

Signing on Screen: Exploring Deaf Narratives in Film

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Abstract

The representation of Deaf individuals and Deaf culture in media has been a debated topic in the Deaf Community for years. Many feel that the way Deaf characters are depicted on screen perpetuates negative stereotypes that can spread misconceptions about the Deaf Community. With recent blockbuster films like *CODA* and *A Quiet Place* featuring Deaf characters played by Deaf actors, it brings up the question of if these modern films depict deafness in a way that is accurate to and accepted by the Deaf Community. The purpose of this thesis was to collect data to try and better understand how Deaf characters in film have been portrayed and characterized in films from 1975 to 2021. The desired outcome by conducting this research was to determine if the quantity of Deaf characters has increased over time, and whether the quality of the Deaf characters has improved over time as well. A questionnaire was designed that allowed me to keep track of the role that Deaf characters played in the films I watched. Based on the data collected through the questionnaire, it was determined that the total number of films featuring Deaf characters has increased over time, and that these characters have overall become more well-rounded and developed. Areas for improvement when it comes to representation of the Deaf community in film were also pinpointed, as there was a lack of representation that was age appropriate for children, as well as several stereotypes that were seen in multiple films across the years. This thesis contributes to pre-existing literature surrounding the representation of deafness in the media.

Key words: Communication disorders, Deaf, representation, film, stereotype

List of Films Viewed and Analyzed

- Nashville (1975)
- Murder by Death (1976)
- Looking for Mr. Goodbar (1977)
- Voices (1979)
- Sesame Street: Follow That Bird (1985)
- Children of a Lesser God (1986)
- Walker (1987)
- Suspect (1987)
- See No Evil, Hear No Evil (1989)
- Grand Canyon (1991)
- Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare (1991)
- Little Noises (1991)
- The Object of Beauty (1991)
- Gas Food Lodging (1992)
- Hear No Evil (1993)
- Miracle on 34th Street (1994)
- The River Wild (1994)
- Mr. Holland's Opus (1995)
- Jerry Maguire (1996)
- It's My Party (1996)
- In the Company of Men (1997)
- Speed 2: Cruise Control (1997)
- Cop Land (1997)
- Illtown (1998)
- She's All That (1999)
- Nutty Professor II: The Klumps (2000)
- Requiem for a Dream (2000)
- The Family Stone (2005)
- A Lot Like Love (2005)
- The Quiet (2005)

- The Good Shepherd (2006)
- Babel (2006)
- Copying Beethoven (2006)
- Bratz: The Movie (2007)
- Music Within (2007)
- There Will Be Blood (2007)
- Adventures of Power (2008)
- Bangkok Dangerous (2008)
- Orphan (2009)
- All About Steve (2009)
- Knowing (2009)
- Love N' Dancing (2009)
- The Hammer (2010)
- Spy Kids 4: All the Time in the World (2011)
- Take Shelter (2011)
- Resident Evil: Retribution (2012)
- Creed (2015)
- My Father Die (2016)
- Wonderstruck (2017)
- Baby Driver (2017)
- Creed II (2018)
- A Quiet Place (2018)
- A Star is Born (2018)
- Sicario: Day of the Soldado (2018)
- Sound of Metal (2019)
- CODA (2021)
- Eternals (2021)
- A Quiet Place Part II (2021)
- Godzilla vs. Kong (2021)
- Immortal Beloved (2021)

Introduction

The Deaf community is highly diverse, and has their own culture with unique, “social norms,” and a native language of American Sign Language (MCDHH, n.d.). Individuals who identify as culturally Deaf, and as members of the Deaf community often show pride related to their Deaf identity. Many members of the Deaf community do not refer to deafness as a disability (Andreassend, 2023). Despite this, media representations of Deaf individuals have historically portrayed them as, “more isolated, disabled, or dependent than the rest of the population” (NAD, n.d.). This is a misrepresentation of the Deaf community, and can result in those who are only being exposed to the Deaf community through popular media, to misunderstand this community entirely. Studies have shown that seeing yourself mirrored back through media is important for one's mental health, so the lack of representation, or improper representation of Deaf individuals has the potential to be harmful towards the overall mental health of the Deaf community.

