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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 helped South Africa progress in numerous ways. Following this act of injustice, interpreters claimed the individual teased 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 the media have continued to evolve in language learning, a new issue has emerged regarding fake sign language interpreting in the media. In particular, TikTok has 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 to perform a critique of the videos using the same platform.

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 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 as the algorithm balances repeating content you have reinforced and expanding the range of content you see. 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. 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 September 2021, 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. Although it is never disclosed, the purpose of her username can be interpreted by her consistent wearing of a purple zip-up hoodie that is seen in most, if not all, her videos. 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 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. Importantly, 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 (@sallymckinney0). 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 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 many 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, an array of stitched and duetted videos pop up from deaf creators communicating that Sally's signs are wrong. More specifically, one of the top videos under the option to click on Sally's profile is a video by @purplelady9302.

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 (@wrl Drake) 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 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 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.

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 hard-of-hearing 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 hard-of-hearing 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 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?

Prospectus

When trying to thoroughly understand the growth of the Deaf Community and ASL on TikTok, there are two important entities that need to be established. First, it is important to recognize the different theories and concepts that surround this discourse. Second, once applying these theories to different videos surrounding such discourse, it is crucial to determine who is allowed to teach ASL and who knows what is the right way and wrong way to sign words.

To achieve this goal, I ask the following questions:

- How do the affordances of TikTok, such as 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?

To answer these questions thoroughly, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the Deaf community's responses to fake ASL being spread across TikTok. To do this efficiently, the Deaf community's responses will be analyzed by their reaction to three TikTok videos from three different hearing creators. Two of the videos feature Deaf creators duetting the videos while the third video solely focuses on the comment section of a hearing creator's video. In all three examples, the videos from the hearing users are claimed to have disrespected the Deaf community and ASL through the use of teaching or interpreting fake or false ASL.

The discourse of the Deaf Community on social media has been an interesting area of

study for many years due to its myriad of benefits and drawbacks. At first, communicative apps such as WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, etc. did not cater to the Deaf Community (Yeratziotis et.al). But as online media began to develop, so did access for Deaf users. Now, social media has made it immeasurably easy for Deaf individuals to communicate with “government services, services, businesses, workmates and friends” (“Looking across the Hearing Line?: Exploring Young Deaf People’s Use of Web 2.0 para. 19). Similarly, it has afforded Deaf individuals to participate in meetings via video link with the help of video conference interpreting (Napier et.al) and, most importantly, allowed Deaf individuals to create social media accounts and share their experiences and identity as a Deaf person with the world (Crom Saunders). However, at the same time, social media has also functioned as a gateway for fake sign language being performed by hearing influencers, particularly in ASL, to spread and constitute culture appropriation (Crom Saunders).

Although there is a lot of fake ASL that flows through social media, I do not believe the specific hearing creators being critiqued in the videos analyzed in this paper upload TikTok videos signing in ASL with the intent of spreading disinformation about the language. Instead, I argue that even though these creators are aware they are unqualified to teach and interpret ASL, they still do it. The question then is why. One possible rationale is that these users lack awareness and falsely perceive themselves as more informed about the language and culture than they truly are. Another explanation is that posting this type of content is a marketing tactic to receive views and a following. Regardless, these user’s end goal of gaining “clout” and attention has a detrimental effect on the Deaf community as their content misinforms their followers about Deaf culture and signs that hold no meaning. Their lack of knowledge and accountability for their actions is reflected by disregarding comments and responses from the

Deaf Community pertaining to their content that offends their language and culture. Instead of the hearing users perceiving these situations as learning experiences, the large sum of TikTok stitches, duets, and comments received reinforces the behavior because it is understood as their platform growing expeditiously. This phenomenon has very real consequences by distracting from content producers who actually do teach ASL. By spreading false information regarding this already oppressed community, it is harder for the hearing community to connect and understand Deaf culture.

Literature Review

Misinformation, Disinformation, and Deception across Social Media

As social media continues to grow globally, fake information concerning different matters is becoming a common issue across all mediums and is being weaponized to support performative arguments (Diez-Gracia et.al). Since information across social media is not sufficiently regulated, it is easy to come across content that is not supported by evidence. For instance, following the COVID-19 pandemic, a plethora of fake news unfurled across the internet causing individuals to have a decreasing trust in “the media, in journalists, and in democracy” (Crucian 34).

