The Emergence of a Deaf Economy

By

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1. Introduction

The “deaf economy” is an emerging, new niche economic system taking shape within deaf communities globally. My research attempts to understand and describe the relationship of economic networks of deaf businesses, entrepreneurs, employees, and customers embedded in the “deaf economy.” I came to discover that many social-cultural aspects of the deaf communities in my research, such as social ties and attitudes of solidarity, are one of the driving forces behind the “deaf economy.”

There were some studies done about the employment of the deaf in both United States and Europe in the past years. There are also few research studies done on the phenomenon of American deaf business-owners and entrepreneurs, but that was not the case for European deaf business-owners and entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship has become a popular concept and research topic today in the mainstream society. However, there is very little research into entrepreneurship within the deaf communities. Hence, there is not much understanding of how the government, institutions, and other people could advocate for entrepreneurism within the deaf communities, especially in the United States and Europe. Despite such little information, in the last few decades, there has been a substantial increase in employment and education of the deaf in both United States and Europe, which also incidentally shows an increase in phenomenon of deaf business-owners and entrepreneurs. However, I believe there is virtually no research into the concept of the “deaf economy”, an economic network of deaf businesses, employees, and consumers.

In 2012 and 2013, I was looking for a possible research topic on the deaf population for my summer projects. By chance, in 2012, I had happened to come across Professor W. Scot
Atkins’s dissertation on the lived experiences of fourteen American deaf entrepreneurs. 1

Professor Atkins is currently a Rochester Institute of Technology business professor interested in deaf entrepreneurism. In our email correspondence, he had indicated the need for research into the concept of the “deaf economy,” so I had decided to take on the initiative to answer this simple research question: “What is the deaf economy?” Secondary questions include: “What are the composition and attributes of the ‘deaf economy’ for Europe? How does it compare to American ‘deaf economy’?”

In order to answer those questions, I have selected certain sites of my case studies in different geographic locations using a qualitative or ethnographic approach: California and Las Vegas, Nevada (United States) and London, France, and Bulgaria (Europe). Also, I was hoping to discover the premises of the “deaf economy” similar to the concept of an “ethnic economic enclave” and conduct a short comparative analysis between the United States and Europe at the conclusion of the research.

My research focuses only on the “deaf economy” of first-world, developed, capitalistic countries, such as the United States and England/France. I also had time constraints, since all of my research was done during summer vacations, so I was not able to go in-depth as much as I wanted to. Also, during my fieldwork, I came to realization that the “deaf economy” is a very broad topic and encompasses wide range of areas worthy of further examination in the future. My qualitative research is by no means rigorous as a dissertation research would be. Also, it is based on my own selected interviews and field observations, so my research may or may not be generalizable, especially if my research were to be replicated in the future. However, I would

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like to use this research opportunity to point out my interesting observations of the “deaf economy” and help to open up a potential new research topic for future research initiatives.

1.1 Researcher Interest

I am a d/Deaf person part of the Deaf community, where by definition, “deaf” with the lower case “d” refers to those who have the medical condition of hearing loss and does not necessarily mean any connections to the Deaf culture. By contrast, the capital “D” denotes the cultural aspect of the Deaf community. It is usually made up of deaf members who primarily use their own country’s sign language, and view themselves as a linguistic and cultural minority.

They pointed out that they would not be considered “disabled” if everybody else used sign language, which is a social model view of disability rather than using medical methods to treat their deafness\(^2\). For the purposes of this thesis, a lower case “d” will mean the general condition of all deaf people while the capital D will denote the cultural aspect of the deaf community.

“Deaf” and “deaf” may be used interchangeably throughout the thesis.

As a d/Deaf person, this research is meaningful for me because I was hoping to try to make a difference for the global deaf community while as an undergraduate as well to have the opportunity to meet other deaf people within the U.S and Europe.

I was born deaf and had Cochlear Implant since I was three years old. I grew up mostly mainstreamed, isolated, and spoke English. I did not learn American Sign Language (ASL) nor did I meet many more of other local deaf people until my sophomore year at MIT. With the deaf people’s support and encouragement, my fluency in ASL grew. Not only that, I had finally came to terms with my own deafness. I had felt conflicted as the only deaf child growing up in a hearing dominated environment for the most of my life. I felt that I was the “abnormal” one who

could not fit in no matter how hard I tried. I could not be a “hearing” person, no matter how much I wished. However, I now acknowledge my differences from others, but I see it as an opportunity to educate other people and open up a dialogue rather than hiding it away in shame.

MIT gave me generous financial and academic resources to head to California and Europe to meet other deaf people, beyond the MIT bubble and the borders of the United States. While in London last summer, I had the privilege to acquire a conversational level British Sign Language (BSL) and International Sign Language (ISL) as well to obtain a glimpse of my participants’ life and become part of their community. Such opportunities to learn foreign sign languages and to immerse oneself into foreign deaf communities are very rare. I came to learn about their culture, language, and their viewpoints of their world, which were so different from mine. However, despite our differences, we also have many commonalities, such as our desire for stronger accessibility in our countries or cracking jokes. Since I had grew up in the United States only, I had frequently thought that the deaf Americans were “unlucky” to have so many barriers and lack of opportunities leading to a quality life that our hearing counterparts enjoy. But after my stay in Europe, I have come to the realization that deaf Americans and I are the “lucky” and privileged ones. We have many opportunities and rights that our non-American counterparts do not have, such as quality education, accommodations, or services. I recognize that the United States still has many deaf issues that need to be improved, but we at least have stronger protection of our rights and greater awareness of the deaf American community than our non-American counterparts do.

I was also looking to gain experience in conducting humanistic, qualitative research, in contrast to technical, quantitative research I had done in the past. Dr. Scot Atkins’s dissertation on the experiences of the Deaf entrepreneurs and his concept of “deaf economy” gave me a
chance to delve into a new research project on the deaf population. While I may not have any significant experience with entrepreneurship, I had fancied the idea of owing my own business one day in the future, where I could be my own boss and engage in an initiative that is rewarding and gratifying. One of his recommendations for future research had called out for more research into the idea of "deaf economy." I thought this is where I could build my senior thesis and seize the opportunity to meet and learn from the deaf entrepreneurs, especially by learning about the challenges as a deaf business owner and their use of resources to run a successful business. It was very important for me to build rapport with my informants, especially since I had the advantage of being a deaf person and with knowledge of their language.

In the future, I hope to pursue a further inquiry into the phenomenon of the "deaf economy,"— perhaps for my future dissertation research. I also intend to share my research results with my participants, aspiring deaf entrepreneurs, and other researchers who may be interested in replicating my research in different countries. While I cannot guarantee that other researchers will come to the same conclusion as I had in my research, I strongly encourage others to attempt to discover if there is a "deaf economy" in the countries of their choice.

2. Background

2.1. What is the Deaf Population?

The purpose of this section is to give a general overview of the deaf population in the United States and Europe (United Kingdom), mostly focusing on employment and accessibility. The deaf population is diverse in its communication needs. It can consist of people who speak and wear assistive hearing devices (hearing aids or Cochlear Implant), sign only without any assistive hearing devices, or use a combination of signing and assistive hearing devices. According to Food and Drug Administration, Cochlear Implant is "an implanted electronic
hearing device, designed to produce useful hearing sensations to a person with severe to profound nerve deafness by electrically stimulating nerves inside the inner ear.”

According to Gallaudet Research Institute, one of the nation’s premier universities for the Deaf, in the U.S, approximately 9 to 22 out of every 1,000 people have “severe hearing impairment” or is “functionally deaf”. There are no exact figures for the deaf/Deaf population in Europe in general, but it is estimated that it at least comprises of around 15 million or more (or at least 1% of the total population). Compared to their hearing counterparts, the deaf are much less likely to be employed and educated in those two countries. In the United Kingdom, it is reported that the rate of unemployment amongst deaf people is four times higher than for the whole population. Deaf people who are employed often tend to be restricted to low paid, unskilled jobs, irrespective of their abilities. In the U.S, about 18.7% of the general population did not graduate from high school; among those with severe to profound hearing loss, 44.4% did not graduate. Similarly, in 18-to-44 year old age group, 82% of the hearing population were employed but those with severe to profound hearing loss, 58% were employed. Such differences often stem from the rampant employment discrimination in mainstream society that value ability and auditory-verbal skills. Such barriers can be attributed to a number of factors such as health and safety issues, lack of education and training opportunities, and communication barriers.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was passed in hopes to reduce the barriers encountered by the deaf and other individuals with disabilities, especially with regards to

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3 "What is a Cochlear Implant?" last accessed May 9, 2014, http://www.fda.gov/MedicalDevices/ProductsandMedicalProcedures/ImplantsandProsthetics/CochlearImplants/ucm062823.htm
4 "Deaf Information," last accessed May 9, 2014, http://www.hayfield.org.uk/content/general/deafinformation.htm
employment discrimination and accessibility to services. Most European governments do not recognize sign language and refuse to give accommodations in sign language, but the United Kingdom is an exception to this rule. British Sign Language (BSL) was recognized as a full, independent language in the UK in March 2003, which increased funding for BSL interpreters and deaf BSL tutors. Akin to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Equality Act of 2010 (UK) was also passed to address issues of employment discrimination. Despite the discrimination acts, it is still important to at least address and research into the issues of supporting deaf entrepreneurs and employment of the deaf people.