Media representations of deafness are important for a multitude of reasons. For groups that are often underrepresented in media, such as the Deaf community, the portrayals of these communities in media can greatly contribute to shaping public perspectives and perceptions of these communities. Despite the fact that, “one out of every four Americans has a disability...far fewer than 25 percent of characters in the media today are depicted with a disability” (Ford Foundation, n.d.). The lack of disability representation in media can be connected to the term symbolic annihilation. Symbolic annihilation describes the, “underrepresentation of groups in the media with the goal of maintaining social inequality” (Braun, 2020). By limiting storylines and characters that include disability, the voice of the disabled community is often shut out of popular media.

Recently, there has been an increase in overall disability representation in media, with media content that is inclusive of disability increasing by over 175% from 2012 to 2022, compared to the decade prior (Nielsen, 2022). There have been several recent films featuring Deaf actors playing Deaf roles, such as *CODA* and *A Quiet Place*, that have been widely successful, winning awards and receiving media coverage. *CODA* won the Oscar for Best Picture, and Troy Kotsur was the first Deaf man to win an Oscar, winning Best Supporting Actor for his role in the film. This research explores how more recent representations of Deaf characters in film compare to representations from the past.

Objective

The objective of this research was to determine how many Deaf and hard of hearing characters there were in films over a period of time, and if these characters were portrayed in an accurate, non-stereotypical fashion. It was predicted that there would be an increase in the amount of Deaf/hard of hearing representation over time, as well as that Deaf characters in film would become more accurate, and less stereotypical over time, and that representation would become more accurate to the Deaf community. This research focuses on determining what trends and changes can be seen when looking at Deaf representation in media, specifically films.

This thesis was designed to help extend what we know about how representations of deafness in film have changed over time, as well as quantifying how often we see stereotypical portrayals of deafness on screen. It's important for this information about how Deaf representation has changed over time to be known, so that we can have a better understanding of what aspects of representation have improved and evolved over time, and what areas can still be improved upon moving forward.

Methods

To begin, I first had to find films I could view that featured Deaf and hard of hearing characters. Films were compiled from a Wikipedia page titled, "List of films featuring the deaf and hard of hearing," as well as an online resource published by the Iris Center that had a compilation of films featuring deaf and hard of hearing characters. From these two resources I selected films that had a theatrical release in the United States between the years of 1975 and 2021 to be included in my study. No documentaries or animated films were included. Using my guidelines to select films, I ended up with 60 films to view from 1975 to 2021 that featured a Deaf or hard of hearing character(s).

Once I had my list of films, I developed a questionnaire that I would fill out while viewing the films. The questions were designed to help me collect information about the films themselves, the Deaf/hard of hearing characters in the films, and what their role and impact was on the plot of the films they were in. I piloted my initial questionnaire by watching three films and filling out the questionnaire for them. After this pilot, I made a few adjustments to the questionnaire, to create the finalized version I would use for my research. I completed the

questionnaire for each of the 60 films I viewed. Questions pertaining to the Deaf/hard of hearing characters in these films were answered for each Deaf/hard of hearing character that was on screen. I gained access to the films for my study through streaming services (Netflix, Hulu, HBO Max, etc.), free websites, and by renting them through YouTube, and other online databases.

