Media Representations and Social Integration: A Study of Deaf Cafes in China

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Abstract. There is a large population of deaf workers in China. These individuals often face challenges in obtaining quality vocational education in their youth, further hampered by societal prejudice that questions their ability to lead normal lives. Their employment, especially in the catering sector, has been less than promising due to these combined factors. This paper explores the potential of social media as a platform to promote deaf-owned businesses and challenge prevailing biases. By interviewing the deaf owner of Sign Cafe, the study highlights how social media can not only serve as an advertising tool but also as a medium to change perceptions about the capabilities of the deaf community.

Keywords: Deaf Cafe, Deaf Workers, Media Representations, Social Intergration, Media Narrations.

1. Introduction

China is the home of over 20 million deaf or non-speaking persons. It is hard for deaf people to get a good vocational education and training during their young age. Public prejudices toward deaf people commonly claim that they cannot support themselves and live ordinary lives like other people. Such beliefs limit their educational and occupational opportunities. This project has explored the relationship between the media and new movements toward self-sufficiency and self-employment of deaf people in the food services industry. The argument of this paper is that the proliferation of social media platforms and the widespread dissemination of digital information allow small business owners, including proprietors of newly developed cafes staffed by deaf persons, to advertise their establishments, and to acquaint the public with the genuine capabilities of individuals with hearing impairments. The cafes and their owners' use of media have developed into powerful resources for eradicating prejudicial attitudes and biases toward the disabled.

This study has been sparked by the example of one Deaf café in Hangzhou, the Sign Café. It examines the experience of the deaf owners in achieving self-sufficiency and, with the help of social media, their success in using the business and its online promotion to challenge and refute societal biases regarding the capabilities of deaf persons and others with disabilities.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. The Situation of Deaf Persons in China: From Marginalization toward Self-Sufficiency

Historically in China, and elsewhere, the situation of deaf persons and others with disabilities was grim. Practical support and adaptive accommodations were spotty, educational opportunities were limited, and expectations were low that individuals could achieve self-sufficiency and constructively contribute to society while living with their disabilities. Deaf individuals were subject to negative stereotypes that associated their lack of hearing with general lack of cognitive and other kinds of abilities. Deaf persons were trained to work in low-wage, unskilled occupations where their lack of hearing was not viewed as a barrier to employment, but which limited their chances for self-sufficiency and advancement.

In the past, the international and national media have magnified the misery of deaf and non-speaking persons in order to grab eyeballs of an audience. In their articles, writers continuously spread negative attitudes and emphasized sorrowful past experiences, even if they want to draw contrasts

with the later success of individuals. Also in the articles, authors always defined deaf people as people with limited capabilities and such a description conveyed the typical stereotype which will mislead readers. Even these days the media portray Deaf-owned cafes as very legendary things through the constant exclamations of wonder in their articles.

In recent years Chinese media have taken to representing the experience of the Deaf community more positively. Some reports have documented the challenges faced by deaf persons, noting complaints about the lack of services and persistent patterns of exclusion, especially in education and job training. These sympathetic and critical representations of difficulties facing deaf persons have contributed to the emergence of a new climate for them. Media accounts have appeared along with the expansion of educational programs for deaf learners centered on use of one or the other forms of Chinese sign language. Such programs also have sought to develop more complex job skills among students. China has begun to offer financial support for deaf individuals and families raising deaf children, and has taken steps to limit discrimination toward members of the Deaf community in the workforce. These measures have been well-covered in the print, electronic and digital media.

The influence of such a transformative shift in media portrayal of the deaf community, fostering a more-inclusive and tolerant society, extends beyond public perceptions to shaping national policies. These critical and sympathetic media reports in China and other countries definitely influence, not only the Chinese government, but also foreign countries to make policy changes toward accommodating the needs of deaf persons in schools, workplaces, and public settings.[1] In China, the media force often report on some policies that were motivated by previous critical media reports, and which have been beneficial to deaf and non-speaking persons.