2.2. Literature Review

Most of my research is based on Rochester Institute Technology business Professor Atkins’s dissertation Lived Experiences of Deaf Entrepreneurs, and so this review will focus on the literature that he cites. His dissertation documents the nature and experiences of 14 deaf American entrepreneurs as he attempts to understand the experiences of “those entrepreneurs who are deaf in the context of creating their ventures and sustaining those ventures.”

His method of data collection was to conduct semi-structured videotaped face-to-face interviews, which were later transcribed. The participants came from a wide range of industries and mainly conduct their businesses in the United States. Six themes had emerged from his interviews, which were the following below:

Theme I: Pursuing their passion with experience and skill

Theme II: Building the organization through collaboration, networking and a deep understanding of the market

Theme III: Reflecting on one’s identity as a deaf person and how it has impacted their

6"Deaf Information."
experience

Theme IV: Building bridges with the rest of the world using communication strategies

Theme V: Having a support network

Theme VI: Making an impact in today’s world

Note that his research uses the approach of phenomenology, which

“explores other people’s experiences in order to better understand a deeper meaning of an aspect of human experience in the context of the entire human experience. Phenomenology goes beyond the subjective experiences or data of the participants to the orientation of inquiring about the nature of the phenomenon as an essential human experience. In phenomenology, the researcher collects data from the individuals who have experienced a specific phenomenon. The data is analyzed and organized and the researcher develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals”.

The emerging themes did certainly provide interesting insights into the lives of the American Deaf entrepreneurs that I could compare with my findings, especially if my observations validate or contradicts his findings. Atkins’ approach of semi-structured interviews had gleaned rich troves of data that helps him to understand the experiences of his participants better. I have taken the same approach of semi-structured interviews to understand my participants better, but I have decided to include a fieldwork component.

In one section, Atkins infers from his interviews that the deaf community is possibly akin to an “ethnic economic enclave”, a term coined by Alejandro Portes and Leif Jensen. A. Portes, a Princeton sociologist interested in immigrant issues, and L. Jensen, a Penn State sociologist, had coined the term “ethnic economic enclaves” to describe a community largely composed of people who share same cultural heritage and language, usually applied to immigrant population,

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and conduct businesses with each other. "Ethnic economic enclave" hypothesis defines a space culturally distinct from the mainstream society with sufficient amount of "social capital" that people working within the community could conduct economic activities. Generally, the term refers to defined geographical locations with identifiable characteristic visible cultural markers, such as Chinatown and Little Italy. In Portes and Jensen's case, they had used the case study of Cuban immigrants in Miami to pioneer the discourse of "ethnic economic enclave." Since people are clustered in such geographical spaces, they develop place-based networks where members can generate resources to promote the social and economic development of its members. From my understanding, an ethnic economic enclave generally is not necessarily composed of a community exchanging goods and services, but also includes the social and political components. Examples can include ethnic business owners hiring employees of same ethnicity or sharing valuable information that they may not be able to access in the mainstream society easily.

Atkins argues that in the case of the Deaf community, it is not strictly restricted to geographical locations, but rather mostly virtual and transnational, crossing physical borders. It is not concentrated heavily in one physical location, unlike other typical ethnic economic enclaves. This statement can be attributed to the small size of the deaf community and the far-reaching network of technology and relationships. Atkins's research study noted that the American deaf business-owners in the study talked about catering to the deaf community and outside of the deaf community as well expanding their business outside of their community. I would like to see if his claims could be validated or not, and this question changed my own

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10 Portes and Jensen, "What's An Ethnic Enclave?" 769.
research approach.

3. Methodology

The primary research question is: “What is the deaf economy?” Secondary questions include: “What are the attributes of the ‘deaf economy’ for Europe? How does it compare to American ‘deaf economy’?” Is it an “ethnic economic enclave” as Atkins proposes in his study? Hence, I thought the methodology of conducting an ethnography research is appropriate to answer those questions. It would allow me the opportunity to interact face-to-face with my informants in a variety of settings as well to observe the interaction between the employers, employees, and consumers in their natural settings (such as restaurants, expo, offices, etc.). Ethnography means I must see my informants at least more than once and take in detailed observations. I saw them on repetitive basis in same setting I had met with them or in different setting that generates economic activity. For example, many of the businesses I had analyzed primarily provided services within their local communities, but would also provide services in another city or in an expo.

3.1. Participant Selection

In other ways, my methods differed from Atkins’. Atkins was more selective about his interviewees than I was. He had few more criteria for the desired profile of his participants in order to create a purposeful sample. For example, his research had a more specific, deeper focus on a specific group —deaf entrepreneurs and their businesses. On the other hand, I was not only interested in deaf businesses, but also in either deaf or hearing employees and consumers. The businesses within the “deaf economy” do not need to be always deaf-owned nor do the employees and consumers needed to be deaf to qualify as my informants. Finally, I also decided
to do not only look at American companies, but also at international companies in two types of venues, businesses and cultural events. I wanted to analyze the "deaf economy" on a local and continental-scale to unearth possible connections between those geographical scales to help to create a picture of the "deaf economy". This is especially important to look out whether businesses cross physical boundaries or not beyond their local communities. It may seem paradoxical for the need to research the "global" in the "local".

My first steps were to determine the types of businesses and geographic locations most appropriate for my research. I selected businesses a variety of industries and of different sizes as long they meet the criteria of the following:

1. Operating for profit with a revenue stream;
2. The business-owner is "an entrepreneur/business owner is someone involved in the implementation, investment, the assumption of risk and managing a venture;"\textsuperscript{11} and
3. Must be either deaf-owned or the overwhelmingly majority of the employees are deaf (in this case, the business owner would be hearing as long the business play active role in the deaf community. Customers can be deaf or hearing)

Next, I had to determine suitable geographical locations to serve as case studies for my research. In 2012, I had decided to research deaf businesses in California and Las Vegas, Nevada; in 2013, I decided to visit the United Kingdom, France, and Bulgaria. I had several reasons for selecting those ideal locations:

1. I have the most networks to the deaf communities in California and the United Kingdom, which had greatly aided in facilitating in my connection to the

members of those local deaf communities and discovering potential research subjects. It was very important to build rapport with my subjects so they could become accustomed to me and share their experiences with me.

2. My preliminary searches via the Internet and personal conversations came up with viable options for businesses in those communities worth investigating. My European colleagues had remarked anecdotally on more than one occasion that the United Kingdom had more active deaf businesses than other European countries.

3. London, Las Vegas, France, and Bulgaria were the sites of large congregation of deaf people for important deaf events (1st Deaf Build Expo, DeafNation exposition, Clin d’Oeil art festival, and Deaflympics, respectively) with the potential for economic activities during those events. Most of those events had deaf businesses promoting their businesses or were a space for people to build their social connections.

4. To collect data from my informants, I was required to be able to converse in my informants’ languages, which were American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL), and International Sign Language (ISL), depending on their preference. I had to learn BSL and ISL “on the go” when I arrived in Europe, which took me about a month to acquire conversational level fluency. My background in ASL had certainly helped me to give me the confidence to acquire another different sign language. Local deaf social events had helped me to quickly make friends and build rapport with those people, so they had patience to teach me their language on the go. I was also fortunate that several
of my non-American informants had some basic knowledge of ASL, so I was able to build on that to achieve working fluency in BSL and ISL.

Not all of my participants were found through the Internet searches or the social media. For those businesses I did find online, I had written up an email template introducing myself (See Appendix A). However, the snowball effect was useful in networking, where I came to discover those participants via social events or word of mouth once I have arrived in the local communities. Social events, especially with a large gathering of deaf people, were indispensable in searching for and meeting contacts as well any potential events sponsored by the local businesses.

