

The Misrepresentation of American Sign Language and Deaf Culture in Mainstream Film Media: A Call for Inclusive Representation

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Mass film media has the power to shape popular culture and influence public opinions and perceptions; thus, properly portraying Deaf characters, the correct linguistic model of American Sign Language (ASL), and Deaf Culture in this powerful medium is crucial. This research examines the misrepresentation of Deaf Culture and ASL in film and its impact on real-world interactions between Deaf and hearing c/Communities. By analyzing historical film trends, bringing modern trends to light, and creating educational tools, this study aims to create measurable change in media practice. The study uses online questionnaires and interviews with ASL-fluent participants from the Deaf Community who have film media experience to highlight the Deaf American's perspective and understand what values are priority. Accurate Deaf life portrayal in storylines, abandoning archetypal Deaf characters, and intentional character composition emerge as key factors; findings demonstrate high value placed on accurate representation and vehement support for projects aligned with these values. The results of this study are intended to impact Deaf and hearing c/Communities by educating production companies on the realities of working with Deaf actors and crew, strategizing methods to do so, and educating consumers.

Note: The capitalization of “Deaf,” “Community,” and “Culture” is important to indicate the pride the Deaf Community has in their Culture. “Deaf” and “deaf” are two separate terms which cannot be used interchangeably.

Keywords: Deaf Culture, American Sign Language, media literacy, mass film media, Deaf Studies, television and movies

History and Modern Trends

History of Deaf Culture and ASL in Film

In the 1800s, as American culture grew and flourished, Deaf Americans were left to their own devices to create and preserve their own separate culture and history within the hearing world. Deaf Culture and American Sign Language (ASL) was misunderstood and vastly uncredited nationwide. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Milan Conference of 1880 played a pivotal role in discrediting sign language, leading to a massive wave of anti-Deaf Culture in America (Moores par. 1). At this conference, educators declared that sign language hindered the development of spoken language and pushed for its eradication from educational settings. The most powerful anti-Deaf Culture rhetoric spewed at the Milan Conference is notable in the English translated excerpt provided by Donald F. Moores in the *American Annals of the Deaf*,

(1) Given the incontestable superiority of speech over signs in restoring deaf-mutes to society, and in giving them a more perfect knowledge of language that the oral method ought to be preferred to signs; and (2) considering that the simultaneous use of speech and signs has the disadvantage of injuring speech, lipreading, and precision of ideas, that the pure oral method ought to be preferred. (par. 2)

As noted by most scholars in Deaf Studies, no Deaf people were invited to attend this historical whiplashing of their language and Culture. Consequently, many Deaf individuals were forced to abandon their natural mode of communication and learn to speak and lip-read, often at the expense of their linguistic and cultural identity. As sign language continued to be discredited and the oral method was promoted, the gap between the Deaf and hearing world grew deeper by each passing day.

Then came the era of silent films. John S. Schuchman, a former academic advisor at Gallaudet University, described this time as the “Golden Era” for the Deaf Community (231). Between the years of 1893 and 1929, Deaf people nationwide felt they had equal access and opportunity in the film industry (231). In this short period, the hopes that the Deaf could be represented in mainstream media seemed plausible for the first time in American history. For efficient contrast, note the near past when the Deaf were sent away to boarding homes and the use of sign was punished; when oralism thrived in the hearts of the oppressive (232). However, this golden era of inclusivity was short lived, as all technological advances are sure to be followed by another bigger, better invention with shorter intervals between innovations. Soon after the silent film boom came the so-called “Talkies.” While the Deaf had previously thrived in the film industry with their natural talent for exuberant facial expressions and telling body language, the Deaf Community was now excluded completely from film as sound was introduced. Since the Deaf were involved so heavily in the film industry prior to the use of sound, naturally directors continued to use sign language roles in talkies, yet they excluded those who were fluent in the language. Schuchman brings to light the example of the actress Jane Wyman, a hearing woman, who won an Oscar for her portrayal of a Deaf woman in 1948 (235). Schuchman explains the language was now depicted as “wooden” and lacking in emotion because the people presenting were not part of the Deaf community in any way (235). Following this event, the abhorrent misuse and misrepresentation of ASL and Deaf Culture in film and media can be clearly marked as beginning. A good example of the continuation of this issue is the 2016 film, *Hush*. A simple search of the cast will reveal although the main character was Deaf and the plot of the film revolved around her Identity, neither the main actress nor any of the cast or crew themselves were Deaf.