At present, coverage in newspapers and other media of the living situation of disabled persons has been improved and strengthened to a certain extent, so that disabled persons have received extensive attention and support from all walks of life. The reporting shows the personal and spiritual aspects of deaf persons, so that the public has a more fair and objective understanding of their different abilities, and can begin to change their treatment of them. Through positive reports, more people know the real situation of deaf and non-verbal people, and know some of their deeds, and slowly change their view of them. The media reports set an example and a moral standard for the society. At the same time, newspapers increase their circulation, popularity and influence, and with their enhanced sense of social responsibility, they enjoy a benefit. The mental states of the deaf and non-speaking persons have been improving, because they will no longer be subjected to discrimination and malicious speculation. According to Lin & Yang (2019), media reports advocate for self-employment and entrepreneurship among deaf people, acknowledging their often-overlooked working abilities.

For the public, media coverage can be shown breaking stereotypes and popularizing deaf culture, helping those hearing people to better understand the special group of deaf people. Reporting in the media conveys the idea that deaf people and hearing people are no different, as long as an adequate barrier-free environment is available: they can do everything first, not simply work behind the scenes.

[1] Compared to Chinese decisions, foreign countries such as the United States have more comprehensive and diverse policies influenced in part by media coverage. ExtraBux reports that in the aspect of education, young people the US have been encouraged to attend to conventional schools, since special programs and classes are provided separately for special groups in these schools. For example, on Harvard's official website, it clearly states: "Harvard treats all international and domestic applicants equally, regardless of disability." And, at Harvard University, deaf students can get a certain level of special learning support. Professors and tutors are fully aware of the learning habits and special needs of deaf students. In addition, Harvard University also provides deaf students with translation, interpretation and translation services, which cover all aspects of the school, including academic meetings, social events, campus information and so on. In the aspect of living, the government in America provides extra assistance payment to deaf people. To be specific, there are three types of disability insurance in the United States, including short-term disability insurance plans, long-term disability insurance plans and Social Security disability insurance.

However, due to the actual limitations of hearing impairment and language barriers, narrow information channels and the lack of "adequate" education for the deaf students, resilient features of their culture are overlooked and quality of life often remains unsatisfactory. “Labeling" of specific individuals caused by deep and long-lasting impressions within society, coupled with the lack of understanding and support for barrier-free exchange of information contribute to blocking the full integration of deaf persons into society, so many cannot share the fruits of social development.

If the media can eliminate stereotypes of the disabled, reduce the fear and erroneous beliefs, promote and publicize the concept of supportive accommodations and barrier-free environments, and popularize cultures that develop in barrier-free settings, they can strengthen the attention and support of the whole society for inclusion and mainstreaming of long-marginalized persons. More deaf friends can be helped to claim their sense of self-worth in public settings, and truly and fully participate in society in all aspects.

Although various websites now are buzzing with news reports about deaf and non-speaking persons, and official polices and the attitudes on deafness and other disabilities have changed, in China there still are only sixteen schools designed for deaf students. In most cases, conventional schools do not provide the specialized education and resources with trained teachers for deaf students. These continuing limitations have undoubtedly affected the employment situation of deaf people in China, even in the emerging and promising field of self-employment.

One means for deaf persons to demonstrate their capabilities and achieve self sufficiency has been in the field of small business, undertaking forms of self-employment. In recent years Chinese media have reported on a slowly expanding group of coffee shops owned and staffed by deaf individuals, offering a full range of products and services to a largely hearing public. Different means of communication have emerged for hearing customers to smoothly interact with the deaf staff of these establishments – sign language, electronic communications (texts and QR codes), writing, and gesturing.

These Deaf cafes have emerged as a poignant and culturally rich space for the Deaf community and their allies to engage, converse, and spread awareness about Deaf culture. A diverse range of media platforms have been instrumental in portraying and promoting these unique spaces. Traditional media outlets, such as newspapers and television programs, have highlighted the significance of Deaf cafes by showcasing their stories, interviews, and events, offering a glimpse into the silent, yet expressive world of sign language communication. Numerous online postings of documentary videos, recordings of transactions, and straightforward news reports have brought these establishments to the attention of a curious and sympathetic public, increasing interest in this new phenomenon and driving an increase in business. Examples of successful coffee shops have inspired the development of others across China (and indeed, in other countries).

