

# Assignment #1

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**Title:**

*Strengthening Deaf Community Ties Through Social Media Platforms*

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### **Abstract**

This paper centres around the deaf community strengthening its ties through social media platforms, such as Facebook, by deaf individuals supporting one another and providing helpful advice in ways that are not possible in traditional communities. This focus results in the paper falling into the Communities and Social Media stream of the conference. Social media can be utilised as a third place to inform and support deaf individuals in the case of disasters and emergencies using deaf-friendly forms of communication. Social media groups on platforms such as Facebook are beneficial for deaf members to recount the everyday struggles they frequently encounter as part of the deaf world and receive support and advice from other deaf individuals who can relate to the same experiences. Social media platforms are effective channels for deaf individuals to motivate and inspire one another to achieve their goals in life. Social media enables deaf individuals to connect from across the world to form persistent contacts that defy time and location. These contacts result in a pervasive awareness of what others in the deaf community do in their day to day lives. This support and strengthening of ties within the deaf community is made possible by the accessibility of social media platforms for deaf users. The use of videos, captions, comments and contrasting colours makes it easy for deaf users to interact with each other.

### **Conference Paper**

Communities use social media platforms to keep in touch with one another and maintain ties that would otherwise be lost in traditional communities. Traditionally deaf communities are small and close-knit, due to the inability to communicate with the hearing world, making it hard for members to grow and form connections outside of the community they were born into. Social media platforms create a third space in which individuals from around the world can provide support by alerting deaf individuals to disasters and emergencies. Deaf individuals can share their everyday struggles and impart support and advice on how to overcome these barriers. Deaf communities on social media motivate and inspire each other to achieve their goals in life. These platforms create this third place of support and advice by enabling users to have persistent contact and a pervasive awareness of one another despite shifts in distance and time. These platforms create a more accessible space for their deaf users through their affordances and emphasis on their visual nature. Deaf individuals use social media platforms such as Facebook to create a third place as a safe environment in which to strengthen ties within the deaf community.

Ray Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett initially coined the term the third place in 1982, a concept which Oldenburg further expands on in his book "The Great Good Place" in 1989. Oldenburg describes the third place as being personalised places which are not the first place of home and the second place of work (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). Oldenburg discussed third places in the context of physical spaces, however with the development of social media, this term can now be applied to places created by people on social media platforms including Facebook groups. Third places demonstrate several characteristics including the accessibility of the third place, the equality of members, the appearance of regulars who guide the mood, and a welcoming, playful and wholesome sociability which creates the feeling of a home away from home.

Social media platforms are extremely useful ways for deaf communities to communicate during disasters and emergencies. People belonging to deaf groups online can inform and warn deaf individuals of a crisis as they may not be able to find out information through other methods such as radio broadcasts. People utilising these groups know the benefits and limitations surrounding deaf communication, such as the reliance on a visual stimulus and minimal audio input. This enables them to cater the content they wish to send to the deaf individuals in the social media groups. The users posting content may use sign language and closed captions in their posts meaning that deaf individuals can understand what is being said. Members of these groups can then share the posts by uploading them to their profile page, with other groups and across platforms, resulting in a larger network of people viewing the posts. This means that it is not just deaf people belonging to such groups who get the benefit of the deaf-friendly form of communication, individuals outside of the groups who see the posts are also informed. One such example of this can be seen in the case of the Amatrice Earthquake in Central Italy. A Facebook page was created several hours after the earthquake, providing safety information and videos on the emergency with Italian Sign Language videos, closed captions and service numbers for the viewers to understand (Rotondi et al. 2019). This Facebook group demonstrates the accessibility characteristic found in third places, where inhabitants are able to utilise and personalise the place for themselves and others without hindrance from accessibility and exclusion issues. While these online platforms enable deaf communities to communicate and support each other during emergencies, they also create a means of support and offering suggestions over everyday common issues.

The ties between individuals in the deaf community are strengthened online as many of the struggles faced by deaf individuals can be shared with others online who face the same everyday issues. This common ground enables deaf individuals to relate to one another and share support. This support extends to social media spaces, where the deaf community can partake in discussions on topics such as, “technical difficulties, coping with difficulties presented by hearing loss, ... difficulties communicating with the hearing world, and rights” (Shoham & Heber, 2012). I am a profoundly deaf individual myself, and while I do use cochlear implants, I still relate to some of the common struggles in the deaf community such as not hearing alarm clocks and the infamous “I’ll tell you later” response when a deaf person asks what is being discussed. Like many in the deaf community, I personally find Facebook groups a great third place in which I can find assistance for these issues. For instance, the NDIS Assistive Technology (AT) and Equipment for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Facebook Group provides technological solutions and advice such as vibrating alarm clocks (Bucciarelli, 2020) to overcome the prevalent alarm clock problem. Furthermore, group members can request recommendations and contribute solutions to support one another through these social media groups. These genuine recommendations and heartfelt support help to create the feeling of a “home away from home” (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982) for many deaf individuals, a characteristic commonly seen in third places. This creates a safe space within which deaf individuals can strengthen their community ties, which is not always possible with traditional communities due to their limited access to new information and suggestions as a result of their localised nature.

Online communities enable deaf individuals across the globe to unite on online platforms to inspire and motivate each other to achieve the things in their lives that they want.