Modern Trends

The 2016 film, *Hush* is a clear example of the modern continuation of this issue. A simple search of the cast will reveal although the main character was Deaf and the plot of the film revolved around her Deaf Identity, neither the main actress nor any of the cast or crew themselves were Deaf. Despite this, the film went on to amass a 93% audience approval rating on popular film critique website, Rotten Tomatoes (“*Hush*”). Clearly, the hearing world enjoys viewing content featuring ASL and Deaf Culture, yet most people are unaware of the negative trend they are participating in by absorbing this misrepresentative content. Many mainstream pieces of mass film media enjoy highlighting ASL, but fail to do so without executing their ideas in an exploitative manner. While the hearing world functions under the belief that ASL is a visual substitute for English, the Deaf Community struggles to communicate how wrong this belief is. The syntax, parameters, and descriptive linguistics are vastly different to the English lexicon. While signs can be linked back to English words and used to form a somewhat coherent sentence, lacking a full understanding of the complexity of the language can lead to a Cultural trainwreck. Pierre Schmitt, a social science researcher based in Paris, focuses on the ASL interpretation of the National Anthem at the 2014 Super Bowl. He goes in depth, speculating that while Amber Zion, a Deaf performer, gracefully showcased her rendition of the anthem, she was a “prisoner of the bubble” on screen (131). Hearing people thought she was merely interpreting the lyrics to our national anthem, when in reality, she was presenting it in her own language as a visual poem. Schmitt goes on to scold the decision to trap her in a small section of the screen as if she were nothing but a glorified captioning system, stating this action “promotes the perception of sign language as an accommodation for a minority who have a handicap as opposed to a full-fledged language of artistic expression” (132). As examples like this indicate, what mainstream film media continually fails to understand is that the Deaf Community does not view ASL as a way to catch onto the coattails of the English language.

ASL as Its Own Language

Contrary to spoken languages, the Community views signing as its own separate entity with its own rules and cultural significance. In a research article on syntactic priming by use of psycholinguistic studies, Matthew Hall et al. is passionate about the topic:

These analyses find many syntactic devices that are familiar from spoken language research (e.g. hierarchical phrase structure, constituent order, movement operations, anaphora, embedding, etc.), but there are other syntactic devices that make use of the unique affordances of the manual modality to accomplish grammatical functions e.g. facial marking for topics and interrogatives, spatial marking for verb agreement, etc.). (2)

By downplaying Zion's rendition of the anthem and treating it as a mere way to "catch up" with the hearing world or as a simple substitute for English, Deaf culture itself was downplayed across all of America and further set back in the minds of hearing people due to the lack of understanding by mainstream hearing media. In this era where technology is second nature, turning on sub-titles is no feat for anyone. American sign language is a visual language, which means that facial expressions are translated as tonality. Because those who are fluent in the language must articulate their meanings through their expressions, they gain a skill for executing flawless facial character, a skill that is easily transferable to acting work. When imagining a favorite film, people most likely envision a film with expressive actors. Casting producers may make the argument that the hearing audience will not be able to get the full effect of the emotion of the script without hearing the tone of voice. However, when looking at communication using ASL, arguably the emotion of the words is more perceivable than relying on the tonality of voice itself. Ronnie B. Wilbur, a linguistic researcher at Purdue University, states,

A unique aspect of signed languages is the systematic grammatical use of facial expressions and head or body positions. The nonmanual markers (NMs) comprise a number of independent channels (our current count is 14): the head, the shoulders, the torso, the eyebrows, the eyeballs (gaze), the eyelids, the nose, the mouth (upper lip, lower lip, mid-lip, lip corners), the tongue, the cheeks, and the chin. Each of these is capable of independent articulation and, with layering, complex combinations can be produced. (247)

American sign language should not be held from the screen for fear of lack of understanding; instead, it should be held in high esteem in an industry where expression is so highly regarded.