Theories of misinformation, disinformation, and deception all analyze fake information from different perspectives. When putting these theories in conversation with Deaf culture and ASL on TikTok, we can understand the fake information spread by hearing people in a new context. Before continuing, it is important to note there is limited scholarly research addressing the interrelationship between Deaf culture with misinformation, disinformation, and deception theory on social media. However, that does not diminish the need for these

concepts to be critically engaged when considering the RO of this study.

The dichotomy between the theory of misinformation versus disinformation is an appealing conversation when considering the unqualified hearing TikTok users teaching ASL on the app. Studies analyzing both theories in the context of social media has been a common research object for many years across academia. However, multiple articles define misinformation and disinformation differently. While both definitions confront the act of “fake and inaccurate information” (Lamar et.al 35), for the purpose of this paper, misinformation functions as the relaying of false information unintentionally while disinformation is typically created to intentionally deceive (Wu et.al, Lamar et.al). Misinformation can be recognized in various situations such as urban legends, unverified information, and rumors. This theory can be applied to Deaf Culture and ASL in social media because ill-equipped TikTok users teaching ASL can unknowingly falsely teach a sign by using sloppy hand gestures and lacking facial expression, two very important features to communicate sign language effectively (Saunders).

On the other hand, disinformation is predominantly identified in the media as “fake news” and is not as easy to recognize or differentiate from “the genuine portrayal of a controversial perspective” (Bastick 1). Disinformation is theorized to alter attitudes about specific topics and nudge users toward predictable behaviors (Yeung, Bastick). For instance, one broad example that can be associated with this theory, in the context of social media, is the discussion of conspiracy theories that are deliberately spread to influence users across multiple online media platforms behaviors and attitudes toward political, economical, and social issues. On some occasions, it is common for people to also spread conspiracy theories simply “adopted to justify preexisting preferences and behavioral intentions” (Enders et. al

12). Thus, in this context, making the spread of conspiracy theories a result of misinformation rather than disinformation.

The last theory to discuss is deception theory. Similar to disinformation, deception theory applies to the action of intentionally trying to mislead an individual or group from the correct information (Burgoon and Levine). Since the focus of this paper is understanding relationships between the Deaf and hearing community online, I will solely focus on interpersonal deception theory (IDT). IDT is defined as the goal to “describe deception from the viewpoint of interpersonal communication in the presence of dynamic interaction between the sender and receiver.” (Abdulqader et.al 128630). Deceivers applying the interpersonal deception theory tend to engage in strategic behavioral changes to gain credibility from their receivers (Abdulqader et.al Buller et.al). Unlike disinformation, which is spreading false information, the goal of IDT is to establish an authority of trust and worthiness from those listening. On social media, IDT can be noticed when users who are spreading false news begin to gain a following and support.

Ableism and Cultural Appropriation against the Deaf community

For many years, instead of being considered a minority group that carries its own linguistics and cultural patterns, the Deaf community was viewed down upon and considered a disabled group. This notion was emphasized by ableist, prejudice, and social attitudes that deny the Deaf community access to business and public aspects of life. Ableism is defined as “the invisible and shared norm, beliefs, and practices, against which all bodies function differently” (Russo and Grasso p. 69). In a hearing world, it is common for Deaf people to experience discrimination for their inability to partake in audible activities. Consequently, employment inequality has become a prevalent issue against Deaf individuals in leadership

positions within the deaf community (O'Connell). For the American Deaf community, knowing ASL is not a linguistic right and Deaf individuals are rather encouraged to learn how to speak and understand written and spoken English (Scoggins and Crom Saunders). As a result, cochlear implants are heavily advertised as a way to cure hearing loss and teach English rather than Deaf people learning ASL or "broken English" (Crom Saunders). These oppressive actions have become common within the American Deaf community as they have had recurring issues of not only ableism but also racism, xenophobia, homophobia, etc. (Crom Saunders).