As I watched each film, and completed the questionnaire for the film, I entered the information I was collecting into an Excel spreadsheet. Once I completed viewing all 60 films, and filling out each questionnaire, I had all of my data inputted and available in this Excel spreadsheet. I organized the data by the year the film was released. I then split the timeframe for the films I had watched into two different time periods. Time period one would be films from 1975 to 1999, and time period two would be films from 2000 to 2021. These years were chosen intentionally. Several important legislatures for the disability rights movement were passed in 1975, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, which was why this was chosen as the starting year. 1999 was the cutoff for time period one, as this was the year of the Supreme Court case of *Olmstead v. LC*, which helped further the rights and integration of individuals with disabilities in society. 2021 was the cutoff for time period two, as this was the year *CODA* was released, and there was an increase of press coverage surrounding the film. I copied and pasted all of the data for the films from time period one into a new Excel spreadsheet tab, and did the same for the films from time period two. This was done so that I could have two separate time periods to analyze my data for, in order to allow me to compare the results from the two time periods, to determine if any significant changes or improvements in representation had occurred over time. I analyzed the data for the films in both time periods using features on Excel. Once all my data was analyzed, I was able to begin comparing and contrasting my data from both time periods.

Creating a questionnaire was the most feasible way of answering my question, because it allowed me to develop baseline questions I could answer for every film I viewed. I was also able to notice trends before data analysis, since I was answering the same questions for each film. Also, using Excel was an accessible, easy way to help me analyze all the data I collected, since those analysis features are already built into the program.

Results

Comparing my results from time period one (1975-1999) to time period two (2000-2021), I did find some significant differences between the two time periods. Looking first at the information my questionnaire collected regarding the films themselves, 26 films were analyzed from time period one (TP1) and 34 films were analyzed from time period two (TP2). My results showed that the average box office value for films from TP2 was over \$62,000 more than the average box office value for TP1 films. 88.5% of TP1 films offered closed captions while 91.2% of TP2 films did. The common genres and film ratings across both time periods were similar, with 69.2% of TP1 films having an R rating, and 44.1% of TP2 films having an R rating. 11.5% of TP1 films were rated PG-13, while 47.1% of TP2 films were rated PG-13. There was a decrease in the number of films with a PG rating from 15.4% in TP1 to 8.8% in TP2. The two most common genres across both time periods were Horror/Psychological/Thriller films and Drama films. 57.7% of TP1 films fell into one of those genre categories, while 52.9% of TP2 films did. The results collected regarding film information show that there was an increase in the number of films featuring Deaf/hard of hearing characters over time. These results also indicate that most of the films viewed for this study are intended for mature audiences, due to their rating and genre. There was also a decrease in the percentage of films with a PG rating comparing the two time periods, indicating that the amount of film content including Deaf/hard of hearing characters that is appropriate for children to watch is limited, as well as decreasing over time.

There were also some significant differences over time when it came to character demographics results. There was an increase in the number of Deaf/hard of hearing characters from 28 in TP1 to 40 in TP2. There was also a significant increase in the number of Deaf/hard of hearing characters who were people of color. This value more than doubled, increasing from 14.3% of Deaf/hard of hearing characters being people of color in TP1, to 32.5% of Deaf/hard of hearing characters being people of color in TP2. These results indicate that not only are the number of Deaf/hard of hearing characters increasing over time, but also that these characters are becoming more diverse over time as well. Most characters across both time periods were over the age of 18 (71.4% in TP1 and 62.5% in TP2). This correlates with my findings that most of the films in my study were rated for mature audiences and fell into genres that would be inappropriate for children. Most of the characters I analyzed from these films were adult

characters with adult storylines. Most characters across both time periods identified, or were portrayed as being Deaf and signing, meaning that they used ASL at some point in the film (67.9% of characters in TP1, 60% of characters in TP2). There was an increase in the number of characters who were male from TP1 to TP2 (42.9% were male in TP1, 52.5% were male in TP2).

Something else that is important to consider when it comes to representation is whether Deaf characters are being played by Deaf actors. The Deaf community advocates for their stories to be told and portrayed by members of their community. Through my questionnaire, I collected data on whether the Deaf characters in these films were being portrayed by a Deaf actor. My results showed that 50% of characters from TP1 were played by a Deaf actor, while 47.5% of characters from TP2 were played by a Deaf actor. This means that there has not been an increase in the number of Deaf character roles in films being played by Deaf actors, despite the total number of roles increasing over time.

