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## **Introduction**

At Nelson Mandela's funeral in 2013, chaos, frustration, and anger struck the Deaf community after a fake sign language interpreter stood next to Barack Obama and signed unintelligible gibberish on national television (Smith). One of the most memorable events to occur in history excluded an entire community from honoring a famous historical figure that socially and politically progressed South Africa in numerous ways. Following this act of injustice, interpreters claimed the individual made a mockery of their profession and deaf individuals were outraged by his fake interpreting and claimed he made a "total mockery of the language" (Gumuchian para. 5).

Unfortunately, this was not the last time fake sign language was shown on online modes of communication. In 2017, two incidents of fake signing occurred during news conferences in the state of Florida where "interpreters" were signing words that made no sense (ABC13 News). Once again, the deaf community was infuriated by these fake interpreters and took to social media to express their frustration. Responses in regards to these acts of injustice have been referred to as unnerving for qualified interpreters along with being a danger to modern society and a disservice to the deaf community (Mendoza). Similar to these two events, common frustrations from the deaf community pertaining to interpreters on television channels have been focused on stations failing to show the interpreter sign the news, especially when the news concerns the Deaf community. The inadequate screen time given to the interpreter made it difficult for deaf and hard of hearing people to follow along and understand the news information (White).

Now, as technology mediums have continued to evolve in language learning, a new issue has emerged regarding fake sign language interpreting in the media. In particular, TikTok has

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become a bittersweet platform for Deaf individuals that speak American Sign Language (ASL). Members have discovered that while TikTok is allowing ASL to grow quickly and efficiently to users across the app, it is also proliferating the number of people, specifically from the hearing community, teaching it incorrectly. A common translation error has been users signing ASL the way English is spoken, or better known as Signed Exact English (SEE) (Morris). As a result, fake and false signs have traveled throughout TikTok and “spread like wildfire” (Morris para. 4).

In this paper, using a visual and textual analysis, I will be examining three different videos that display deaf users addressing the disinformation and cultural appropriation of ASL across TikTok. These accounts respond to such videos by utilizing the different communicative affordances provided by the social media platform such as duetting, stitching, and commenting.

### **The History and Development of American Sign Language**

Before further inspecting the use and teaching of ASL on TikTok, it is imperative to understand where ASL derived from and how it has developed over the past 200 years. American Sign Language is a very young language and did not come to the United States until the early 1800s. Before this time, if an individual was deaf, their only form of communication was using a local signing system, now formally known as Old American Sign Language, specific to their area (Jay). In 1814, Dr. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet had a young deaf neighbor named Alice Cogswell who was unable to speak and hear. Nonetheless, Gallaudet recognized she was an exceedingly bright girl and decided to go to Europe where there was known to be deaf education (Jay). During his trip abroad, Gallaudet learned French Sign Language (LSF) from French teacher Laurent Clerc (Sutterer). Upon his return from Europe months later, Gallaudet was accompanied by Clerc where they established the first deaf school in the United States named the Connecticut Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb in Hartford, Connecticut merely three years after Gallaudet

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initially set off for Europe. Now, the school is officially known as the American School for the Deaf (ASD) (Evans). As the school population grew, Clerc and Gallaudet were able to establish a new standardized language for students – American Sign Language (Connecticut Historical Society). Slowly, the language evolved and became more prominent across the U.S. until it was finally recognized as an official language in the 1950s (Sutterer). In 1988, California was the first state to offer ASL class in public schools and allowed it to “satisfy language requirements for a high school diploma” (Billington para. 2).

### **The Affordances of TikTok**

Formerly known as Musical.ly, TikTok was created by the Chinese company ByteDance in 2016 but gained popularity later on in 2018 for its ability to allow users to create and watch short videos (D’Souza). When opening TikTok, instead of being welcomed with content from followed or friended accounts like Instagram or Facebook, the app takes you to the For You Page (FYP), a curated algorithm which presents users interests and commonalities that match their personal identity (Bhandari 2). The format of the app makes it easy for users to scroll through content offered, creating an intrapersonal connection with oneself and the app rather than interpersonal relationships that is encouraged on other platforms. Instead of users connecting to potential friends, “like, comment on, or share posts, and view other member’s profiles,” TikTok is designed to make users choose between two entities: (1) “A trending algorithm which presents users with videos ostensibly catered to their personal tastes and interests” or (2) let users develop “their own content and self-representations” (Bhandari 2).

With the affordance to scroll through the TikTok FYP, it is common to come across all sorts of videos. This convenient feature has allowed publics to connect like the Deaf community with the hearing community. In fact, a new subculture on TikTok was created called DeafTok.

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With over 1.1 billion views, this area of the app includes “creators raising awareness of accessibility issues, sharing information about life as a deaf person, educating viewers on interacting with deaf people, and of course, posting ASL covers and other general TikTok content, like ‘get ready with me’ videos” (Glover para. 5). Deaf creators like Scarlett Watters say that TikTok has afforded deaf and hard of hearing people to connect with the hearing community and teach users how to make communication between them easier (Glover).

