

AIPS Short-Term Research Grant Final Report

Project Title: Ethnographic Study of the Uses of Mobile Social Networking Apps in Urban Pakistan

Author's Name: Ahmed Afzal, Associate Professor, California State University, Fullerton

Dates for Project: December 2023-January 2024

Location: Rawalpindi/Islamabad and Lahore

1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

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, transgender, 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 (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 with scant attention paid to the uses of Grindr in the non-west, especially in Muslim societies. This research attempts to fill such gaps in existing interdisciplinary literature through an ethnographic case study of Grindr users in Pakistan. It also utilizes engagements with networking apps as a lens to explore the increasing entrenchment of neoliberal consumption in a rapidly globalizing Pakistan.

The research contributes to interdisciplinary studies of emerging queer communities in the Global South and anthropology of contemporary Pakistan. The research illuminates non-heteronormative sexualities in contemporary Pakistan, a topic that has previously only been explored in the context of the Khawaja Sira/transgender communities.

2. Key Outcomes and Deliverables

Follow-up interviews with participants provided valuable longitudinal qualitative data regarding Grindr app usage over time. In addition to follow-up interviews, I utilized snowball sampling to identify and interview approximately 10 additional men with profiles on the Grindr app to ensure the inclusion of individuals with varied backgrounds and experiences.

A second key outcome of the research is that provides qualitative data on emerging gay communities in the Global South through a case study of urban Pakistan.

A third key outcome of the research is that it fills gaps in existing literature on the relationship between new media technologies, notably smart phones, everyday life, and constructions of selfhood and sexuality during the current period of globalization.

Deliverables for this project include an in-progress peer-reviewed journal article tentatively titled “Predators, Scammers, Fakers: Negotiating the Perils of Grindr in Pakistan” and a proposed book on based on the data collected for this project, tentatively titled “Beyond Hooking Up: Tales from Grindr in Pakistan.” I am currently working on a draft of the peer-reviewed journal article as well as the book proposal, with anticipated completion of the article and the book proposal by the end of summer 2024.

I will also draw on data collected during the field research trip for an invited lecture to the South Asia Working Group at Texas A & M University on February 28, 2024. In addition, I will be submitting an abstract for paper presentation at the annual South Asia Conference in Wisconsin in October 2024.