The Deaf Community in the Context of the Hearing World

A good example of brilliant expressiveness is Nyle DiMarco, a Deaf activist become actor and model, who stated in an MTV interview that his modeling career is made simple because he is used to communicating without words (par. 6). Yet, DiMarco is also a prime example of perceptions of the Deaf Community in the context of the hearing world. DiMarco graduated from Gallaudet University, an esteemed Deaf college, with a degree in mathematics (The Harold, par. 3). Despite his amazing work on *In the Can* (2013), a movie entirely in ASL with no audio, he was only noted as being an "actor" by the hearing world after picking up a role in popular, mainstream television show, *Switched at Birth*. DiMarco used his new popularity in the hearing world to further his activism. He was discovered by *America's Next Top Model*, and won as the first and only Deaf contestant, as well as winning *Dancing with the Stars*. After winning these two primarily hearing contests, he started the Nyle DiMarco Foundation – Parent's Corner which spreads Deaf awareness as well as provides grants to Deaf students to further their education. Alongside this prestigious foundation, he is the lead spokesperson for Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids (LEAD K). Both of these are significant pillars in the Deaf Community. However, despite his outspoken fight for equality, when searching his name all that is found is "HOTTEST MEN ON INSTAGRAM" or "WOW! DEAF MAN CAN DANCE?" While researching this topic, a common trend emerged. His interviews in mainstream media are centered around his looks, a disbelief that a Deaf person can be a model or an actor, and other repetitive, insignificant topics. Publicity such as this clearly transcribes how even when Deaf actors break through the barrier to entry, they are impeded by stereotypes and held in a lower esteem than other actors who have achieved significantly less. DiMarco is only one such person dealing with this discriminative trend as a Deaf man who broke into mainstream film media, but the same trends are found with most, if not all, Deaf Community members in his situation. While most hearing audience members are not inundated with malicious intent, their lack of education in the topic at hand simply stems from the media they consume. Viewing popular films in the hearing world showcasing Deaf Culture and/or ASL improperly leads to this very real impact on the Deaf Community's real-world perceptions; thus leading to negative interactions and the furthered separation of the Deaf and hearing worlds.

The Divide Between Deaf and Hearing Media

As Hollywood and media outlets deflect criticism by the Deaf Community, the Community has not been stagnant. Many movies *for* Deaf people *by* Deaf people exist, but the divide between Deaf and hearing media is vast. Many attempts at bridging this divide fall into a hearing-centric narrative, whether intentionally or unintentionally. To show the difference between a hearing-centric project and a more carefully constructed, intentionally representative narrative, look at the films *Through Deaf Eyes* (2007) and *Audism Unveiled* (2008). Both films are documentaries, published around the same time, and attempt to capture the real-world experiences of the Deaf Community. *Through Deaf Eyes* goes through the entirety of Deaf Americans' struggles to form their own Culture and expands on the Community that has now settled into the roots of our nation. Lawrence R. Hott, a hearing producer who aided in the production of the film, asks viewers to bear these thoughts in mind before watching:

How does a Deaf person relate to hearing professors, employers, lovers, or their own hearing children? What is it like to read lips—or try to? How is it to raise a Deaf child, if you are hearing, or how does it change your world to have an electronic device surgically implanted in your ear and hear language instead of seeing it? Hollywood has had a hard time understanding any of this, especially the reality of reading lips. (140)

The film was a huge success in sign language classes as basic curriculum to introduce hearing students with no experience with Deaf Culture to the Community. This film focuses on the faux lip reading superpower perpetuated by Hollywood; in too many depictions of Deaf folks in movies and television shows, the roles are played by hearing people who feign an ability to read lips. While reading lips is a possible skill, it should not be the default skill characters in media assume, though most Deaf characters in mainstream media seem to possess this skill. These stereotypes portrayed on screen permeate our society and lead to misunderstandings between the Deaf and hearing world. Even experts in the field, such as Hott, feel a need to make a change in the media industry; yet this documentary faces criticism for appealing to a hearing audience by selective narratives to present that align mostly with the idea of Deaf folks hearing people already have. An example of this is the so-called “trauma-porn” aspect of these narratives, allowing the hearing audience to infantilize the cast for the dramatic feeling of success and pride at the ending. *Audism Unveiled* is a project made by students at Gallaudet University in an attempt to “unveil” the realities behind audism, a term coined by Tom Humphries to describe “how Deaf people are often the victims of discrimination and bias shown by their hearing families, teachers, and communities” (Benedict, Sass-Lehrer 6). This documentary goes in depth about the emotional damage and isolation Deaf folks feel when they are isolated from the Deaf Community and forced to live in a hearing-centric world. *Audism Unveiled* specifically wants its hearing audience to feel uncomfortable watching this film, creating an environment conducive for empathy and growth. However, this documentary, though coming out at the same time and covering the same topic from a more empathy-driven level, saw much less success than *Through Deaf Eyes*, as *Audism Unveiled* was not marketed with the intention of allowing its hearing audience to come away with feel-good emotions.