The following tables provides a description of the businesses I had selected and profiled (Table 1):

Table 1: Profile of Businesses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym*</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>General Industries</th>
<th>Size (Small, Medium, Large)$^{12}$</th>
<th>Deaf-Owned or Majority Deaf Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Babble, Inc.</td>
<td>Northern California</td>
<td>Telecommunications</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Deaf-Owned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronan (owner)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia (employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan (employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yummy Food</td>
<td>Northern California</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Deaf-Owned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie (owner)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to selecting businesses, I attended few deaf expositions or conventions, where
deaf businesses and consumers congregate together to advertise, share information, socialize, or
conduct general economic activity. Some of my case studies had gone to those
expositions/conventions, where I was able to observe my informants as well to capture the
general statements or feelings from the attendees about the expositions/conventions. The
following table provides an overview of the events I attended (Table 2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(employee)</th>
<th>(employee)</th>
<th>(employee)</th>
<th>(employee)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>Christina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeafE!</td>
<td>Southern California</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TechZech</td>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Zach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Zach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td>(employee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TechZech</td>
<td>Northern California</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeaffTimez</td>
<td>Eli (owner)</td>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>(employee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli (owner)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeaffTimez</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeaffTimez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli (owner)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeaffTimez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli (owner)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(employee)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pseudonyms of businesses’ and people’s names were created for confidentiality of the informants.*
Table 2: Deaf Expositions/Conventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number of Attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012 DeafNation Expo</td>
<td>Las Vegas, Nevada</td>
<td>General businesses and social</td>
<td>26,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clin d'Oeil</td>
<td>Reims, France</td>
<td>International art festival</td>
<td>4,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Deaf Build Expo</td>
<td>London, England</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>100+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaflympics</td>
<td>Sofia, Bulgaria</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>4600+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I interviewed forty-eight people in total over the duration of two summers (2012 and 2013), but focused on few businesses as case studies in each continent since I only had limited time to conduct my research during the summer vacations. I interviewed all of the profiled businesses-owners from Table 1 whenever they were available and willing to meet with me. I also had some opportunities to interview with the profiled employees from Table 1 and thirty-one consumers/event attendees (either deaf or hearing).

The MIT Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the method of obtaining consent via signed forms for my participants in the United States (See Appendix B). However, since using sign language was crucial to conversing with my informants, I had applied for a written consent waiver for my European informants and opted for verbal consent in sign language (See Appendix C). The deaf community within the United States is more homogenous in terms of culture and language, so its members all are expected to know written English. However, I could not assume the same for deaf communities in Europe. The deaf communities in Europe are more varied and composed of more international deaf people with varying degrees of written English fluency, especially in the United Kingdom. It would not be ethical for me to ask them to sign a form they do not understand, so instead, I opted to explain in the sign language they are familiar with.
made sure they understood my research. It would also be difficult to predict which person has complete literacy in a particular written language, but a commonly used sign language used in the local community was useful to obtain verbal consent from them. I did not use written consent forms for exposition attendees since I only wanted to obtain a general sense of an attendee’s opinion of the expositions, and I cannot assume they are fluent in written English. I had to assure my informants that their identities would be kept confidential and that I would take extra steps to ensure any identifying markers were removed, especially that the deaf community (domestic and international) is very small. Pseudonyms replaced my participants’ real names and businesses to ensure their privacy.

3.2. Data Collection

Using these ethnographic field observations and semi-structured interviews, data were collected and analyzed by grouping/tagging similar observations and statements from a wide range of people I had met—business owners, employees, consumers. In both United States and Europe, I had conducted several semi-structured interviews with the employees, employers, or consumers/attendees in a particular setting that generates economic activity, such as restaurants, shows, or expo. I had created a list of starter questions to generate conversations:

1. Why did you start this business venture?
2. How do you feel about your hearing consumers?
3. Why did you hire those deaf employees? How did you recruit them?
4. How do you find your consumers (method of advertisement)?
5. Do you form any partnerships with other businesses?
Unlike Atkins, I did not videotape my subjects, because I am aware that the presence of videotapes in a setting like restaurant or office could disturb the natural flow of the environment that could affect the people’s behavior around me or cause them to feel uncomfortable while they are conducting business. Instead, I opt to be a participant-observer. I would write up my notes to record my observations or informants’ responses and code my observations. Also, social media advertising, email correspondences, local newspapers, news article, blogs, brochures, pamphlets, forums, and any other public written statements or commentaries were also very helpful in gleaning further insights of the perception of the businesses.

Though I tried to be inclusive as possible, those businesses and events only represent a small, selective sample. More sophisticated research methods could be used in the future research, but I did not have enough time or other resources this time. I would have outside reviewers to double-check my data to further ensure the validity of my research. I would have followed up with my interviewees about their businesses and experiences. Nevertheless, new themes had emerged from my observations and collected statements to form a picture of the premises of the “deaf economy” and as the hypothesis comparable to an ethnic economic enclave for United States and Europe, which will be detailed in the next section. It is organized around three themes:

Theme I: Capitalizing on deaf identity in businesses

Theme II: Crossing the State and Transnational Boundaries: Building the Market & Network

Theme III: Observations of the differences between United States and United Kingdom

4. Findings

The first focuses on the social and cultural aspects of deaf identity in businesses; the
second on spatial concentration of the deaf businesses and building of the market and network; and the third theme is a comparison study between the United States and United Kingdom since they represent distinct markets. Those themes in this section are only to mostly present my findings, using best-selected examples to illustrate the themes. Exceptions will be noted in some cases. The themes were determined by my field notes, where I have created tags for repeating or similar observations and statements. The themes and their subthemes are stated as below:

Theme I: Capitalizing on deaf identity in businesses

a. Branding itself as “deaf”
   b. Route to Employment
      i. Employee
      ii. Self-Employment/Employer
   c. “DEAF CAN DO”

Theme II: Crossing the State and Transnational Boundaries: Building the Market & Network

a. Geographic Spatial Distribution
   i. Physical geographical distribution
   ii. Liminal geographical space
   iii. Virtual geographical distribution

Theme III: Observations of the differences between United States and United Kingdom

a. Economic & Social Opportunities/Programs
   b. Geography

Theme I: Capitalizing on deaf identity in businesses

The first theme that emerged from my field observations, experiences, and informants had implicitly revealed the importance of being deaf or having a deaf identity. The deaf community can be defined as an ethnic minority with its own shared language and cultural
values. Their deaf identities are one of the important initial factors for spurring the development of the businesses and bringing in the social and financial capital. The term “kinship” I use in this thesis does not necessarily refer to the traditional definition of blood or marriage relation. But rather, I was referring to the feeling of solidarity amongst the deaf people; especially many of my informants had used their “shared deaf experiences” to build social ties within the community. The employees and employers could be seen as stand-ins for a large family. Because of their “kinship ties”, the members of the deaf community were able to use their social ties to their advantage to either promote their businesses or obtain employment. Hence, this theme strongly influences the other subsequent themes.

a. Branding itself as “deaf”

All businesses had slightly different approaches to advertising their statuses as “deaf” businesses as a way to capitalize on the deaf identities of the company owners, employees, or consumers. They had especially remarked that it was particularly important to emphasize the “deafness” of their company. Many of the profiled companies had advertised or branded themselves as a deaf business to gain consumers and advertising attention for its “uniqueness.” For example, Ronan of Babble, Inc., one of the telecommunications company founders, had a quirky company slogan stating that they understood the deaf consumers’ need, and that deaf people within the company made their product just for the deaf consumers. For a telecommunications company whose products serve to facilitate communication for a population that often face communication barriers in a hearing dominant society, accessibility and the ease of communication were one of their selling points. Ronan remarked:

“My goal is to have all deaf people have the same level of access I had myself with [my interpreter]. How? I am not sure. When I conduct committee meetings, it’s easy to do all of that
because I have [my interpreter] by my side, but that’s not realistic for all deaf people because interpreters are costly.”

Because Ronan identifies himself deaf, he was able to relate to and understand his consumers’ need for communication and accessibility, such as interpreters. He was able to capitalize on his “deafness” to impress upon consumers that there is truly a business out there that truly were made by deaf people “just like them.” I acknowledge that I am a regular consumer of such products, so from my interviews and observation, I had felt Ronan was able to connect with me, a deaf consumer, by sharing our personal experiences with communication needs and desire to improve accessibility and communication needs of the deaf.