A concerning trend that has gained traction surrounding ASL on social media is hearing people misrepresenting sign language and Deaf culture. Now, it is important to address that the Deaf community is very welcoming of the hearing community learning sign language and wanting to become immersed in their subculture (Crom Saunders). This cross-cultural connection is a great approach to breaking down barriers between the two communities and creating more accessibility for Deaf people in their everyday life. However, the issue that continues to grow is hearing people attempting to teach and interpret sign language on social media when they are not fluent. Sign language interpreting is a profession that not only takes years of schooling, but is also a form of artistic expression for the Deaf community. For example, sign language interpreters who present at national sporting events, such as the SuperBowl, take their profession seriously by developing "strategies of coordination and synchronization so that their interpretation aligns with the action on the stage" (Schmitt 136). Without the correct qualifications and knowledge of sign language and Deaf culture, signing can be sloppy and hard to understand, similar to a beginner speaker of a spoken or written language (Crom Saunders). In an attempt to preserve the language, it is

common for the Deaf community to critique hearing users signing incorrectly or express their frustration with the fake interpreting. But instead of hearing individuals learning sign language and applying constructive criticism, the offending hearing individuals typically block Deaf accounts from accessing their social media accounts (Saunders).

Users who post videos teaching ASL on TikTok incorrectly struggle to understand that fake ASL is a form of cultural appropriation against the Deaf community. When hearing people teach or interpret ASL incorrectly, a rift is created between the hearing and Deaf community. Instead of allowing Deaf individuals to teach their language to the hearing community and create a connection between the two groups, hearing people, who have limited knowledge of the language and culture, take initiative in teaching their community about ASL. Since they are able to verbally and audibly communicate to other hearing members, they are privileged in reaching their community quickly. However, by doing so, falsely teaching ASL to fellow hearing individuals makes it more difficult for a connection to be tethered (Crom Saunders). Additionally, fake interpreting can make it difficult for Deaf individuals to receive vital news. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, an ASL interpreter on a news station in Florida was held responsible for relaying information to the Deaf community about a Hurricane heading in the direction of the local community. But since the interpreter did not know sign language, Deaf members were excluded from knowing life-saving information and what preventative safety measure to take (Crom Saunders).

Within the realm of cultural appropriation against the Deaf community, a certain branch of discrimination specifically applies to this group. According to an unpublished essay by Tom Humphries from 1975, audism is defined as “the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears; a system of advantage based

on hearing ability” (Bauman 240). The use of audism can be applied to users on TikTok who are attempting to achieve a type of power over hearing people interested in learning about Deaf culture. Since these creators have the advantage of communicating with the hearing community, it can be harder for Deaf people to connect with a wider audience since a majority of people link identity and authority with audible speech (Saunders). As a result, the Deaf community is left on the outskirts of society and not seen as holding authoritative power for teaching ASL.

Without allowing Deaf people to teach about their culture to hearing people interested in learning, fellow hearing individuals who are not well immersed or informed about the culture can take initiative in this field. As a result, unqualified individuals end up appropriating Deaf culture and using their hearing privilege to teach ASL incorrectly. Not only does this negatively affect perceptions of Deaf people and culture, it also restrains the Deaf community from teaching the hearing community the true meaning of what it means to be Deaf. Thus, making it difficult for hearing people to communicate with Deaf individuals in sign language and connect with their culture.

Methodology

Prior studies have successfully addressed the limitations of fake ASL teaching and interpreting being spread across the media. However, to the author’s knowledge, no significant research has been completed that analyzes fake ASL on TikTok. Since this issue is rather recent, considering TikTok has only been around for about eight years, the goal of this analysis is to address how the evolution of fake and false ASL is becoming more easily accessible, augmenting its negative effects. However, it is also increasingly easier for members of the Deaf community to confront the cultural appropriation of their language through the same platform,

creating a double-edged sword.

All TikTok videos of focus engage in a critique of some form of fake ASL, either through disinformation or misinformation. To conduct a clear and thorough intertextual analysis of inaccurate and fake information about ASL spreading across TikTok, responses from the Deaf community will be examined through the creation of three TikTok videos. More specifically, instead of focusing on the hearing user's videos attempting to teach and interpret ASL, the analysis will strictly focus on the unique usage of TikTok's communicative affordances employed by the Deaf community to critique the original videos. Each original video in question is from a different hearing user. Two videos will utilize the duetting feature provided by TikTok while the third video will strictly focus on the comment section. The first duet video is from @purplelady9302 responding to hearing creator Sally Mckinney (@sallymckinney0) falsely demonstrating how to sign "computer" and "laptop" in ASL. The second video is from another Deaf creator Elizabeth Harris (@lizzytharris) duetting a video from Drake Russell (@wrldrake) attempting to interpret a popular song. Elizabeth's duet shows the correct way to interpret a popular song on TikTok. Lastly, the third object is from a young creator named Lola (@asl_for_teens) showing how to sign the word "flower." The content of analysis will entail going through the comments on this video, as many members of the Deaf and hearing community expressed anger and frustration with her teaching ASL without any form of certification.