Hearing people consume media *for* hearing people and do not seek out Deaf films intentionally unless they have had experiences, in some way, with the Deaf Community. Yet, most Deaf films suffer from inaccessibility; popular streaming platforms such as Netflix or Hulu fail to appreciate many Deaf films and make them accessible to the general hearing audience. For example, the movie *SuperDeafy* (2013) is hugely popular in the Deaf Community, yet the movie is incredibly hard to find. Streaming platforms Amazon Video and Vudu have the title listed, if specifically searched for, but neither place actually provides access to the film; instead, the notice “This Title is Not Currently Available” appears. The same issue occurs for many other staples in Deaf film. In lieu of access to films illustrating proper representation, the general hearing audience consumes popular media. While some popular shows and movies attempt inclusivity, such as *Switched at Birth* which Columbia University professor Saljooq M. Asif claims to “upend expectations, confront differences, and challenge the meaning of normality,” even that endearing drama series did not cast their main Deaf character with a Deaf actress (37). Katie LeClerc, the actress playing the character the show centers around (along with her hearing counterpart, Bay) has publicly stated she does not identify as Deaf, but has “fluctuating hearing loss” and puts on a “deaf accent” for the show (abilitymagazine.com/katie-leclerc-abc-family-star-on-menieres-disease). While this show is often paraded around as the token show for inclusivity due to the casting of many real Deaf actors, the fact the main actress puts on, in her own words, a

“Deaf accent” provides evidence of the harmful stereotyping and perpetuating misrepresentation of Deaf Culture in popular media. The film *CODA* (2021) took the first step attempting to bridge the divide between Deaf and hearing film worlds, yet even that film had flaws. In an attempt to make this film marketable to hearing audiences, the plot seemed to devolve into a “hearing-centric” narrative. An article in *The New York Times* titled “Representation or Stereotype? Deaf Viewers Are Torn Over ‘CODA’” mentions the term “hearing gaze,” referring to “scenes that may resonate with hearing viewers but fall flat with Deaf viewers or even upset them” (par 2). The actress playing the Child of a Deaf Adult (CODA) was not a CODA herself, so much of her interpretations of scenes (her facial expressions, her body language, her general attitude) has been criticized for coming across as wrong and condescending. The technical aspect of the film also showed a strong favor for its hearing audience as the camera angles cut off signs, forcing viewers to rely on closed captions despite the signer being in full view of the camera. While much of the Deaf Community is hesitant to heavily criticize this movie because of its strides towards progress, this film should not be seen as the gold-star standard for films demonstrating Deaf Culture in an inclusive manner. *CODA* also sits behind the paywall of AppleTV, an exclusive stream platform, not readily accessible. While, yes, television shows and movies exist with the *right* representation, only characters and storylines presented in widely-accessible mainstream media will have an impact on the hearing world. This problem must be presented to the mainstream Hollywood industry itself, an industry and community that lacks education or understanding about the Deaf Community and how the film media directly impacts it. Accessible, popular mass film media *must* do the work to represent the real Community they wish to portray.

The Deaf American Community’s Perspective

Methodology

Through QuestionPro, a numerical study was employed to gain insight into the values of the Deaf Community. The survey questions on ASL and Deaf Culture representation in mainstream media were carefully crafted in written English to ensure clarity and inclusivity; additionally, to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for the Deaf Community, an ASL interpretation video was provided alongside each written question. These videos featured a Deaf, certified ASL interpreter presenting each question in American Sign Language, ensuring that Deaf participants could fully understand and engage with the survey in their preferred language. The language used in the questions aimed to be neutral and unbiased, encouraging participants to share their honest perceptions and experiences.

The survey on the perception of ASL and Deaf Culture representation in mainstream media garnered responses from a diverse range of participants across the Deaf Community nationwide. Through various recruitment channels, including social media platforms, Deaf Community organizations, and specialized online forums, 30 individuals contributed their valuable insights. Participants were asked to rate their opinions on a numerical scale of 1 to 10 for different aspects of ASL and Deaf Culture representation in popular/mainstream television shows and movies. They were specifically prompted to assess the accuracy of ASL portrayal, the level of representation of Deaf characters, the extent to which Deaf Culture was adequately represented, and the inclusivity of linguistic and cultural diversity within the Deaf community in mainstream media. Upon completion of the survey, a comprehensive data analysis was conducted, utilizing the ratio scale through data analysis tool HubSpot to determine average scores and overall trends in perception. The qualitative data obtained from the optional detailed responses provided by some participants were meticulously analyzed to identify recurring themes in the participants’ viewpoints.