A couple of companies were even willing to go far as to include the word “deaf” in their company name to further increase the visibility of the “deafness” of their company. DeafE!, a Southern Californian entertainment business composed of the overwhelming majority of deaf employees, and DeafTimez, an England-based restaurant, were such examples I had encountered. Eli, the deaf founder of DeafTimez, had remarked by including the word “deaf” in its name, the restaurant was able to garner an explosion of positive publicity internationally and nationally wide, and emphasized that his business was designed to cater to the deaf consumer’s communication needs in the restaurant. DeafE!’s name was a clever homophone wordplay on an English adverb containing a positive connotation and the word “deaf”. To further protect the privacy of this company, I will not state which adverb it is, but the company name was designed to inspire a feeling of what I call “DEAF CAN DO”—an attitude borne out of the feeling deaf people has the constant need to prove themselves repeatedly. This attitude will be discussed further later in this section.
In fact, in addition to the underlying messages of “DEAF CAN DO”, the “uniqueness” of
their companies was especially highlighted to me many times in my conversations with the
owners and employees. Ronan of Babble, Inc., indicated his company is “unique”:

“We are designed/developed by deaf people exclusively so this makes us unique
compared to other competitors. We’re the only one with deaf engineers.”

Eli of DeafTimez and Marie of Yummy Food, two deaf owned restaurants, claimed their
restaurants are the first of its kind---deaf owners, deaf/deaf-aware staff with fluency or
willingness to learn sign language---in the world. In order to substantiate their claims, I looked
up online and print mainstream media of the businesses, which ran the gamut from United
Kingdom’s Evening Standard to the Huffington Post. Even though the telecommunications and
restaurant industry are saturated with the common products and services DeafTimez and Yummy
Food had specialized in, they were “unique” in the aspect that they are deaf owned or deaf-
staffed with sign language as the primary mode of communication in the business settings.
They were unique in the fact they were the first deaf to serve their particular products in their
industry and use sign language. However, Lee of TechZech, a northern California technology-
solutions based start-up, brought a different angle to their “uniqueness”:

“We are the only serious deaf business out there doing this. There may be others, but we
are still the only one this serious.”

Clearly, for those businesses, their “uniqueness” as “deaf” businesses served to attract
consumers in order to bring in the necessary revenue. Atkins had discussed about his participants
using “deaf as a competitive edge” for their businesses since “it allowed them to access to a
niche market within the deaf community”, and use the knowledge of their language, their culture, and [ability to] with hearing people, [so] clients feel comfortable using…services.”

However, not all of the companies were on the “uniqueness” bandwagon. In our conversations, the deaf owner of Yummy Food acknowledged it is the first deaf-owned restaurant serving that particular food in its industry. However, she said:

“I don’t want to be known just as the deaf _____ restaurant. I want to be known for our awesome [food] people will come to eat.”

Branding itself as “deaf” is an ethnic signal for those businesses looking to conduct economic activities in an ethnic enclave, such as the deaf community. Also, I want to point out that the profiled businesses had used each other’s services to “show their support” and “advocate” for Deaf businesses. TechZech and Yummy Food had used Babble, Inc’s telecommunications services as their preferred partnership. It turned out that all of the owners of the businesses knew each other personally; especially all of their businesses were in the same geographical region (Northern California). They had particularly emphasized to me few times that it was very important for them to support another deaf businesses whenever they could, but I wondered if that included extending their support to their deaf businesses competitors within the same industry. If their “uniqueness” were their selling point, how would the deaf businesses fare if they were competing against each other? Or would their deaf consumers be repelled by the “deafness” of the businesses? There were very few instances of such deaf consumers refusing to use a deaf business’ services I came across in my research.

Usually, for all of the businesses I had came across, by emphasizing their deafness, they were hoping to garner the employee and consumer’s social and financial support for their

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businesses. Deaf people were supposedly to have a sense of responsibility and solidarity to ensure their compatriots were able to succeed in their initiatives. In the expositions/trade shows I had attended, when the deaf attendees were asked if they were willing to support a deaf businesses and buy goods or services from deaf businesses over same hearing businesses, nearly all of them had said they were willing to do so. When asked why, they said along the lines of “to support deaf businesses” or “deaf support deaf”.

However, there may be an exception to this instance. For example, not all deaf consumers were willing to use Babble, Inc.’s telecommunications services (this businesses has few of other competitors in the same industry, but all hearing owned). In my interviews, they had cited strong privacy concerns because the consumers and employees or owners knew each other (due to the nature of the small size of the deaf community). There was the possibility that the owners and employees could come across their consumers’ telecommunication records and “violate” their privacy even though they were bound by the federal telecommunications rules to not to violate or disclose their consumers’ privacy. Another reason for not supporting a deaf business was that if a hearing business provided better cost and service quality than its deaf counterpart, they would go to the hearing business. Also, at the trade shows/expositions, many deaf businesses were offering similar goods/services, so it would seem that they would be competing against each other. Some of those owners said they took different angle on their businesses from the other businesses—projecting an image of “uniqueness” of their businesses (but not “deaf-uniqueness” as other profiled businesses in this thesis). I was not able to tell if the competition was fierce amongst them due to the limited time I had at the trade shows/expositions, but that is what I would like to look into more in the future.

b. Route to Employment
In this section, I will discuss two different possibilities to employment for deaf people: Self-employment (owner) and employment in a business (employee). Both Atkins and Portes had discussed about the successful entrepreneurial activity within an ethnic enclave and the “kinship” ties between ethnic and minority members in the enclave, which helped to foster the ease of entry into the labor market or as starting point for their business ventures than they could in the mainstream economy market.14

i. Employee

In the case of employees, there were instances of preferential hiring practices. All of the businesses owners in this research preferred to hire a deaf employee over a hearing employee for ease of communication, shared deaf experiences, and altruism on the employers’ part, but exceptions were made if the hearing employee was sign language fluent or Deaf-culturally aware as long the hearing employee was able to meet the communication needs of their deaf employer and co-workers. Ronan of Babble, Inc., had pointed out his commitment to create an all-inclusive deaf environment for himself and his employees in their offices as well the ease of using his “kinship” ties to jump-start his business:

“It’s mainly a lot of contacts I have built over years. It’s also a preference of working with people you know so the ramp up time is much shorter than normal. It is tougher for a small company but we are making a commitment to create all deaf or signing environment so it’s easy for a deaf person to come in here and start contributing right away.”

He continued on to discuss about the importance of the ease of communication, which was more lacking when he was working in a hearing dominant environment: “Also, in a hearing

dominated environment - even though they are providing interpreters, etc. The pace of the communication is still always 5-10 seconds ahead of what interpreters are telling you, so you’re still a little behind.”

In addition, Marie, the owner of Yummy Food, strongly stipulated that all potential employees must know American Sign Language, regardless of their hearing status. But she did point out her preference for hiring a deaf employee was based on her desire to “show support” and “provide opportunities” for deaf people looking for employment. She had commented on the difficulties of searching for employment as a deaf person, hence her business had provided an avenue for further possibilities of employment opportunities for the deaf. Such opportunity was available to one of the employees of Yummy Food, John, who was one of the chefs and newly hired. He is deaf and around in his mid-30’s. When I asked him to give me an overview of his employment history and how he became a chef at Yummy Food, he told me of times when he had hopped around different work sites, usually in work sites requiring manual labor in hearing dominant environment with hearing bosses. He said he was a friend of a friend of Marie who had directed him to Marie—an instance of John capitalizing on his social ties within the community to obtain his job. He was especially was very happy for the opportunity to work for Marie at Yummy Food, despite his lack of previous culinary experience. Marie had taken her time to teach him how to make the restaurant’s specialty food. It turned out that his previous skills with manual labor had come in handy. He also had recounted the days when he was frustrated his bosses and co-workers due to communication barriers as well the lack of the development of camaraderie in his previous all hearing environment.

However, the employers emphasized several times that they would not usually hire a person just because that person is deaf. Qualification standards of the employees were not
compromised in the hiring process. The point was that they would practice preferential hiring —
picking a qualified deaf employee over an equally qualified hearing employee (with an exception
for those in the interpretation roles, in which the employee can be hearing). In other words, the
employers were practicing affirmative action.

ii. Self-Employment/Employer

On the path to becoming self-employed, the current business owners had started out as
employees in an all-hearing environment before they become entrepreneurs. Most of the business
owners, with an exception of DeafE!, which is hearing owned, had similar experience as John
did in his all-hearing environment. They cited the lack of “respect” and preferential treatment of
the hearing over the deaf when it comes to greater job responsibilities. Ronan remarked,

"As an employee for a hearing owned company, I feel they’re trying to be charitable and
doing things out of pity. But as an owner/CEO for a deaf run company, I don’t feel anything like
that - I feel the respect is there and it’s really equal footing."