According to Hampton and Wellman (2018), traditional communities were hindered by the inability to physically escape from local communities due to restricting technology and transport, resulting in the lack of long-distance networks and the perseverance of close tight-knit communities. The development of social media communication technology has equipped deaf communities with the possibility of forging long-distance connections with other deaf people they know and with strangers. These thin ties still strengthen the deaf community as they give the individuals involved free reign to share their positive experiences and motivate others to do the same in a welcoming third place, no matter where they live. We can see this in the case of the Facebook group Deaf Music which “is perfect for everyone who loves to listen to music and make music videos – as long as it is in SIGN LANGUAGE” (Deaf Music, 2021). Deaf Music encourages its members to provide deaf-friendly music in many different international forms of sign language. Group members support the content creators in the posts’ comments and motivate them to continue making music. In the Deaf Music Facebook group, the equality characteristic of third places is evident as the societal and economic status of its members does not matter. Members can join the group without having to fulfil demeaning prerequisites and can post musical content without judgement from other and without the feeling of being looked down upon. Connections no longer need to be local for communities to be brought together to support and keep in contact with one another, rather ties can be formed and maintained through social media.

An issue that arose with traditional communities was the reliance on locality for individuals to maintain close ties to one another. The rise of social media has enabled persistent ties to form between people, including in the deaf community. Hampton and Wellman (2018) define persistent contact as allowing people to stay in touch with one another despite shifts in location and time. Swartz and Marchetti-Mercer (2019) use the example of a deaf woman from South Africa to portray how the use of social media such as Facebook enabled her to keep in contact with her family and maintain persistent contact with them after she migrated to Australia. The persistent connections formed on social media strengthens the ties within the deaf community as it enables them to keep in contact with one another from dispersed locations and through natural life events such as changing jobs and marriage. With these persistent contacts comes a pervasive awareness, in which social media users share their everyday activities, resulting in their followers knowing what they are doing constantly (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). This pervasive awareness further strengthens ties within the deaf community on social media as it is akin to the gossip that maintains people’s connections to each another in traditional communities, with allowances for shifts in location and time. Social media communities not only permit persistent ties to be maintained and a pervasive awareness to ensue, they also allow community members to form these ties online which can then potentially shift into the offline space.

Keeping in touch within a dispersed network of thin ties is also beneficial to social media users when they wish to meet new people with the same interests. Deaf communities are usually small, this can be seen in Australia, where there were only 11,682 individuals who could use sign language in 2016 (Deaf Australia, n.d.), compared to the 23.4 million people living in Australia in 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). This makes it difficult to reach out to other deaf people in a new and unfamiliar location. Social media is beneficial for deaf individuals as they can initiate thin ties with other deaf people and groups, which

can lead to the creation of strong thick connections in real life. An example of this is the South West Auslan Social Facebook group that meets regularly in the MacArthur region of Sydney to socialise and maintain connections (Burrett, 2021a). A deaf individual new to the area, may join the South West Auslan Social group and attend the next organised catch up to meet other deaf people or people who can sign in AUSLAN in the area. This Facebook group presents the characteristics of a third place, such as the sociability of the space, where the participants interact democratically without the influence of personal values and biases, such as political alliances, to mar the playfulness that resides in the place. This South West Auslan Social group also presents a clear example of the characteristic of regulars who frequent the third place and influence the feel and tone of the socialising. This can be seen with the regular Raphie Burrett who organises regular in-person meet ups for the group members to attend (Burrett, 2021b). These newly formed connections between individuals in the deaf community would not be possible if the affordances of the platforms did not make communication online more accessible.

Part of making online social media platforms safe environments in which deaf communities can strengthen their ties is by making them accessible through their technical affordances. Facebook posts, stories and reels usually consist of a photo or a video in which users can perform sign language to communicate effectively. There is also the potential for content creators to insert text bubbles into their videos so that deaf viewers can follow along with what is being said. Alternatively, some posts provide the option to activate closed captions that occur in time with the audio and video (Kožuh & Debevc, 2020). Further explanations or a transcription of what is being said can also be included in the caption and comments of the post. In 2017 Facebook took a step towards becoming more accessible to deaf and hard of hearing audiences by including closed captions on live video broadcasts (Facebook, 2017). This implementation strengthens ties within the deaf community as individuals would be able to easily understand what is being said and respond more directly and immediately. The visual nature of these social media platforms means that bright and contrasting colours are frequently used, making it easier for deaf users to view the content and interact with one another. All these affordances make it easier for deaf groups to communicate with one another on social media platforms, thus strengthening the ties between people within the deaf community.

This paper has shown how valuable social media platforms, including Facebook, are as third places for the deaf community to strengthen their ties to one another. Deaf communities can provide their individuals with support in crises, advice on everyday issues not often seen in the hearing world but a commonplace feature of the deaf world, and inspiration and motivation to continue following their aspirations. These third places create a safe place for deaf communities as they furnish deaf individuals with persistent contacts as a way in which to remain in touch despite shifts in time and place. Finally, these social media platforms are accessible to deaf communities as they provide visual forms of communication which deaf individuals can utilise to communicate with one another. The characteristics of these third places, including the equality of members, accessibility of the third place, the appearance of regulars that influence the mood, and a welcoming sociability which creates the feeling of a home away from home, all work together to enable deaf members to strengthen their community ties on social media platforms. This paper is limited as it was not possible to

discuss the raising of awareness around the deaf culture and community on social media platforms as it is outside the scope of the paper.

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