When an individual with hearing impairment establishes a coffee shop tailored to the Deaf community, it often garners significant empathy and interest from the broader community. Such initiatives have the potential to catalyze a transformation in societal biases against the hearing-impaired.

2.2. Research Methodology and Data Collection Methods

To study the influence of media on cafes for deaf and non-speaking person’s people, the author designed a questionnaire for data collection both through written responses and in face-to-face interviews. The author also examined recordings of media representations of this new form of enterprise – one in Hangzhou, and one with two branches in Shanghai. The author coded the interview responses and created a thematic matrix to analyze the content of the videos representing the operations of the Deaf cafes. The author also reviewed a number of descriptive accounts in Chinese and English language media of the work of several cafes operated by deaf persons in several cities in China.

The author interviewed one of the owner of the Deaf cafe in Hangzhou which is called Sign Coffee following the original interview protocol. Sign Coffee is run by a married deaf couple. Because of their love for coffee, the couple started their own business.

The interview protocol covered fourteen topics, mainly focused on the media and its role in the operation of the cafe. The author also asked about the personal history of the cafe owners, including their educational and employment backgrounds before starting the cafe. The author then divided the questions into three parts, which cover the experience before opening a coffee shop, the preparation for opening a coffee shop and the influence of the media after opening a coffee shop. The protocol included open-ended questions and also posed single-choice, multiple-choice, and questions, with opportunities for the participant to elaborate freely on their responses.

2.3. Findings

Before opening Sign Cafe the owner and her husband were a potter and a graphic designer respectively. They discovered the process of coffee making accidentally and then decided to become baristas. Their experience was different from the owners of the Bear Paw Coffee shop in Shanghai, which is the largest Deaf cafe in China and is more fully developed because its founder was already a capable barista.

The founder of Sign Cafe decided to open her own coffee shop, staffed entirely by deaf people, because she was always frustrated by the fact that most existing coffee shops hired employees who could speak and hear, which limited opportunities for persons who were deaf and hard of hearing both to be employed and to be served as customers.

The owner explained that small businesses run by deaf entrepreneurs are a new development in China. Like many deaf persons in earlier generations, the educational attainment of the owners was limited to high school graduation. Opportunities for higher education had been almost non-existent. Public funding for any available deaf education was also limited, so families were expected to pay for it, and the interviewees' families were not rich enough to afford them to go to school. The owners prepared for a career change by attending skills training organized by the Hangzhou Disabled Persons' Federation. The resources to start the business came from family members, who have been the major investors. In an era when many people remain prejudiced against deaf people, only the home is the most solid support.

The owner explained that she learned to use digital and print media for the business on her own. The café owners did not seek attention from social media or use digital resources until after they had opened the shop. They recognized the value of a positive online presence for business success, and wanted the café to be operational before they promoted it. After early contact with social media platforms, the owner gradually became familiar with some Internet language and began to promote their shop.

The Internet has been a source of affirmation for the owners of the Sign Coffee café. On various social platforms, many bloggers have uploaded photos of the store after visiting, with compliments for the quality of the coffee. The shopkeeper was impressed by the many comments favorably describing this unique coffee shop, which also sincerely recommended the business to others.

All the positive attention online has had a positive impact on the coffee shop. The owner of the store mentioned that every day someone brings in a camera to record images and posts the photos or videos on the Internet. This way more and more people learn about the business. The shopkeeper said she hoped that people can overcome prejudices against deaf and non-speaking persons with evidence widely available online that deaf people have the capability, not just to work in a customer-serving business, but to start up their own business.

The owners noted that the postings about the coffee shop on social media are helping to expand their business. Digital and other print media coverage portray the café in attractive ways with the result that more customers are excited to check it out.

The impact of unsolicited publicity on the business has led the owner to consider increasing their use of media to promote the success of the cafe. One reason, they said, is that increasing media

publicity will let more people know about the success and abilities of deaf and non-speaking persons, reducing the chance people would spontaneously discriminate against them. Secondly, the owner recognizes that the media have made the coffee shop quite popular and help them earn their livelihoods. Thus the success of coffee shops like theirs depends on media attention.