However, he was grateful for the experiences and skills he had gained in his previous
employment, where he was able to transfer his knowledge gained into a successful business
venture within the same industry he had worked in. Marie of Yummy Food had a family
restaurant business she grew up working in, enabling her restaurateur knowledge to turn her
dreams of owning a restaurant into reality.

On the other hand, not every owner had similar experience as Ronan and Marie did. Eli
of DeafTimez told me he came up with the concept of his restaurant after years of frustration of
the inability of the hearing restaurants to meet his communication needs, and had decided to
establish DeafTimez with his hearing co-founder despite his lack of experience in working
restaurant settings.

The only hearing owned company in the profile of businesses I had studied, Mary, the hearing owner of DeafE! is an exception in that she had no prior experience working with the deaf employees. However, she was willing to set up a business employing all deaf people in order to promote the deaf people into the entertainment industry by capitalizing on their “uniqueness” of their deaf identity and providing them with training to secure jobs within the entertainment industry. Mary had a long history of working in the hearing entertainment industry and had built her up her network over the years. She had worked with other deaf companies not listed in the Table 1 by providing the deaf companies with her deaf employees. Interestingly, DeafE! is a company whose economic activity actively contributed to both the mainstream and ethnic economic market. In a way, Mary was the bridge connecting between the entertainment mainstream market and her deaf employees, while her deaf employees helped to maintain a social connection to the deaf community. The employees had used their “kinship” ties to search out for other deaf businesses to bring in a partnership with DeafE!

c. “DEAF CAN DO”

“DEAF CAN DO” is an attitude believing that “deaf people can do anything hearing people can do, except hear.” It was method of projecting positive images of the deaf people who can do anything the hearing can do except hear and have the ability to perform on par with their hearing counterparts. Note that “DEAF CAN DO” attitude is prevalent and pervasive in all companies, employees, consumers, and in expositions/conventions studied in this research. It is an underlying attitude common to many of the deaf people I had met. The attitude of “DEAF

"CAN DO" is embedded in their everyday language in all of its spoken, signed, and written representations. For example, DeafE!'s Facebook page included an array of positive words or phrases:

1. Inspire
2. Dispelling misconceptions
3. Broaden and challenge [the mainstream ideas]
4. Change
5. Breaking down the barriers that limit

London's First Deaf Build Expo website's statement of purpose has a strong dose of DEAF CAN DO attitude:

"We have seen that Deaf people are capable to do anything and they are not any different from hearing people. We have learned new information from the lectures that we were not aware or thought of. From the vendors, we now know that there is a multitude of services they can offer to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing customers. It is to agree that they key for our success is by speaking in our own language, British Sign Language as this brings a communication bridge between Deaf skilled workers and Deaf customers. The event has also narrowed the wide information gap between Deaf customers and professional Deaf business owners. We need this network to make our community strong and reliable."

Those case studies illustrate the employees and owner's job frustration with the mainstream market and their perceived oppression from those in the mainstream market, which is further aggravated by the fact that many employees in the deaf community tend to have harder time finding employment in the mainstream labor market due to language/communication and attitude barriers. Sometimes, an employee can become an employer within the deaf economy if

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16 Portes and Jensen, "What's An Ethnic Enclave?" 768-771.
typical employment avenues were closed to them. Hence, they took the opportunity to capitalize on deaf identity and their deaf "social capital" to upstart a new business for themselves.

Theme II: Crossing the State & Transnational Boundaries: Building the Market & Network

This particular theme focuses on the geographical and spatial distribution of the "deaf economy" based on my field observations and inquiry. One feature of an ethnic economic enclave is the cluster of geographic spaces containing a high geographical concentration of ethnic community members that allows them to generate economic activities. Examples include Chinatown and Little Italy. Hence, during my research, I thought it would be worthwhile effort to examine if the 'deaf economy' had any geographic spaces allowing for economic activities.

Atkins had put forth his own hypothesis of what the geographical and spatial distribution of "deaf economy" could look like. He had remarked that the enclave "is mostly virtual, and sometimes transnational, with most businesses occurring within the deaf community across physical boundaries, such as through the Internet, social networks, or through large community events such as trade shows. With the decline in the number of deaf people attending Deaf Clubs and traditional residential schools, large trade shows have become a way for deaf people to get together to socialize and to purchase goods and services...Anecdotal information suggests that a large number of businesses at the trade show were owned by deaf people. Due to the collective nature of the deaf community and the advent of new technology, the enclave is far reaching. The concept of marketing to the specific deaf community is a common one, and fits within the framework of ethnic enclaves." 18

My field observations had reinforced his statement above about geographical aspect of the deaf community, but I had decided to create three sub-themes of our observations of geographical spatial distribution of the "deaf economy": Physical, Liminal, and Virtual. Please note that they represent a range of geographic distribution.

17 Portes and Jensen, "What's An Ethnic Enclave?" 768-771.
a. Geographic spatial distribution

i. Physical geographic distribution

In this case, "physical" means tangible, visible space in which people or buildings occupy a land space. In such spaces, deaf people gather together and see each other to conduct face-to-face communication. Deaf people tend to value face-to-face communication, especially it facilitates for a highly visual sign language communication. Portes had usually defined an "ethnic enclave" consisting of a defined geographic region that contains an area with high concentration of ethnic businesses. However, in the case of the deaf businesses profiled, none of the businesses are based in a significant clustered geographic region consisting of deaf businesses on a local scale, to an extent the way Chinatown or Little Italy was structured. They tend to be scattered around the city in their offices/establishments in their local cities. Reasons for their businesses sites are varied and range from lower business taxes, proximity to their homes/families, available affordable spaces for sale or rental, and to the "hotspot" of their particular industry (for example, entertainment industry is most prominent in Southern California). I noticed that deaf people don’t live together in a sense that Chinese people live together as “next-door” neighbors in a Chinatown, but they do live scattered all around the local city or region.

Deaf businesses and people living scattered all over the local city or region (such as Southern California) usually make connections at sites outside of businesses, often at local social events or "deaf night out" in local bars or restaurants. It provided means for deaf people from all over the city/region to congregate together in a chosen social site to facilitate and upkeep the community “kinship” social ties. Social connections forged at those social events often lead to

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new connections to potential employees or consumers! "Word-of-mouth" tended to be a
dominant means of advertising for all of those local deaf companies, capitalizing on their social
"kinship" ties.

Atkins had said the number of deaf clubs had declined over the past years. I have not
encountered any so-called deaf clubs in the United States, but I did come across a few in
London. Such deaf clubs were based in certain areas of London or the Greater London areas,
such as the Walthamstow Deaf Club in Eastern London or St. John Deaf Club (100 years and
counting) in Northern London. They often form intramural sports teams to play against other
Deaf clubs, poker tournaments, holiday celebrations, or religious events. It was a second "home"
for many of those deaf locals. The deaf clubs in London had permanent buildings for people to
drop by to socialize or relax, in which the American deaf community was lacking. However,
after DeafTimez was established in London, some of the of the local Deaf club events, such as
poker tournaments, were moved to Deaffimez. Deaffimez became another permanent place
akin to a deaf club for people to drop by and socialize during its operating hours. Eli, the owner,
had remarked that he wanted to create more space for deaf people in a certain region in London
to come together, nearby their homes, since traveling from one side of a large city like London to
another side of London could be time-consuming. He had pointed out that there weren’t enough
physical space for deaf people to come together in his region of London, which was one of the
main reasons for picking the site of Deaffimez.

ii. Liminal geographical space

In this sub-theme, I want to transition from physical geographic space to what I call
"liminal geographical space", a term used often in anthropology. The concept of "temporal
dimension of liminality" can be used to refer to the transience of trade shows, expositions, or
conventions. They usually occur once a year or every few years, ranging from a day to a week, so they were not permanent fixtures of any defined space. But they were particularly significant for deaf people to congregate together for face-to-face communication and build social kinship ties. They were not entrenched in one particular, visible space as an ethnic enclave would nor the interactions were completely virtual and far-reaching as an online forum would be. I see those events occurring “in-between” the physical and virtual geographic distribution, so the term “liminal” would be appropriate to describe those events. Expositions and conventions are the best representations of “liminal geographical space” where large amount of deaf people gathering together in a geographically defined space for a short period of time, ranging around a day to a week.