TikTok has become a great platform to bring together all sorts of public and private communities. One of these communities is the Deaf Community containing people from all over the world who speak all different types of sign language such as American, Spanish, and British Sign Language. However, with such easy accessibility, a gateway has opened for

hearing people not a part of this community to insert themselves. This has been demonstrated through people trying to teach sign language to their audience on TikTok and also attempting to interpret songs in the language. As a result, fake sign language has spread across the app rapidly and is causing people uneducated about the Deaf Community and language to learn from people who are not qualified in this discipline. This analysis will utilize an intertextual analysis of three different videos that focus on members of the Deaf community's response to hearing people teaching and interpreting ASL incorrectly on TikTok. To successfully complete this analysis, I will be answering the following questions:

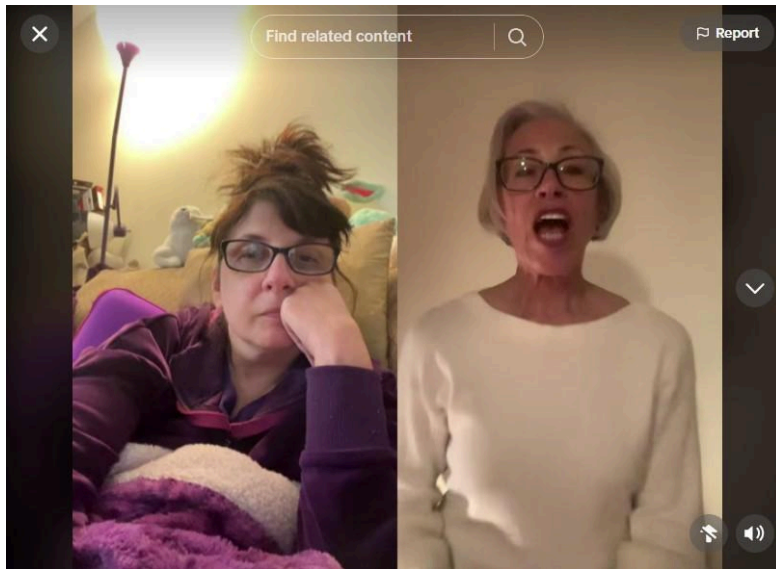
- How do the affordances of TikTok, such as duetting, and commenting, assist the Deaf Community in critiquing and responding to what they believe are misconceptions of ASL?
- How do people teaching ASL in these videos claim the authority to be teaching it correctly as they critique others?
- What type of power and identity needs to be established when determining who can credibly teach ASL and how?

Based on these questions, I argue that sign language, specifically ASL, is heavily misconstrued through public media, particularly TikTok, by the hearing community, causing an abundance of misinformation surrounding the language and culture. The discourse of fake sign language of TikTok is mostly escalated through videos of hearing people attempting to teach certain signs and interpreting song lyrics in sign language incorrectly. Each video is only a small depiction of the larger discourse pertaining to misleading content about sign language that is on social media. The following intertextual videos analysis will address these two different classifications of misinformation or disinformation that are

prevalent in different videos depicting fake sign language.

The first video is formatted in a duetted style and discusses the use of teaching sign language incorrectly. The second video equally uses a duetted format but specifically addresses the usage of false interpretation of song lyrics. The third and final video furthermore incorporates the use of teaching ASL incorrectly but instead of a singular member of the Deaf community responding to it, a plethora of members in the comment section address their frustration textually. Each of the videos are a demonstration of misinformation, disinformation or both. Although I do not believe these creators hold any intention of purposefully spreading false information about sign language, I do believe the creators being criticized are practicing partners of disinformation. Two of the TikTok users mentioned in this analysis are young, likely in high school, and interested in receiving recognition and attention for their videos, which is why neither of them have taken their videos down that address and mention ASL even after multiple people have tried to correct them.