After completing the numerical study, participants were invited to take part in one-on-one interviews to provide more in-depth insights and personal experiences regarding Deaf Culture and ASL representation in popular television shows and movies. The interviews aimed to delve deeper into their feelings, perceptions, and the impact of media portrayals on their daily lives and real-world interactions. Participants were asked to describe their first encounter with Deaf Culture and ASL in a popular television show or movie and to share their initial emotional response to it. They were then asked to recall the worst representation of Deaf Culture or ASL they had seen in mainstream media and how it made them feel emotionally. Conversely, participants were encouraged to recall the best representation of ASL or Deaf Culture they had encountered in a popular television show or movie and the positive emotions this portrayal evoked.

To understand the impact of media representation on their daily lives, participants were asked if they had ever felt that

the portrayal of ASL or Deaf Culture in popular television shows or movies had affected them either positively or negatively, and to provide specific examples. Participants were prompted to express their thoughts on whether they believed popular television shows or movies perpetuate negative stereotypes towards ASL and/or Deaf Culture, and to explain their views. The interviewees were invited to offer their suggestions on how popular film media could improve the positive representation of ASL and Deaf Culture, fostering a more accurate and inclusive depiction. Lastly, participants were given the opportunity to address casting companies and directors directly, sharing their thoughts and messages regarding the portrayal of Deaf characters in popular television shows and movies. Through these one-on-one interviews, this study aimed to capture the nuanced perspectives and personal experiences of the participants, further contributing to the broader discussion on the representation of Deaf Culture and ASL in mainstream media. The interview responses provided valuable qualitative data that complemented the quantitative findings of the initial survey, allowing for a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the Community's perspectives and aspirations for better representation.

Survey Results

For the accuracy of ASL portrayal, responses were varied, with some participants giving low ratings of 1 to 3, while others found it relatively accurate, giving ratings of 6 to 8, resulting in a mean rating of 4.733. Similarly, views on the representation of Deaf characters spanned the scale, with a mean rating of 4.767, indicating diverse opinions but with a strong lean towards >5. Regarding the showcasing of linguistic and cultural diversity, participants were in agreement with the low standards in Hollywood, presenting a mean rating of 4.067. Participants' assessments of the representation of Deaf Culture itself leaned towards low scores but still varied, with ratings ranging from 53.33% being less than 5, 26.67% being greater than 5, and 20% being 5, resulting in a mean rating of 4.233. The variation likely stems from the range of media consumption, with some viewers selecting only films with higher accuracy in representation and others being less selective in their viewing choices. However, a prominent trend emerged in the importance of including more accurate Deaf characters and storylines, as the majority gave high ratings of 8 to 10, leading to a substantial mean rating of 8.933. The representation of lived experiences and challenges elicited a strong response as well, with a mean rating of 3.833. As this is one of the lowest scores, clearly participants value the reflection of lived experiences of Deaf life greatly. On the positive side, participants acknowledged some improvement in the representation of ASL and Deaf Culture in mainstream media over the years, with a mean rating of 6.533. Finally, there was a resounding trend in supporting movies with authentic representation, as the majority rated it a high 9 to 10, leading to an impressive mean rating of 9.433. These trends underscore the importance of accurate and inclusive