I had gone to a total of four deaf expositions or conventions. DeafNation Expo in Las Vegas, Nevada (26,000+ attendees) and Deaf Construction Expo in London, England (100+ attendees) were all trade shows, in a sense, that had the primary purpose of bringing business together from all over the country into one building and showcase their goods and services. Potential consumers were expected to attend as well. Many attendees I had met came from all over a particular country or in some cases, from another countries. The demographics of the attendees depend on the host event site. If it was in the United States, majority of the attendees I had met were Americans. Otherwise, most were Europeans in European-based events. Despite what one may think, they did not come for the sole purpose of buying goods and services from deaf companies at the expositions. I had interviewed many attendees (consumers, employees, and business owners) of those expositions asking questions, such as “Why did you come to this

exposition?” and “What do you think of those businesses?” It turned out their primary reasons were to socialize and forge new networks—catching up with old friends, opportunity to meet new people and make new connections, and “check out what’s new.” One attendee had poignantly pointed out a reason for coming to the expositions for socializing: To fulfill their strong desire to satisfy their communication needs and to connect with other deaf people “just like him.”

_Clin d’Oeil_ in Reims, France (4000+ attendees) and Deaflympics in Sofia, Bulgaria (4600+ attendees) were different from the other two expositions above in a sense they had different primary purpose for their expositions. _Clin d’Oeil_’s primary purpose was to showcase all forms of artworks made by deaf people from around the world – a major deaf international art festival celebrating deaf culture and art. However, there was a significant portion of expo space dedicated to artistic and non-artistic businesses. Interestingly, I came across several businesses that had no artistic purpose or connection to art, but those entrepreneurs wanted to display their products and services at _Clin d’Oeil_ as a starting springboard for their businesses and market to the deaf participants. I particularly was drawn to one deaf French businessman who had invented a light-flashing device to alert deaf people in a variety of situations. It was his first time marketing and selling to deaf people at the art festival for the first time. _Clin d’Oeil_ was his initial launching point for his devices. When I asked him how he came to build the product, his inspiration came from his frustration with the lack of such products available to him in France, so he took a leap and used his accumulated savings to invest into this business, and went to China alone to search for inexpensive Chinese manufacturers, who happened to be hearing. I especially had observed consumers at his booth were entranced with his demonstrations of the light-flashing devices and would buy them up quickly. When asked if he would consider
expanding his market beyond France, he said he hopes to reach deaf people around the world in need of his products, but wants to start in France first, using his connections. Other artistic and non-artistic businesses also reported that it was their first time displaying and selling their products or services, be it handmade jewelry, comics, or sculptures.

Deaflympics held Olympics-like sport competitions for deaf athletes. However, to my surprise, unlike what I had thought, Deaflympics did not have any deaf businesses in attendance as the businesses in DeafNation and Deaf Construction Expo did. But it was a focal event celebrating the prowess and the DEAF CAN DO ability of deaf athletes, bringing people from different countries together, and creating a space for deaf people to socialize and forge new connections.

To further foster social networks and raise publicity of some deaf businesses or artists, social gatherings were strongly encouraged, including parties, every night after the day of exposition (Las Vegas DeafNation and Clin d’Oeil) was concluded. They were often held in bars, nightclubs, or reserved open-ended outdoors spaces, depending on the expositions. There were a prodigious amount of discussion and publicity surrounding those parties amongst the attendees throughout the days of the expositions. Word of mouth and flyers were the primary means of advertising. Attendees were especially either very enthusiastic or pressured to attend such social gatherings. In fact, DeafE! had hosted a party by reserving a Las Vegas night club for deaf people to attend for free, and to meet and mingle with the employees representing DeafE! who were dressed uniformly and conspicuously different from the attendees. The nature of DeafE! business depended on the success and visibility of its deaf employees in order to bring in revenue, so the party was a way to showcase and raise the visibility of the employees. It was a well-done publicity method of advertising and raising awareness because many attendees said
they never knew about DeafE! and its employees nor had the opportunity to get to know the deaf employees until this party.

In *Clin d'Oeil*, it was the reverse. Event planners had paid musicians and performers to perform on-stage at an outdoor venue. I was lucky to have a press pass and friendship of performers of a deaf American rock band concert, so I was able to spend a significant amount of time in the backstage observing and talking to the performers, event planners, and directors of the festival. The performers had told me it was a great opportunity for them to increase visibility of their artistic work in the global deaf community, especially their livelihood depends on the visibility and success of their performances.

The 1st Deaf Build Expo in London presents an interesting case of specialized expo composed of local deaf businesses only, unlike the other expositions, which had more of an international scope. All of the businesses involved in construction industry were based in the United Kingdom, mostly in London. The number of participants was very small, in comparison to DeafNation’s 26,000+ and *Clin d’Oeil’s* 4000+ attendees. However, the expo included a significant portion of helpful workshops and presentations geared towards entrepreneurs and industry professionals on best managing their businesses practices and other related topics.

### iii. Virtual geographic distribution

Physical geographical spaces where deaf people congregate together for face-to-face interaction may be an important aspect for facilitating communication to operate the “deaf economy.” Atkins had pointed out, however, many businesses within the deaf community use virtual means (Internet) beyond their physical boundaries to generate economic activities. The Internet and technology had made all of the virtual connections possible between the business
owners, employees, and their consumers around the world, regardless of their domicile. All of the businesses profiled used the Internet and technology to outreach to their potential employees and consumers. The deaf people in both United States and Europe had used same virtual communication strategies, which is listed in below:

- Websites
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc)
- Email
- Texting (mobile phones)

However, the deaf community in the United States has an advantage over their European counterparts when it comes to using federally funded video and text-based relay services such as videophones (VP) and IP Relay. Deaf people in the United States are able to use their webcams or a particular VP hardware to use ASL interpreters in their videophones or an English/Spanish language interpreter for text-based relay to communicate with their non-signing consumers. The signing deaf are also able to input a phone number into their VP software to directly call another signing user.

It may seem the same as using other popular Internet-based video communication services such as Skype and Google Hangouts, but only VP and IP Relay include interpreter services for deaf people. The deaf people in the United States has the “luxury” of 24/7 relay services for whatsoever reason they need, be it calling for work or personal reasons, without at any extra cost to the individual. England do have some relay services, but not as comprehensive or accessible as the American relay services. Most of the British deaf people I had talked to had used UK relay services for the occasional personal calls and had to pay out of their pocket—similar to paying for their phone bill. To me, it seemed that they were paying extra for services that should be provided for without charge, on top of their phone bills, compared to their hearing
counterparts who did not need to pay extra for the relay service, but I acknowledge that my feelings came from the “luxury” of not paying for the relay services in the United States. In some cases, the hearing companies the deaf work for would be willing to pay for their deaf employee’s relay services, but only for work-related calls and during limited hours. Apparently, the British government did not fund relay services as the American government had. The British government instead passed on such services to other UK-based telecommunications carriers, often leaving many of their British deaf consumers frustrated because they wanted fee-free relay services like their American counterparts.

DeafTimez did not use relay services to out-reach to their non-signing consumers, but rather relied on websites, social media, email, and publicity (newspaper and interviews) to communicate with its consumers. However, Eli has a hearing co-founder/owner of DeafTimez. He said he often rely on his hearing partner to maintain communications with other hearing people needed for its establishment. His partner was responsible for calling and talking to the hearing government officials to approve the establishment of the restaurant, hearing contractors to re-model the interior, interviewing hearing employees, and anyone who doesn’t know sign language. I particularly thought this was interesting since it contrasted with other American deaf businesses. There were no such deaf-hearing partnerships or such reliance on a hearing person necessary for the functioning of a business (other than sign language interpreters). I believe that the success of the American relay services and steady technological development in relay services had helped to foster such “independence” in the American deaf businesses so they have the greater freedom to engage with their hearing or non-signing consumers directly.
Theme III: Observations of the differences between United States and United Kingdom

The United States and United Kingdom have distinct laws and social programs for their disabled population. Such laws regulate and impact the quality of life of their deaf constituents and their development of businesses in their home country. In this section, I give a general overview of what I had learned about the similarities and differences between the United States and United Kingdom that either foster or hinder deaf entrepreneurism.

a. Economic & Social Opportunities/Programs

Sign languages are particularly important for both American and British deaf communities to facilitate communication and build their deaf “kinship” ties. But communication barriers between the deaf and non-signing hearing is one of the greatest challenges deaf people face everyday in a hearing-dominant society, especially if they need to access public services (such as government, hospital, etc.). In many cases, establishment of businesses may require communication with non-signing people. But just how much does the hearing-dominant society try to lower the communication barriers? The UK government had recognized BSL as one of UK’s official languages in March 2003, but it offers no complete legal protection. BSL-users believe they should have equal access to information as their hearing counterparts, but they do not get any guarantees that they will be able to access information in their preferred language. This could be problematic if deaf business owners want to communicate with their hearing consumers or communication with the local government, especially if there are scant relay services or other means to lower the communication barriers. However, UK already had passed the UK Equality Act of 2010, akin to United States’ Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but many of my informants had remarked that the Equality Act could be strengthened and better enforced. They had said they noticed many of hearing people were not even aware of the
existence of the UK Equality Act of 2010. On the flip side, ASL has no legal recognition, but has legal protection, under the provision of Americans with Disabilities Act. Americans had the right to obtain reasonable accommodations in most settings, such as sign language interpreters, captionists, and written materials. Nearly all American businesses have to be ADA-compliant.