Video #1: @purplelady9302 vs @sallymickinney0



The first research object of my analysis that will be discussed is a duetted TikTok video from user @purplelady9302 responding to a video from @sallymickinney0. At the time of this analysis, the duetted video has 58 likes and 21 comments. In the original video from Sally Mickinney, which is now deleted, Sally, a hearing individual, is attempting to teach her viewers how to sign “computer” and “laptop” in American Sign Language (ASL). Sally is speaking in English and explains how to sign the words by first demonstrating the two signs and then explaining how to place your hands and arms to communicate the sign “correctly.” Her rendition of signing the word “computer” includes one hand flat at a 180-degree angle while the other hand is signing the letter “C” in ASL and is moving in a large circular motion above the flat hand. @purplelady9302, who is a Deaf content creator, duets this video, wearing a purple shirt of course, with a frustrated look on her face. As Sally exhibits the initial movement of how to sign “computer,” @purplelady9302 begins to shake her head in disagreement and eventually signs the word “no” and “wrong” in ASL to explain that Sally’s way of signing these words are incorrect.

@purplelady9302 finger spells the word “computer” then goes on to show her viewers how to sign it correctly in ASL. For the word “computer,” instead of moving one hand in a large circular motion, @purplelady9302 does a small circle above the flat hand. She then mocks Sally by doing an exaggerated circular motion with one hand and a dramatic face. When Sally shows how to sign the word “laptop,” she puts one hand flat with her palm facing down and the other hand on top while moving upwards and towards the camera. @purplelady9302 finger spells the words “laptop” then explains this way of signing the word is incorrect because the flat hand is supposed to be palm up. When signing the word laptop with the palm down, @purplelady9302 makes a silly face and shakes her head to express that it is incorrect.

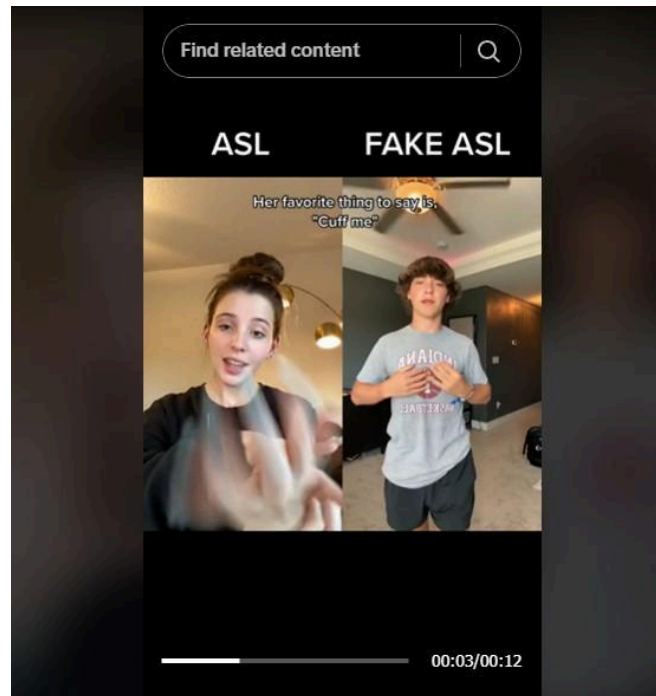
One of the biggest misconceptions about sign language is that the language is solely spoken with hand gestures. Since most signs are translated through hand use and placement, it is not uncommon to believe that explaining and conversing in sign language requires no use of other body parts. However, facial expressions and body language are a vital part of communicating in sign language because they are more evocative of reactions in real-life social situations (Gu et. al). For example, in ASL, raising your eyebrows indicates asking open-ended questions while keeping a neutral face infers making a statement or fact, similar to the way punctuation works in written language and inflection works in spoken language. (Gu et.al). When @purplelady9302 is explaining that the way Sally signs “computer” and “laptop” is incorrect, she makes sure to exaggerate the hand motions and make a dismayed face. The purpose of using these facial expressions and hand gestures is because @purplelady9302 cannot verbally explain that the signs are false to a hearing audience because they do not speak ASL and she only speaks ASL. It is clear that @purplelady9302 is interpellating to all communities, not just the Deaf Community, as she addresses her message not only to the Deaf Community, but also the hearing community and Sally who is not fluent in ASL.

The Deaf community is not oblivious to misinformation being spread about their language. Studies have discovered that even ASL instructors have struggled passing ASL assessments to confirm their teaching eligibility (Buchanan et.al). Thus, Deaf individuals have consistently become victims to fake sign language in multiple situations so it is not uncommon for members to be adamant about stopping unqualified individuals teaching sign language on social media. For example, when news outlets have revealed crucial information for the public to know, they have failed to either have a correct interpreter relaying the information or are only provided closed-captions of whomever is distributing the news (Nowak). As a result, information pertaining to Deaf individuals can be slow to circulate.

