzal forthcoming). The research is guided by questions such as: How has technology such as smartphones become incorporated into everyday life in Pakistan? How and to what effect are specific populations such as gay and bisexual men using social networking apps such as Grindr? How are the engagements with Grindr transforming constructions of sexuality? And finally, how is religion intertwined with such transformations? I am applying for an AIPS Short-Term Research Grant to carry out follow-up research in Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Lahore in April-May 2023. The follow-up research will conclude the data collection for this project. During the trip, for a period of one month, I will carry out follow-

up one-on-one interviews with a select number of interlocutors whom I have previously interviewed. Follow-up interviews will provide longitudinal data regarding changes in patterns of Grindr use over time, particularly given COVID mandated restrictions on socializing. Following the completion of the proposed follow-up field research in Pakistan, I will transcribe, code and analyze data, and complete a draft of a journal article during summer and fall 2023. I will submit the article for publication consideration to the peer-reviewed journal, GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies in the winter. GLQ is actively soliciting original research in non western contexts and appears to be an ideal platform for this research.