When I had asked my British participants about the attitudes and businesses practices they had encountered in other hearing businesses, many of them had remarked that their hearing counterparts had very little deaf awareness, did not attempt to try to meet their communication needs, such as writing down on paper, prefer to hire hearing employee over a deaf employee (citing health and safety reasons), or their businesses were not disability accessible. The United States also has those problems to an extent, but I believe that with the provision of ADA, deaf Americans have more access to services and information than their British counterparts.

One common venue for the deaf British to find employment (in any business) is through a government-sponsored program called Access to Work, which is one of the programs designed to assist people with disabilities to find employment. It is similar to the United States’ Vocational Rehabilitation program. The Access to Work program is able to pay for any extra costs incurred due to their disability in employment settings, such as paying for BSL interpreters or specialized equipment. Through my preliminary search, there are instances of other deaf British entrepreneurs not profiled in my research using the program to jump-start their own businesses. However, Access to Work just had faced recent cuts, just as the American government had sequestration cuts across many social programs. This may substantially affect the employment and entrepreneurship prospects of deaf people in the United Kingdom, but the cuts were very recent as of this writing, so I would like to see how that affects the deaf British people.
From my research, it seem that each deaf entrepreneur has his or her own set of challenges of starting-up a business or finding employment in the United Kingdom and the United States. No two persons had the exact same circumstances or backgrounds, but they were subject to the available economic or social opportunities within their country that either hinder or foster their entrepreneurial initiatives. This is would be one of the areas of future research I would like to pursue.

b. Geography

The United Kingdom appears to be minuscule in comparison to the vastness of the geography and population size of the United States. London is especially a large city, comparable to large American cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco. I had noticed that there were much more frequent social events, often weekly, in London than in the United States, where there were almost no weekly events. My informants had pointed out it was easy for them to use the London subways to head out to the weekly social events almost anywhere in London. They did not have to pay for their fare to use the London transportation systems, which was a very cost-effective way for them to travel around London as they please. They also had more vacation days per year (about one month, excluding holidays) than their American counterparts (about two weeks, excluding holidays). Also, from my experience in the United States, many deaf people live outside of a major city and would often complain of the time and cost it took to drive to a social event hosted in a major city. America has a stronger driving culture than England do since the geography of America has thousands of roads laid down all over the land. I thought this was a case of where geography can foster or hinder social events since the compactness and efficiency of mass transportation of London had helped to foster more frequent social gatherings to forge and upkeep their social "kinship" ties. I also thought that a cultural
factor could influence the frequency of gatherings, especially in a strong British pub culture, it was very common for friends to socialize in a pub after finishing work for the day on a weekday. Hence, the ease of transportation does have a significant impact on the formation of ethnic enclaves.

6. Discussion & Analysis

In this Discussion and Analysis section, I will explore possible concepts that unify all of the themes I had discussed in this thesis. All of the themes in the thesis have underlying important concepts that drive behind the rationale behind each informant I had interacted with and how “deaf economy” came to be as I had observed. I am particularly attempting to give a larger picture of my research and my informants in the context of the society they live in. Those concepts are Deaf Universalism and Deaf Space, and they are related to each other.

6.1. Topic I: Deaf Universalism

Michele Friedner and Annelies Kusters, two deaf anthropologists, had coined the term “Deaf Universalism”, a very new concept (publication forthcoming in late 2014). However, I had permission to cite their unpublished notes on this particular discourse in my thesis. “Deaf Universalism” is a term used to describe the common utterance or signs I came across in my research: “DEAF DEAF SAME”. It implies an erasure of power differential between deaf people—“transcending geography, culture, space, and time... create claims of likeness and affiliation between people with very different cultural, racial, class, religious, economic, and geographic backgrounds and it can instill senses of responsibility and entitlement in both those invoking sameness and those on the receiving end.”

Both authors drew upon their ethnographic

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experiences from their site locations, India and Ghana, to describe the phenomenon of “Deaf Universalism” they had observed.

They had pointed out those notions of “deafhood”, “deaf support deaf”, and “oppression” in their fieldwork had led to their idea of “Deaf Universalism.” In my research, the deaf businesses, deaf employees, and deaf consumers in my research had used those notions many times to benefit themselves financially and socially in terms of identity. For them, it does not matter if they were of a different background as long they were deaf. Being deaf is a universal shared experience shared by all, regardless of their background and language. By using the discourse of “DEAF DEAF SAME”, all of the businesses are especially trying to create a sense of connection between themselves, their employees, and consumers. It is one of their selling points and a way to “form alliances with deaf ‘others’ within their communities and the broader deaf world.”

For example, most of the consumers I talked to in DeafTimez and Yummy Food, two deaf restaurants, would flock to those businesses for their “uniqueness” and the novelty of experiencing a “unique” business. Deaf consumers told me they would come far away from another country to visit to experience those novelties as well to support deaf businesses.

Out of all of this particular discourse of “deaf oppression” and my observations, it was apparent that deaf people did not always have the equal accessibility to services, information, or opportunities as their hearing counter parts in their society, despite disability discrimination and accommodations laws. This makes the deaf people a marginalized group in the society they live in. A sociologist in peace and conflict, Johan Galtung, had coined the term “Structural Violence”

to describe a form of violence where a social structure prevents a group of people from meeting their basic needs and promotes inequality in their society. The deaf people in my research are possibly victims of "structural violence", which may have engendered the concept of "Deaf Universalism." Many of Atkins's themes in his dissertation could be explained by the theories of "structural violence" and "Deaf Universalism". Why were deaf people victims of structural violence in their society? Deaf people are "deviants" in their hearing-dominant society for having a non-functional hearing sense—marking them as the "Other" and different from their hearing counterparts. History has thousands of years of excluding a minority group of people different from the majority. Deaf people are not an exception to this. There was a strong linkage between intelligence and speech, which meant deaf people were not considered equal to their hearing peers in intelligence. They were denied the benefits of citizenship, such as voting, owning properties, or deaf-deaf marriage. Much had changed over thousands of years, but the discourse around "deaf oppression" amongst my informants in both United States and Europe is still as intense and frequent today.

However, there is a caveat to this concept of Deaf Universalism, according to the authors. My research focuses on developed, first world, Western countries, so the idea of "DEAF DEAF SAME" is common and fits in with the context of the businesses I had came across. But the same always cannot be said for developing or non-Western countries. Friedner and Kusters discuss the challenges of a complex concept of Deaf Universalism. Their research was based in developing countries, India and Ghana, where they came across instances of deaf tourists from Western, India and Ghana.

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developed countries encountering a deaf person from the developing countries. Their communication did not go always as the tourist had expected or experienced in Western, developed countries. For example, different cultural backgrounds or perception of their disability would become at a contending point that they could not legibly understand each other. The Western visitor had a hard time establishing a social "kinship" ties with those different deaf people.  

6.2. Topic II: Deaf Space

This section attempts to discuss about the concept called "Deaf Space", where deaf people congregate together in a physical space. A research project "Transnational Connections in Deaf Worlds" has already thoroughly researched this topic in-depth. This particular topic is a large and complex topic, but I would like to apply some of the ideas of Deaf Space to the "deaf economy" and connect them back to my research observations on the geographic distribution of the deaf businesses. Hilde Haualand, a Norwegian anthropologist who has an active interest in the deaf issues/community, had followed key international events in the Deaf world, such as Deaflympics or World Federation of the Deaf World Congress, in order to learn about the transnational deaf activities for her research project. I had thought my case studies of the businesses in the trade shows/expositions I had attended fit within the context of her research on Deaf Space.

Trade shows/expositions like the DeafNation Expo, Clin d'Oeil, 1st Deaf Build, and Deaflympics establish what Haualand call "Deaf Space" — transnational, temporary space for

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deaf people to come together. She had emphasized that “Deaf communities must be understood as translocal and increasingly transnational”, since such notions challenge the idea “durable physical locations as prime site for identification and belonging.”