Although Sally is not teaching ASL correctly, this “sign language tutorial” video carries a more accurate representation of misinformation rather than disinformation. Her intentions of teaching sign language do not seem malicious. When looking throughout her page, this is not her only post that includes sign language tutoring. Her arrangement of content from about two years ago, during 2022, was specifically formatted to teach one or two signs in ASL per video. However, her content switched abruptly from this style of content to a variety of styles. Sally received a lot of backlash from the Deaf community, such as @purplelady9302, regarding her sign language tutorials because most of the way she signed words were considered incorrect. Sally understood the Deaf community was trying to explain her use of cultural appropriation, but took it seriously as she did not post on TikTok for about a year. When she did start posting again, none of the videos were about ASL tutorials. Since switching up her style of videos a little less than a year ago, and so suddenly, it is speculated the retaliation from the Deaf community encouraged her to step away from doing sign language tutorials. This shows how users like @purplelady9302 were able to hinder a user from misinforming the public about sign language by first responding to her videos and showing the correct way to sign words and then having her stop posting ASL tutorials on TikTok. By reaching out to Sally and informing her that there are certain qualifications that need to be reached when teaching ASL, the Deaf

community was able to resist more appropriation of their culture and how sign language works.

Video #2



The second video is another duetted video, but from two other content creators. While it holds a popular formula of a Deaf Creator duetting with a hearing creator signing ASL incorrectly, this video instead focuses on ASL song interpreting. On April 20, 2023, Elizabeth Harris (@lizzytharris) duetted a video posted by Drake Russell (@wrl Drake) who is striving to interpret the song “SLUT ME OUT” by NLE Choppa in ASL. At the time of this analysis, Harris’s video has 349.5k likes, 1633 comments, and 3.6 million views while Russell’s video has 199.3k likes, 2946 comments, and 1.5 million views. Harris establishes that her way of interpreting is correct by having “ASL” written above her section of the video and “FAKE ASL” above Russell’s half. The purpose of creating this divide is to interpellate an audience that caters to the Deaf and hearing community simultaneously. Specifically, it addresses members of the hearing community who are unfamiliar with ASL and may not be able to differentiate between correct ASL and incorrect ASL while also addressing those who can distinguish correct ASL from incorrect ASL. At the same time, the American Deaf community is also interpellated

in the video through her own rendition of interpreting the song in ASL. Below her video duetting Russell, her caption states “this is what happens when someone sees a hearing person that’s not fluent in sign make an ‘ASL’ video for clout and copy them thinking it’s ASL.” This caption helps Harris establish her knowledge and power of ASL by emphasizing hearing people who hold no qualifications in ASL interpreting should not be creating an interpretation of a song. Instead, Deaf individuals, like herself, and hearing people who have obtained the qualifications to teach ASL as a part of this community should be the only people allowed to upload an ASL song interpretation on TikTok. Harris then goes on to clarify to not send hate to Russell’s video or account since he was not the original creator of this interpretation and was simply copying the movements of the person who first coined the “interpretation.” Since Harris speaks ASL in her daily life and is a notable Deaf activist on social media, she is always trying to further enhance her audience’s knowledge about sign language and Deaf culture. One way to accomplish this is by informing users of TikTok to only learn ASL from creators who are a part of the Deaf community and speak ASL fluently. Harris creates a lot of videos about Deaf education and even has a playlist at the top of her account titled “Deaf Ed.” Although most of her videos do not include duetting creators that are interpreting songs incorrectly, she still advocates for her community in other ways.

When looking at Russell’s version of interpreting the song, his performance lacks a lot of details that make an ASL interpretation of a song successful. To start, his lip syncing, also known as mouthing, is difficult to read and understand since he is standing far from the camera.

Typically, sign language interpreters mouth every lyric in a song or only mouthing key lyrics (Fisher). When interpreting a song in ASL it is considered a form of art. The interpreter has to “transform a song into an embodied-visual rendition for d/Deaf audiences” and decide which sign they are going to use and how they are going to use them in the interpretation (Fisher para. 2). In one part of the song, the lyrics are repeated three times in a row. When Russell signs this part of the song, he repeats the same movements three times and includes signs that are very

literal to the words. When signing to the lyrics “slut me out,” Russell holds one hand in a fist motion and the other hand is moving in a way as if he is pulling something out of the first hand.