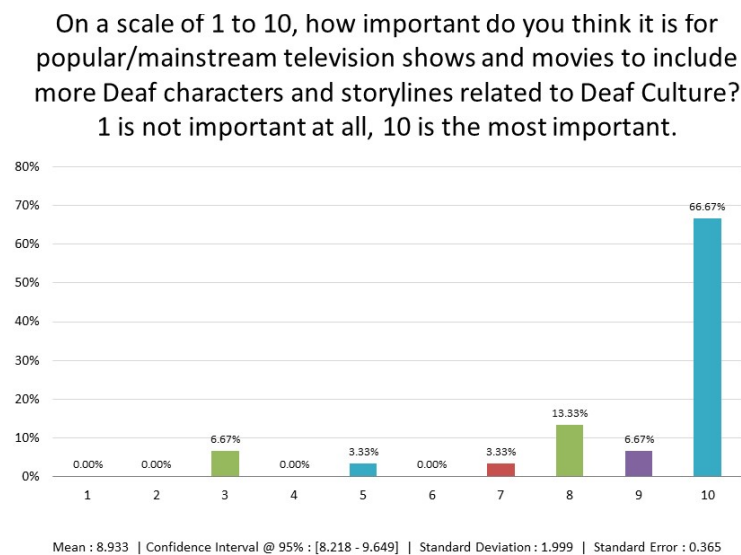


Figure 1

Interview Results

All interviews were conducted in ASL and transcribed by a certified interpreter. The stories presented by the Deaf Community participants provided valuable qualitative data. Despite these interviews being one-on-one with Community members across the country and having never met each other, many participants gave the same answers. In response to the question: “What was the best representation of ASL or Deaf Culture you’ve seen in a popular television show or movie?” all participants remarked on the movie *Children of a Lesser God*, a 1986 film directed by Randa Heins and starring Deaf actress Marlee Matlin. Marlee Matlin plays a multifaceted Deaf character in this romance movie, portraying herself as a strong and independent woman whose allure is irresistible to her hearing love interest. Many participants had personal stories about this movie being a revelation to them; to see a Deaf character signing fluently and accurately without the burden of archetypal narratives written into the script. Participant C noted that even though ASL has been featured in many films and television shows since *Children of a Lesser God*, they have failed to be as impactful. Participant C also mentioned the movie *CODA* as a movie with good ASL representation, but felt the plot was “bland and forgettable,” wishing another movie would come along with good representation but also an interesting plot. Participant D recalled seeing with a romantic partner *Children of a Lesser God* before having much experience with ASL themselves. Participant D looked into space for a moment, remembering the story: “My first partner had a hearing aid, and we were watching the movie. I was asking questions, I was picking up a little bit of baby signing, asking a lot of questions. I asked my boyfriend why don’t you sign? Then I asked the babysitter, why don’t they sign?” This precipitated more conversations in Participant D’s real life about Deaf Culture and ASL.

With all the examples given by participants, every person tied their experiences with film to real-world scenarios. Whether film translated into their life as conversations, curiosity, or pride, each experience was sincerely impactful. Participant B, a parent of Deaf children and a certified interpreter, stated that her children were used to seeing representative media because of Participant B’s ideology and belief that inclusive media is important for shaping self esteem. Because of this, most accurate representation does not phase their children as they see it as normal. However, an experience that happened only recently was mentioned: a cartoon character who was Deaf and signing appeared. The amount of joy this brought, Participant B remembers, was immense for their child. This cartoon, *Craig of the Creek*, can be considered a part of mainstream media and shows how important a child’s access to visible representation is. While Participant B is vigilant about their children’s access to media, more than 90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents with little to no experience in the Deaf Community. Participant B recalled their first time as a child seeing ASL on television being *Sesame Street* and being in awe of the fact “these guys recognise ASL!” and the language extended past their Community.

More than half of the interview participants likened hearing actors portray Deaf life to a white actor portraying Black life and stressed the importance of Cultural understanding when creating a piece of media that could shape the minds and ideas of children and adults. Participant B highlighted a trend seen in most participants, the overwhelming consensus seems to agree: do not include a Deaf character simply to include a Deaf character. If a project chooses to include the Deaf Community, do so to add to the storyline, the plot. Do not add a Deaf character as a tool to show discrimination, or add some flippant “accessibility” narrative. Deaf people want to see Deaf characters in the way hearing people want to see hearing characters; see them fall in love, see them crack jokes and be funny, see them go through heartbreak and joy, and interact with other characters in a *normal* way. Not as Participant B puts it, “an attempt to have more minor interactions.”

The responses to the question “If you could send a message directly to casting companies and directors writing Deaf characters into popular television shows or movies, what would you say?” elicited several interesting viewpoints. Participant D stated, “Stop creating movies that show Deaf people as less-than, looked down upon. Show our experiences, yes, and yes when we’re oppressed. But show real experiences, not these exaggerated experiences of audism. Show how we live and experience life, authentically. So when I go to the store, and maybe there’s a hearing person that has no experience with Deaf people and oppresses me, yes that happens, but it’s not like I get pulled over and am immediately put into jail for being Deaf.” Participant B looked at the logistics of ASL in hearing-centric media, “Some directors need to better frame their camera in regards to placement of arm movements to make sure the signs are actually recorded, not just the edges of the words. For Closed Captioning, it’s also a problem, the captioning overlaps signing.” Participant A notes, “Involve the Deaf Community. We can help you learn different aspects that you could use here and overseas that translates to all Deaf people. Just because it’s easier or having Deaf people on set makes it more complicated, no, they need to learn the appropriate way how to access communication, how to learn, and to be educated. Every time a person comes up, you know you have to explain again and again. It’s easy for Hollywood to spread that information.”