Recall that my discussions about the geographical distribution of the deaf people, where their businesses or homes do not cluster together in a sense of a Chinatown nor do those transnational events occur in such locations. Those events were “ritualized” in the sense that the deaf people gather together to celebrate the Deaf community, forge and upkeek their social “kinship” ties, and start a discourse about their Deaf lives—all prime locations for generating economic activities between the participants. The businesses at those events I had talked to were able to take advantage of those events to promote or jump-start their businesses.

According to Haueland, sign language competence is a crucial feature in a transnational space. When I was in continental Europe, such as France and Bulgaria, I was amazed at how I was able to at least try to communicate with other deaf people from different countries and sign languages. We had used International Sign Language to facilitate our conversations. In Clin d’Oeil and Deaflympics, there were thousands of deaf people from around the world with different language backgrounds communicating with each other. My informants had remarked that it was easier for two deaf people from different countries and sign languages to communicate with each other than two hearing people from different countries and languages. They claimed that they had superior knowledge of using their body language and gestures over their hearing counterparts, which makes it easier for two deaf people to communicate. In a way, sign language is “universal” for them, unlike spoken languages. The ability to communicate with their international deaf audience/consumers is important for deaf entrepreneurs in Europe. For

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27 Haueland, “The Two-Week Village,” 34.
example, in *Clin d'Oeil*, I almost went to every one of the booths set up around a space for deaf businesses to get an understanding of who were those entrepreneurs and their purpose at the art festival. They were trying to promote their artistic or non-artistic businesses that came from a variety of different countries, mostly from Europe. Those entrepreneurs and employees had their own native sign languages, which differed greatly from other countries’ sign languages. Sometimes, their potential customers had no or little knowledge of the entrepreneurs or employees’ native sign language, but with the assistance of International Sign Language or other communication methods, deaf people can communicate to exchange goods and services.

The “deaf economy” should not be seen as strictly to a certain geographic location, but seen as a global network of deaf people. The Deaf community is a “global city, which ‘is not a place, but a process. A process by which centers of production and consumption…. are connected in a global network’”. ²⁹ Both means of physical, liminal, and virtual geographic spaces were important for facilitating communication to operate the ‘deaf economy’, at least in the developed countries I had observed. In this case, the deaf community is not a “place” as other typical ethnic economic enclaves were, but I would like to expand the theory of “ethnic economic enclave” for the theory of the “deaf economy”. The “deaf economy” is indeed an “ethnic economic enclave”, but as a “process” rather than as a “place”. Traditionally, “economy” focuses heavily on the monetary aspect of an economy, such as the sale and consumption of goods and services within a community. However, my research focuses more on the socio-cultural aspects of the “deaf economy” rather than on its financial aspects.

This discourse of “deaf universalism” and “Deaf Space” had created a chain of my own general thoughts about the deaf people and the society they live in, especially what particularly

drives their actions to set up their own businesses, promote “deaf” businesses, hire deaf employees, market to their consumers, or attend deaf events in such a large number—all that made up the “deaf economy”. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: A mix of casual and sequential flow chart of what drives the “deaf economy”

The flowchart is still a developing process and not inclusive of all possible driving forces behind the “deaf economy.” I acknowledge that there are other driving forces behind the “deaf economy”, such as “needs” that help to drive specific demand for products within businesses.

7. Conclusion

The “deaf economy” covers an extremely wide scope of different research worthy topics, hence it was quite challenging for me to put down all of those ideas and observations I had in the limited time I had in the field. Each of the themes and topics I had attempted to cover could be
fully fleshed out for a worthy for in-depth research paper and lead to more ideas or concepts not listed in this thesis. I could not cover and analyze every important aspects of the “deaf economy”, such as the financial impacts on the participants within the “deaf economy”. However, the “deaf economy” is certainly an “ethnic economic enclave”, an economic system worthy to study, especially it challenges our notions of economy occurring in a fixed place with important cultural characteristics attached to a particular place. The “deaf economy” is driven by deaf people using their deaf identities and the power of the social capital/network within their deaf communities to achieve success for their businesses. Locations (physical, liminal, and virtual spaces) are also very important in bringing the deaf people together to upkeep their kinship ties and facilitating economic activities. The research should be expanded to other countries around the world, since it is clear that the “deaf economy” has an international scope.

I still have quite a number of questions and more ideas that came up in my research that needs to be further explored and answered. Here is a particular list of questions, ideas, or concepts not discussed in my thesis that needs further research:

1) Deaf Tourism
2) Developing and non-Western countries
3) Tension between “deaf sameness” and “deaf difference”
4) Financial aspect of the “deaf economy”:
   a. Price discrimination (deaf discount, small purchasing power of the Deaf community)
   b. Expansion to the mainstream market to obtain more consumers
   c. Investments or raising capital
5) Crab theory (deaf people holding back other deaf people from reaching their
potential)

6) Biological citizenship

7) Political discourse

I look forward to seeing new research on the “deaf economy”, a new, exciting phenomenon worthy of study in deaf communities around the world. I strongly encourage others to consider the possibility of researching the “deaf economy” in another countries, especially in developing and non-Western countries. I hope that the research into the “deaf economy” will inspire aspiring deaf entrepreneurs to use the research knowledge to increase the likelihood of success for their businesses as well to raise more awareness about the need for greater supportive initiatives to support deaf entrepreneurs.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Dear *(Name of the Company/Organization Point of Contact)*,

My name is Sheila Xu, a Deaf junior at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and I am currently conducting a research funded by MIT on the “deaf economy” and deaf business-owners and their consumers for the summer. I came across you and your company/organization through *(name of person or organization who gave me the contact information)/(Internet)* and I heard your organization/company is very important in the Deaf community. I would love it if I could come in and talk with you and learn more about you, your company/organization, and your experiences as a deaf-business owner.

Please let me know if it is possible to meet you at your own place and time that are convenient to you. Please also let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Sheila Xu

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Department of Science, Technology, and Society | Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences

Class of 2014

sheilaxu@mit.edu
Appendix B

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW

[An Interpretivistic Approach to the Deaf Economy]

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Sheila Xu, an undergraduate student in the Science, Technology, and Society department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.). The purpose of the study is to conduct research for the concept of “the deaf economy” within the context of the deaf community. The results of this study will be included in Sheila Xu’s research report and presentation at MIT open to the public as per requirement part of my research fellowship. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a self-identified deaf or hearing business-owner and consumer. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

• This interview is voluntary. You have the right not to answer any of the questions, and to stop the interview at any time or for any reason. I expect that the interview will take about 2 hours.

• You will not be compensated for this interview.

• Unless you give us permission to use your name, title, and / or quote you in any publications that may result from this research, the information you tell us will be confidential.

• We would like to record this interview using videotapes so that we can use it for reference while proceeding with this study. We will not record this interview without your permission. If you do grant permission for this conversation to be recorded on cassette, you have the right to revoke recording permission and/or end the interview at any time.

This project will be completed by August 2012. All interview recordings will be stored in a secure work space until 1 year after that date. The tapes will then be destroyed.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

(Please check all that apply)

[ ] I give permission for this interview to be recorded on audio cassette.

[ ] I give permission for the following information to be included in publications resulting from this study:

[ ] my name   [ ] my title   [ ] direct quotes from this interview

Name of Subject

Signature of Subject __________________________ Date ____________

Signature of Investigator __________________ Date ______

Please contact Sheila Xu at sheilaxu@mit.edu or my faculty sponsor, Graham Jones at gmj@mit.edu with any questions or concerns.

If you feel you have been treated unfairly, or you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Chairman of the Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects, M.I.T., Room E25-143b, 77 Massachusetts Ave, Cambridge, MA 02139, phone 1-617-253-6787.
Appendix C

Verbal Consent Template (Translated into written English):

Hello, my name is Sheila Xu, an undergraduate student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). MIT had given me funding to conduct research for the concept of “deaf economy” within the context of the deaf European community.

The results of this research will be published in my senior thesis as per requirement part of my degree. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a self-identified deaf or hearing business owner and consumer.

I want to be clear that this interview is voluntary. You don’t have to answer any of the questions you don’t want to answer and can stop the interview or observation any time or for any reason. I expect that the interview will take about 2 hours.

Also, if any information you give to me will be confidential unless you give me permission to use your name, title, and / or quote you in any publications that may result from this research.

Please ask me any questions you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

Bibliography