On the contrary, Harris’s version of signing the song is much more fluid and flows together, similar to if a song was being sung. During the part of the song when the title is repeated, instead of repeating the same sign three times in row, she signs the three words three different ways, adding more complexity and creativity to her version of signing. Creativity is a vital part of sign language interpretation and enacts not adhering to the standard guidelines of interpretation but rather aiming to enhance the viewers experience (Tamayo). Harris applies this creativity by adding captions to the video and mouthing the lyrics efficiently.

Similar to the previous video, this type of video is also a demonstration of misinforming the public about ASL. One of the reasons for this conclusion is because in the comments of Harris’s video, the creator reveals that Drake Russell was not the first person to do this type of interpretation of the song. Since Drake was repeating the same type of ASL interpretation from another creator, he was continuing to spread misinformation about the language and how a song should be interpreted correctly. However, on the other hand, Russell is also enhancing the spread of disinformation by not responding to Harris or any other creators that have expressed distress about his song interpretation. Due to all the responses, visually and textually, from the Deaf Community, it would be expected for a user to remove a video that appropriates their culture and language. However, Russell is choosing to keep his false interpretation on his page for other reasons that may pertain to his likes and views. Russell’s false interpretation video is his most viewed and liked video on his account. If Russell were to take this video down, his total like count, which can be seen at the top of his page next to his follower count, would decrease. Thus even though he has been told that he is spreading misinformation, he has chosen to keep doing so for the purpose of maintaining his audience share. This makes it function more like disinformation, because he is intentionally spreading and maybe even profiting from incorrect information. Something interesting to note is that at the top of his page, Russell has two playlists

title “Friends” and “Viral.” Even though this video of him doing a false interpretation is his most viewed video, it is not located under his “Viral” playlist. The reasoning for this can be understood that Russell understands his sign language video is problematic but still wants to maintain a high overall like count on his page.

Video #3: ASL for Teens or ASL Teaching?



The final research object discusses a video uploaded by young TikTok creator named Lola (@asl_for_teens) on December 13, 2022. Instead of analyzing the Deaf Community’s response through unique affordances of TikTok such as duetting of this video with other videos, my analysis here will focus on the comments on this video, which are dense with Deaf individuals expressing their frustration with Lola teaching ASL. At the time of this analysis, Lola’s video has received 160.9k likes, 4395 comments, and 5.2 million views. She has pinned this video to the top of her page meaning when looking at her profile, this video is at the top of her account. In this research object, Lola signs in American Sign Language “TODAY SIGN WHAT” followed by the sign “flower” which she repeats twice. As she signs, Lola verbally says the words in English that match up to what she is saying in ASL. Lola’s content format calls attention to her ASL “sign of the day” videos by using multiple forms of communication. First, she is interpellating American Deaf individuals who know ASL and are curious about her “sign

of the day” by signing in ASL. Similarly, she is concurrently drawing in hearing individuals that are interested in slowly learning new ASL signs daily who know English by speaking in English and providing closed-captions in English too.

When scrolling through the comment section, the top comments are from users telling Lola that her signing is wrong and she needs to stop making videos of her showing how to sign. The top comment, which has over 26.7k likes, states “Can you sign - I’m not qualified to teach sign language” from a user named @_tone26 or TonyBoy. A similar comment states “If you are hearing please do not teach sign language 😭 if you've been taking ASL for 5 years you should know why this can be harmful. Be mindful.” This refers to the fact that Lola has mentioned previously on her account that she has been learning ASL for a few years. Comments from the Deaf community and sign language interpreters contain a plethora of different negative and frustrated responses such as “Absolutely not. You’re definitely not our Ally” from @macjaded, and “That’s not signed correctly” from @crazydee62. Both of these comments are examples of how members of the Deaf Community feel their language is culturally appropriated since she is teaching ASL without receiving the correct schooling and is struggling to incorporate facial expressions, one of the most important parts of communicating in ASL (Saunders). By failing to show any accountability for teaching ASL incorrectly, Lola’s actions only further the expansion of cultural appropriation against the Deaf community. Since a majority of Lola’s audience is hearing and are trying to learn ASL from her, teaching ASL incorrectly will only lead to creating negative stereotypes about Deaf culture and As seen in these comments, Deaf individuals are not slow to respond when they feel their language and culture has been appropriated. Since the Deaf Community is already oppressed in modern society for not being able to hear, it is frustrating for hearing people to practice their privilege by reaching a large audience more efficiently. By choosing to ignore the outcries of Deaf individuals trying to get Lola to stop teaching ASL on her TikTok page, her actions are only authorizing users who learn ASL from her to continue the cycle

of teaching incompetent ASL. As a result, making it harder for hearing people to learn true authentic ASL and form a connection with the Deaf Community.