The owners acknowledged that their social media efforts have helped establish their reputations for coffee making and operating a business. Their success and its affirmation online has increased their confidence. The shop owner revealed that even though they were not baristas at the beginning, they were really passionate about coffee making, so they put 100 percent of their energy into the study of coffee making. Based on mostly positive feedback from customers, both are confident in their ability to make coffee. The media effectively convey their professionalism and its appreciation by their customers.

Use of social media platforms has enabled the owners to keep improving their product and their service. A news report on the Internet informed the owner that a man had ordered a cup of hand-made coffee and, after drinking a bit, he wrote the formula on the book that the ratio was wrong and offered suggestions on how to change it. Later the owner learned that the man was a professional barista. Eventually she consulted the man and they talked for a long time.

For all the benefits that the owners have enjoyed from the attention they receive and seek out on social media platforms, they recognize that the different platforms and media resources develop too fast for them to keep up with new opportunities to promote themselves. As baristas their focus is on making coffee drinks and they cannot spend too much of their time on representing themselves online to grow their business.

2.4. Discussion: Small Business, Self-Sufficiency and Routes to Including Persons with Disability

Research with owners of the Deaf café in Hangzhou, viewings of social and print media coverage of Deaf cafes, and reviews of writings on the situation of deaf and non-speaking persons in China, clarify the importance of small business opportunities and self-employment for stigmatized and excluded persons with disabilities to achieve self-sufficient and productive lives. But the effective use of online representations of the operation of cafes like Sign Coffee in Hangzhou has been as important for the success of the business as expertise in coffee-making and good organizational skills. The role of social media in the promotion of Deaf cafes and in their success as small businesses with a kind of fan following has been even more important for the accomplishment of an additional result, and that is, the re-education of the public about the underestimated talents and capabilities of Deaf persons to achieve professional success and make creative and appreciated contributions to the larger community.

We can see that digital platforms, especially social media channels like Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, play a crucial role in real-time dissemination of events, workshops, and performances held at Deaf cafes. These platforms not only serve as tools for promotion but also foster a sense of unity, collaboration, and understanding among the Deaf community and beyond. Moreover, the rise of blogs and vlogs, particularly by Deaf influencers, has enriched the narrative by offering personal insights, experiences, and reviews of Deaf cafes from around the world. Through this combination of traditional and digital media, the essence and importance of Deaf cafes are brought to the forefront, making them more accessible and familiar to a wider audience. At the same time, on an international level, Deaf Cafes are also covered by mainstream media platforms such as *New York Times* and *China Daily* as a form of social advocacy and promotion for minorities.

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions, and their influence on the accessibility and inclusivity of Deaf Cafes is undeniably profound. Historically, media outlets have often portrayed the deaf community through a lens of pity or limitation, focusing on their challenges rather than their capabilities. However, with the advent of social media and the increasing awareness of inclusivity, there has been a marked shift in narrative. Articles and features on Deaf cafes are no longer mere tales of adversity; they are stories of empowerment, community, and innovation. These

narratives underscore the cafe's unique atmosphere, where sign language is the primary mode of communication, fostering an environment where the deaf community feels wholly included. Furthermore, the heightened visibility of such cafes in the media invites the larger public to experience and participate in these spaces, promoting broader societal understanding and integration. The media, in its current state of progressive reporting, amplifies the importance of Deaf Cafes not just as businesses, but as vital communal hubs that challenge and redefine conventional notions of 'normalcy' and 'ability'.

Specifically, the positive impact of the media's role in deaf cafes in other countries can be used as a reference to the impact of online media on similar businesses in China. India's media describe deaf workers in Deaf cafes as "brewmasters," arguing that such workers produce added value for the corporations that hire them, hearing coworkers, and customers who frequent these outlets (Friedner, 2013). So, positive media coverage ultimately led to financial gains for the cafes and job opportunities for deaf people. Using Indonesia's Deaf cafe - Sunyi House - as an example, Novita (2021) describes media coverage as a marketing communication strategy. Deaf workers can be regarded as branding images. It follows that there is a need for Deaf cafes to employ deaf workers, both on a cultural and economic level. Nurfitria and Ghazali (2023) also argue that media should promote public awareness for deaf workers.

