

Book review of Shield,  
Andrew DJ (2019)  
*Immigrants on Grindr.*  
*Race, Sexuality and*  
*Belonging Online.*  
Cham: Palgrave  
Macmillan. 245 pp.



**BOOK REVIEW**

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**ABSTRACT**

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The book *Immigrants on Grindr. Race, Sexuality and Belonging Online* sheds light on gay and trans migrants' experiences in the white-majority (L)GBTQ "hook-up" platform—Grindr—primarily aimed at gay men. It examines the ways different identities such as migrant, sexual, racial, and gender identities intersect on Grindr. The study contributes to the existing online gay research and migration research in Europe. *Immigrants on Grindr* highlights the need to draw a closer attention to race (not only national, cultural, or religious difference) and racialization processes, as experiences of exclusion on Grindr are often the outcome of racist speech acts surfacing Grindr culture. The author, Andrew D. J. Shield, works as an Assistant Professor of Migration History at Leiden University. He has specialized in sexuality and LGBTQ minorities, migration, and diversity studies. The review is based on the first online version published in 2019.

The book consists of seven chapters and index. The first chapter works as an introduction to the subject. In Chapter 1, Shield also defines the keywords of the study such as the Greater Copenhagen area, Grindr culture, immigrant, and race. Chapter 2 introduces Grindr and its history as well as gives a literature review on previous research on gay men's digital cultures. The historiography and changes in gay men's digital cultures over the last 25 years are interestingly dealt with via author's own autoethnographic experiences within the gay culture. Chapter 3 focuses on methodological and ethical issues, for example, recruiting interviewees via Grindr, conducting interviews, author's insider/outsider reflections, and strategies for presenting user profiles visually without revealing personally identifiable information. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are the main analytical chapters while the seventh chapter concludes the results of the research.

The analysis and the research results are based on material gathered by the author in 2015–2019. According to Shield, the research data consist of (1) 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with Grindr users with migration background in the greater Copenhagen area, mainly from "non-Western" countries and (2) 600 "skeleton profiles" created and selected by Shield from the profile texts of estimated 6000 Grindr users in the greater Copenhagen area. In addition, he mentions that the analysis also draws from (3) several events organized by and/or for LGBTQs with immigration background he participated in Europe; and (4) informal discussions he had with Grindr users both online and offline. It stays a bit unclear how he has used or analyzed information received from events and informal discussions, and what is their overall role in the research composition.

There is not a separate theoretical chapter in the book, but main theoretical conversations (on race and racism) are added in analytical chapters. Thus, each chapter brings new and different layers and angles to the discussion of race. Chapter 4 scrutinizes newcomers' experiences and different identifications on Grindr in relation to their backgrounds, for example, reasons for migration (identifying as tourist or as immigrant). It raises the issues on the racial politics of the "gay cosmopolitan tourist" versus the queer migrant or refugee.

Chapter 5 continues the discussions of race by scrutinizing the intersections of different identities (migrant, racial, sexual, and gender) on Grindr, and experiences of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia in relation to Grindr users' subject positions. Shield utilizes the concepts of "everyday racism" and "entitlement racism" by Philomena Essed (e.g., 1991; 2013), and the notion of "sexual racism" (e.g., Callander et al. 2015) to analyze experiences of his interviewees. He identifies five patterns of racist discourses that people of color are likely to encounter on Grindr: persistent questions

about their origins, racial–sexual exclusions, racial–sexual fetishes, conflation between migrants and economic opportunism, and direct insults gay migrants face based on skin color, nationality, or religion. According to Shield, race-related communication is part of the everyday experiences on Grindr for people of color.

He suggests that racial–sexual preferences may be more than just individual’s personal preferences, and connected to larger socio-political context and discourses about race, immigration, and Islam. For example, racial–sexual fetishes may be based on racial stereotypes such as an idea that Asian men are submissive, or that black men are hypersexual or dominant. One of Shield’s interviewee encapsulates well the problematics of racial–sexual speech acts such as referring to people of color as food and treating them as a homogeneous, sexualized group:

“There is another sugar-coated racism: exotification. When people contact you just because you’re black, or just because you’re Middle Eastern. Because you are the fantasy they have and nothing more than that. And I also have [encountered] this a lot: people are talking to me and addressing me as a piece of chocolate. Or ‘I’ve never been with a black guy.’ ‘Black guys are so hot.’ Talking to you in plural, I’m like, ‘I’m not that plural.’” (p. 167).

Although some users might list their racial–sexual fetishes (e.g., “Into Asians”), racial–sexual exclusions instead are more likely to take place on “back stage,” in one-on-one messages than explicitly disclosed in the profiles.

Chapter 6 discusses the burden of racial labels offered by Grindr. Shield examines the interface and advanced search features of Grindr, such as a drop-down menu of “ethnicity” through which users can define themselves. The menu provides nine options from which a user can select only one: Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, Mixed, Native American, White, South Asian, and Other. Therefore, “ethnicity” menu enables race-selective filtering of potential connections. According to Shield, many migrant users found the “ethnicity” menu insufficient and difficult to identify with. Especially some categories such as the “Middle Eastern” and “South Asian” were experienced more problematic than other options (e.g., encompassing negative connotations). Consequently, some interviewees decided not to use the menu at all or used alternative identities, for example, by identifying as “brown” or selecting the label “Other.” The study underscores how the “ethnicity” menu simplifies racial and ethnic diversity of its users, and how it contributes to maintain strict racial boundaries.

Shield uses illuminating examples of interview quotes and “skeleton profiles” how the race and racial identifications are present on day-to-day communications of Grindr users. The text flows nicely and is very interesting to read. However, the book would have benefited from the last fine-tuning. For example, conclusion parts at the end of each chapter could have been more summary-like, as some times Shield continues analysis by presenting new examples and information of his data in the conclusion sections as well. The main research question/s could have also been stated clearly in the first chapter. Instead, the author poses multiple new questions along the way in each chapter, which is a bit confusing.

Ethical and methodological considerations remain unfortunately relatively light in the book. As a reader, I would have wanted to read more about critical discourse analysis and how the data was concretely analyzed by using discourse analysis. The composition of the study would have also required more thorough and critical

reflections of research ethics, not least because of the sensitivity of the subject and potential vulnerability of the research participants (belonging to sexual minorities as well as being migrants, some of them asylum seekers). What was the most distracting was the recommendation to use covert participant observation always for quantitative data and often for qualitative data collection as well (online environments) (p. 79). This should have been pondered in relation to current ethical and legal standards for research, especially in relation to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union (since 2018), for example, regarding the legal obligation to disclose any data collection.

Despite these critical remarks, the subject of this study is highly relevant. It is important to examine experiences of LGBTQ immigrants, not only the problems they face within their families or within migrant communities but also the mechanisms and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion they encounter among white-majority LGBTQ communities as well. To better understand these mechanisms, the book offers illustrative insights how whiteness permeates online spaces like Grindr and how it is still treated as the unmarked norm in Europe, and in the Nordic countries particular. Thus, *Immigrants on Grindr* makes a significant contribution to migration research and race/racism research—both online and offline.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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