Of course, not everyone writing comments thinks her signing is false. This is where we can see a secondary effect of misinformation, as people who are learning ASL are encouraging Lola's to upload more sign language videos. For instance, one of her videos contains a comment from a user asking Lola if she can do another video of her teaching the sign for "bike." Moreover, other users have confided in her for clarification about how to sign a word by asking "Does it change something if I use my left hand instead of the right? But still go from right to left?" Both of these comments are indicators that users find Lola's rhetorical framing of credibility to be persuasive. And while she does not respond to them in the comments, other users reply back to this video telling the ASL learner not to learn from Lola because she "isn't deaf." However, based on the comment section, it is no secret that Deaf users criticize her for relaying fake information about how to teach sign language. She has received a plethora of comments and responses from the Deaf community, in stitches and duets, asking her to stop teaching ASL. It is clear that Lola is ignoring responses from the Deaf community telling her that her ASL videos are problematic.

In comparison to Russell's video discussed in Research Object #2, Lola also presents forms of disinformation in comparable ways. For one, both creators have these videos still up and accessible on their accounts and are both their most viewed videos across their entire pages. One interesting contrast between their viral videos is that, as stated previously, Russell does not have this video included in his "Viral" playlist at the top of his account. However, Lola does have her viral video of her signing "flower" in ASL attached to her "1 Mill +" playlist. Clearly, Lola is very proud of the attention she received on this video even if a majority of the responses to it were negative. Similar to Russell's predicted intentions, Lola may also be keeping this video on her page to increase her like count. However, in contrast, Lola has continued to make videos that follow this same format while Russell has yet to post another video of himself

interpreting a song in ASL. The only thing that Lola has changed about her content is the wording of her videos, subtly qualifying her claim to be an expert: Instead of signing and saying “Today’s sign is...” Lola now says “Today I learned...” and typically does a voiceover rather than speaking the words as she signs. This wording change is an attempt to reduce the number of people claiming Lola is teaching sign language and demonstrate that she is simply showing what signs she learned that day. Theoretically, this formatting change would clarify that Lola is wanting to learn sign language and values receiving constructive criticism from the Deaf community about the signs she learns. However, many members of the Deaf community on TikTok, including Elizabeth Harris, have made videos revealing that Lola has blocked their accounts from viewing her profile and videos. Based on this, it can be assumed that Lola is posting for reasons other than being mistakenly misinformed about ASL. As stated previously, this video is pinned to her page, meaning she is aware of the backlash and responses prevalent on this post but still chooses to keep it on her page and accessible to users who click on her account. Additionally, she still posts videos about signs she's learning and continues to get responses from users saying her way of signing it is incorrect.

Conclusion

Ultimately, examining the Deaf community's reaction to hearing individuals attempting to teach and interpret American Sign Language on TikTok is an opportunity to bring awareness to oppression against the Deaf Community. There are users on the internet misapprehending the immeasurable consequences that occur when partaking in an ASL interpreting trend or attempting to teach signs to their viewers. As a result of users such as Sally McKinney, Drake, and Lola, members of the Deaf community become responsible for educating the public about the detrimental effects of ableism, audism, and cultural appropriation apparent in videos created by such TikTok accounts. Instead of taking a step toward connecting both communities through social

media platforms such as TikTok, the lack of supervision occurring on these apps is allowing misinformation and disinformation to spread rapidly across user's screens regarding ASL. Thus, making hearing people more susceptible to false information that pertains to Deaf culture and sign language. It is not uncommon for TikTok users to become enthralled in the idea of gaining more followers and likes, especially at a young age. As social media apps such as TikTok continue to evolve, and become more accessible to learn sign language, it is important for members of both the hearing and Deaf community to come together to shed light on the issues surrounding a precarious language and culture. Critically analyzing TikTok user's, who are hearing, videos teaching and interpreting ASL is important to enlighten less knowledgeable individuals about how cultural appropriation can occur within the Deaf community. Without this, equality for Deaf individuals will become more and more unlikely.

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