Several questions I collected data for were designed to help me get a better understanding of the role that the Deaf/hard of hearing characters played in the films I was viewing. I found there was an increase in average screen time for these characters, from 17.1 minutes in TP1 to 26 minutes in TP2. There was also an increase in the number of characters who were given a name, from 82.1% in TP1 to 95% in TP2. The majority of characters across both time periods had a supporting/minor role in the films (53.6% in TP1, 50% in TP2). However, there was an increase in the number of characters who were main characters, from 17.9% in TP1 to 30% in TP2. There was also an increase in the number of Deaf/hard of hearing characters who played love interests, from 10.7% in TP1 to 17.5% in TP2.

Something else I looked at was whether the Deaf/hard of hearing characters died during the films. Since so many of the films fell into the thriller/horror/psychological genre, I wanted to see if these characters' deaths were being used as a plot point. I found that 13.2% of the characters I analyzed died in the films. There was a significant increase in the number of films that featured American Sign Language (ASL), the native language of the Deaf Community in the United States, from 65.4% in TP1 to 82.4% in TP2.

Looking at whether the Deaf/hard of hearing characters in these films were portrayed stereotypically, I had several questions on my questionnaire that were based on common disability stereotypes, such as “The Victim” stereotype. I found that there was an increase in

characters being subjected to physical, sexual, or emotional violence when comparing TP1 to TP2. 35.7% of TP1 characters were subjected to some form of violence during the films, while 50% of characters from TP2 were subjected to violence. This indicates that there has been an increase in the frequency of “The Victim” stereotype being seen in films featuring Deaf/hard of hearing characters, which is harmful toward the Deaf community. Comparing TP1 to TP2, there was an increase in the percentage of characters who were significant to the plot (75% in TP1, 92.5% in TP2), characters who had a developed identity outside being deaf (71.4% in TP1, 90% in TP2), as well as an increase in the percentage of characters who were identified as using some form of hearing aid, or a cochlear implant (10.7% in TP1, 42.5% in TP2).

The majority of Deaf/hard of hearing characters across both time periods were seen as only having family connections/relationships on screen (60.7% in TP1, 50% in TP2). Additionally, deafness was often depicted as something tragic, or as an obstacle for a character to overcome, with 57.1% of TP1 films depicting deafness in this manner, and 55% of TP2 films depicting deafness in this way. These results indicate that harmful stereotypes, such as the idea that Deaf individuals are more isolated, or that deafness is a tragedy, are still being seen in modern films.

Based on these results, it was determined that there has been an overall increase in the number of films featuring Deaf/hard of hearing characters, as well as an increase in the number of Deaf/hard of hearing characters over time. It was also found that Deaf/hard of hearing characters in film have become more well-rounded, developed and dynamic over time. Stereotypes that are still commonly seen in more modern depictions of deafness on screen were identified, and identifying them is the first step towards working to correct and eliminate them from the media.

Conclusions

Reflecting on the results of this research, there are several things that are important to highlight. Overall, there has been an increase in the amount of Deaf/hard of hearing characters on screen. There is a clear lack of Deaf/hard of hearing representation that is appropriate for children to view, meaning that young Deaf children are not often given the opportunity to see themselves in film, which can be harmful for their development and sense of self. The diversity

of Deaf/hard of hearing representation has increased over time, but there is still a lack of Deaf roles being played by Deaf actors. Deaf/hard of hearing characters in film have also become more developed over time and contribute to the plot of the film more often.

Looking at the results of this study in a larger context, this research fits into the literature discussing disability representation in media. These results matter, because all communities deserve to see themselves represented in popular media, in a way that they themselves resonate with. These results can help to quantify and qualify the type of Deaf/hard of hearing representation that's been seen on screen in the last few decades. This research has also determined the prevalence of different stereotypes regarding deafness in film.

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