For Deaf Awareness Month in 2021, which occurs every September, TikTok highlighted members of the deaf community on their website that are passionate about sharing their culture with users on the social media platform. To help these influencers share their experiences and knowledge about Deaf culture and sign language, TikTok stated they are working with the National Association of the Deaf to seek guidance regularly and take proactive steps to make their app more accessible for deaf and hard of hearing users (Hind). One of the major steps to reach this goal was the incorporation of auto captions on video which deaf creators and views claimed transformed their experience on the app (Glover).

### **Deaf and Hearing Creators Among TikTok**

The focus of this visual and textual analysis is to further understand how the communicative affordances of TikTok are a crucial staple in the deaf community responding and critiquing fake sign language. The first object of analysis is a stitched video from @purplelady9302 posted on June 28, 2023 responding to a video uploaded by Sally McKinney (@sallymckinney0). @purplelady9302 is a deaf creator on TikTok with 5,910 followers and 51.9k likes. She posted her first video on June 8, 2020 stating she was new to the app with a fun colorful font on the video. Since her first video, her main source of content has stayed relatively consistent with uploading videos comprising interactive TikTok effects that contain prompts

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such as “Your next date” and “Which Sit-Down Restaurant are you?” Occasionally, some of her videos also address how to sign certain words correctly and admonish hearing TikTok users that sign words incorrectly. Her criticism and critique of the fake signing, however, is only a visual critique because it is conducted in ASL with no captions, making it difficult for users who do not understand ASL to acknowledge her criticism. For example, one hearing creator that many deaf users have responded to is Sally McKinney (@sallymickinney0). Since her first video posted on August 13, 2020, Sally has garnered 5,509 followers and 163.1k likes from content that ranges over a plethora of topics of discussion and experiences. However, she is best known amongst the deaf community on TikTok for teaching ASL incorrectly. For three years straight, Sally consistently posted tutoring videos until one June of 2023 when her content switched abruptly to dancing, yoga, friend shoutouts, and more with no explanation. It can be presumed that after receiving much adverse reactions from the deaf community, she stopped posting. This speculation stems from the search page when looking up Sally’s account. When typing her name into the TikTok search bar, one of the first videos to pop up are an array of stitched and duetted videos from deaf creators communicating that Sally’s signs are wrong. One of the top videos under the option to click on Sally’s profile is a video by @purplelady9302’s.

The second video in question is a duetted video from Deaf creator Elizabeth Harris (@lizzytharris). Harris’s duet is her response to a video uploaded by Drake Russell (@wrldrake) attempting to interpret the song “SLUT ME OUT” by NLE Choppa. Elizabeth is a popular creator on TikTok who, according to her bio, identifies as Deaf and Hard of Hearing and uses a unique form of communication with her audience. Unlike @purplelady9302 who only uses ASL in her videos, Harris signs ASL, speaks to the camera in English, and includes captions of what she is saying in English grammar. Elizabeth has opened up on her account about why she is able

Commented [1]: shares a lot about herself too (life as a deaf person). people enjoy watching her because she caters to deaf and hearing people. (makes it very easy to reach a large audience)  
talk about her ability to speak english well.  
she puts captions on her videos to reach a larger audience  
how she became deaf  
too: <https://www.tiktok.com/@lizzytharris/video/7145165120455347499?lang=en>

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to speak English so well and her experiences growing up in a speaking environment. To improve her verbal language skills, Harris enrolled in theater and singing classes to learn how to control her voice and was later introduced to ASL in high school. Since Harris's first post on September 24, 2021, she has always posted with the intention of being an advocate for the Deaf community by teaching followers and viewers about her culture and experiences as a deaf individual. At the top of her page, she has multiple playlists specifying the different types of videos she makes. A few of her playlists are titled "ASL Acting," "ASL Covers," and "Deaf Ed." These videos cater to both Deaf and hearing viewers as she signs ASL and interacts with users who want to learn more about ASL and the Deaf community. Harris's content has helped her accumulate over 870k followers and 36.4 million likes. Additionally, she consistently receives over 30k views per upload. Conversely, Drake Russell is a young TikTok Internet Personality creator who first joined on April 24, 2021. He gained a large fan base six months later when a few of his TikTok dancing videos went viral and received over 30k views. A majority of his videos incorporate popular TikTok dancing choreography with his cheerleading teammates or friends. Now, Russell has over 156.4k followers and 8.3 million likes. Although his videos are not solely focused on attempting to interpret songs, his video trying to interpret the song "SLUT ME OUT" has gained the most views out of all his videos with over 1.5 million views.