Behind the scenes at the Hangzhou Sign Coffee café, we can see that Chinese Deaf coffee shops face their own dilemmas. Because the entrepreneur has hearing impairment, it will be much more difficult than hearing people to start a business. The requirements for starting a business include knowing how to communicate with customers and how to follow up the coffee shop project with suppliers and others. Recruiting staff also can be a challenge, since many deaf people are not willing to work in a job which demands to fac-to-face interaction with consumers.

During the start-up period, Deaf cafes have faced plenty of obstacles. Before achieving their eventual popularity, Deaf coffee shops were known to few people, who knew about them by chance or in their neighborhoods. As a startup, with little income, shopkeepers need to find ways to spread the word about their products. As new entrepreneurs breaking into a field dominated by hearing workers and serving hearing customers, employees often feared directly communicating with customers. They could only communicate through sign language or writing on paper or white boards. How could they negotiate for publicity without spoken language? A solution was provided by the resources of digital media. Deaf entrepreneurs learned to promote themselves relatively inexpensively online and drew curious customers. Satisfied customers in turn promoted the new, Deaf cafes among their internet peers and word spread freely.[2]

An important area of impact of the promotion of Deaf cafes through social media are the perceptions of deaf persons by the public, and in this way, successful and well-promoted cafes influence Deaf culture itself. In the past, prejudicial beliefs about deaf and non-speaking persons considered deaf people only as qualified to work in factories and assembly lines. These arbitrary restrictions contributed to many mental health problems because deaf persons expected to be treated differently and unfairly. Furthermore, people with hearing impairments must also face many challenges on the road of life, such as language communication difficulties, inconveniences in learning, challenges moving about in a fast-paced, hearing-dominated world, and so on. Expectations of indifferent, unfair and abusive treatment have led to self-doubt and a lack of confidence among deaf people. Self-sufficiency and business success have built up confidence in deaf people and feedback from social media has made them aware of changing perspectives on members of their

[2] One downside of the online promotion of deaf cafes, has been an explosion of these businesses beyond what the market can handle. As the deaf cafes became more and more famous, the market became saturated with coffee shops so that each deaf cafe need to compete for customers and because of the competition in the market, some deaf cafes closed because they can't make enough money to cover their expenses.

community in the public. Deaf people in China feel free of the need to live apart and sheltered in the shadows with their lack of hearing.

Within the deaf community, in China and even more abroad, the hearing impaired have developed a different lifestyle from mainstream society, reflecting the need to use devices such as hearing aids or cochlear implants to get hearing assistance. In this process, they have needed to overcome many difficulties, such as adapting to the new lifestyle, learning new skills and so on. At the heart of deaf culture is sign language. Sign language is a completely different language system from speech. Proficiency in signing creates a sense of solidarity among deaf persons and their allies and supporters. With adequate translation services and awareness of the public, deaf persons skilled in signing have been able to participate straightforwardly in public life, displaying the full range of their cognitive capabilities and psychological complexity. Publicity about the deaf cafes deepens strengthens deaf culture and affirms the place deaf persons are entitled to in society.

Nevertheless, because the proportion of deaf people in society is still relatively small compared to the general population, the benefits of a stronger deaf culture remains is very small for many people. In China, there is very little publicity about deaf culture and sign language and translation services are not common. Despite gains from self-employment, the main influences on deaf culture remain the prejudices of mainstream society. It is notable that media representations of the success of deaf cafes generally do not play up the different lifestyles of Deaf persons or the specificity and rare public visibility of sign language.

2.5. Conclusion

Frequent and affirming media representation of deaf entrepreneurs positively reinforces the value and capabilities of the deaf community, dispelling public prejudices and fostering acceptance. Such favorable media exposure can significantly enhance business prospects for deaf entrepreneurs, aiding their integration into mainstream economic activities. Given the media's pivotal role in shaping communication and amplifying influence, enhancing portrayals of the deaf community can provide the public with authentic insights, challenging preconceived notions based on hearsay. In our contemporary society, where media wield substantial communicative power, their narratives directly mold public perceptions. Consequently, accurate and compassionate media depictions can bolster societal tolerance and understanding towards the deaf community.

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