Conclusion

Media portrayal has the power to shape real-world interactions, and inaccurate representations lead to negative perceptions and further the division between the Deaf and hearing worlds. The survey highlights the importance of accurate and inclusive portrayal of ASL, Deaf characters, and Deaf Culture in mainstream media. Participants stress the need for authentic representation that reflects their lived experiences, rather than reinforcing stereotypes. The interviews revealed that movies like *Children of a Lesser God* are exemplary in their accurate portrayal of ASL and Deaf Culture, leaving a lasting impact on the Deaf Community. However, access to such representative media remains limited, as popular streaming platforms often fail to make Deaf films readily available to the general hearing audience.

The Deaf Community calls on casting companies and directors to authentically represent Deaf characters, avoiding tokenism and exaggerated experiences of audism. Involving the Deaf Community during the production process is crucial for accurate representation and education on ASL and Deaf Culture. Continuously seeing mainstream film media damage the reputation of sign language on screen deteriorates the relationship between the Deaf and hearing c/Communities more so than it already has. Hearing people are uneducated in the language and Culture of the Deaf, and these misbeliefs are perpetuated by misrepresentation of the Community in film media. It not only affects the ability for the Deaf to function in the hearing world unimpeded by stereotypes and rude ideals, it prevents the hearing world from being able to understand a Culture that is rich in different perspectives and beneficial mannerisms.

As a first step, advocating for Deaf actors to be cast in Deaf roles is pertinent. Not completely blind to the lack of inclusivity Hollywood gives the Deaf Community, the film industry has a list of excuses to present. Casting staff and production managers ask, “If we hire a Deaf actor, how will we communicate with them easily?” Surprising to some, sign language interpreters are not a rare commodity. Some producers may state that the integrity of their movie is at risk when allowing an interpreter, who is an outsider, on set. Producers worry information about their work will be leaked, or the interpreter would be a distraction. Yet, why should interpreters be treated lesser than any other professional on the crew? According to the *American Annals of the Deaf*, a professional journal dedicated to Deaf Studies and Education, “ASL interpreters were recognized as professionals in the late 1960s and early 1970s following the establishment of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in 1964” (335). ASL interpreters have a strict code of ethics they abide by, ethics which can even be found in Alaskan executive director of Judicial Conduct, Maria Greenstein’s paper in *Judge’s Journal* (par. 4). They, like everyone else on the film crew, are present in a professional manner and will under no circumstance compromise the integrity of the production. With an interpreter, communication becomes easy and would certainly be no more difficult than communicating with the common stubborn, entitled actress that has no interest in using her ears anyway. While laws mandating Deaf casting could increase Deaf actors’ hiring rate, more likely, the decrease of Deaf roles in films would be the end result. Instead, the change needed must be of the social aspect.

The first step to any significant change is awareness. Not only the Deaf Community, anyone vaguely aware of the problem should be vocal about it. Increasing traffic to Deaf journals and news platforms would result in a small change that could snowball into nationwide awareness. Social media platforms give the ability to share articles that would increase visibility of the problem to an audience likely unaware of it. If a hearing person watches a movie and recognizes a Deaf character or sign language on screen, the first instinct should be a quick internet search to look at the cast and crew to determine if the representation is accurate and appropriate. A viewer need not be immersed in Deaf Culture or even *know* sign language to hold production companies accountable by withholding their viewership to any production excluding the Deaf Community from production. As with any social reform, citizens must not be complacent and must stop generating revenue for companies who perpetuate the problem.

Mainstream media must take responsibility for accurate representation and inclusive storytelling to bridge the gap and foster understanding between the two c/Communities. Collaboration with the Deaf Community during production is vital for authentic portrayals that accurately reflect their lived experiences and cultural significance. By doing so, the media industry can contribute positively to the inclusion and appreciation of Deaf Culture in society.

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