The final object of analysis is a video by a popular user named Lola (@asl\_for\_teens) who has acquired 149.7k followers and 1 million likes. Her main source of content includes interpreting songs in ASL, showing how to sign certain words in ASL, and PR unpackaging. Lola's bio professes that she is a student learning ASL and not a teacher along with a hyperlink to her PR email. Since Lola's first video of her attempting to interpret the song "Victoria's Secret" by Jax on August 9, 2022, she has received a lot of criticism from the Deaf community

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for signing songs incorrectly and teaching fake signs. For a majority of her page, videos that included showing how to sign a certain word were assisted with her starting every video saying “Today’s sign is…” followed by saying the word and its designated sign. In May of 2023, Lola changed the formatting of her introductions from saying “Today’s sign is…” to “Today I learned…” as an attempt to fix the “teaching” confusion. Members of the Deaf community argued Lola was attempting to teach American Sign Language on TikTok since she was declaring a word had a specific sign in ASL. Many popular deaf users, including Elizabeth Harris, made videos asking Lola to take down all content that included her signing in ASL. However, all videos on her account are still uploaded and many deaf users claimed that Lola blocked them when they tried to tell her to stop making content relating to ASL. The video that will be analyzed was uploaded on December 13, 2022, before her introduction format changed, and shows Lola demonstrating how to sign the word “flower” in ASL while saying “Today’s sign is flower.” The video is pinned on her page meaning it is at the top of her feed and has garnered over 160.8k likes, 4,393 comments, and 5.2 million views. Her comment section, which will be further analyzed and explained in the analysis section, contains hearing and deaf users asking her to stop posting videos that include ASL.

Based on these topics that will be further analyzed, TikTok is a platform that allows a lot of free range content to be uploaded. Due to this format, the Deaf community has been able to connect with other deaf and hoh users while at the same time also teaching and educating hearing users about their culture. Although the app has improved and adjusted a lot for deaf and hoh users, this community is still not being treated equally. Sign language, specifically ASL, is still being culturally appropriated by hearing users and misinformation continues to spread across the app by accounts who lack qualification to be singing and teaching ASL. By incorporating the

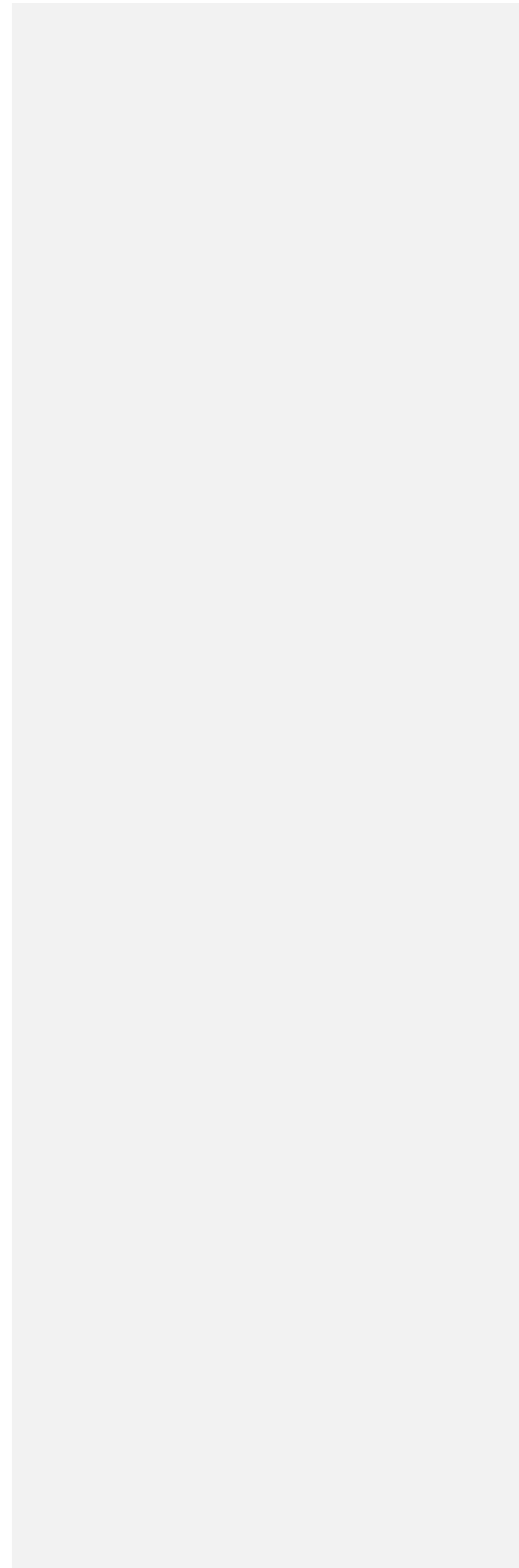
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theories of ableism, audiencing, and misinformation, I hope to answer the following questions that pertain to ASL and the Deaf community on TikTok:

How do the affordances of TikTok, such as stitching, duetting, and commenting, assist the Deaf Community in critiquing and responding to what they believe are misconceptions of ASL?

How do people teaching ASL in these videos claim the authority to be teaching it correctly?

What type of power and identity needs to be established when determining who can teach ASL and how?





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