A Deaf Economy: Deaf Businesses in Europe & USA

By Sheila Xu

7th International Deaf Academics & Researchers Conference

February 2015
Research Questions

- What is a “deaf economy”? 
- What does it look like in the United States & Europe (mostly United Kingdom)?
- Is a “deaf economy” an “ethnic economic enclave”? 
  - “deaf economy” similar to Chinatown?
Ethnic Economic Enclave

- Coined by American sociologists Alejandro Portes & Leif Jensen
- Community of people who share same cultural heritage and language and conduct business with each other
- Applicable to the deaf community and its business?
Literature Review

- Very little research into deaf entrepreneurism & employment in general
- “Deaf economy” term came from Rochester Institute of Technology business professor W. Scot Atkins’ PhD dissertation
- No prior research into “deaf economy”
Deaf Employment

- Deaf people less likely to get jobs than hearing people

- United States: 58% deaf people vs. 82% hearing people employed\(^1\)

- United Kingdom: Unemployment rate 4 times higher for deaf people\(^2\)

Growing number of Deaf businesses?


\(^2\) "Deaf Information," last accessed May 9, 2014, http://www.hayfield.org.uk/content/general/deafinformation.htm
Participant Selection

Criteria for Selecting deaf businesses:

1. Revenue
2. Business-owner must be involved
3. Either deaf-owned or hearing-owned with majority deaf employees
4. Bonus points if they attend deaf expos/events
# Profile of Deaf Businesses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym*</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>General Industries</th>
<th>Size (Small, Medium, Large)</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>Yummy Food</td>
<td>Northern California</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Deaf-Owned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeafE!</td>
<td>Southern California</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Majority Deaf Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TechZech</td>
<td>Northern California</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Deaf-Owned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeafTimez</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Deaf-Owned (equal partnership with a hearing partner)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Large Deaf Events

• Las Vegas, USA
• General business & social
• 26,000+ people

• Reims, France
• International Art Festival
• 4,000+ people

• London, UK
• Construction
• 100+ people
Data Collection

1. Networking at local deaf social events & Internet to find participants

2. Field observation & semi-structured interviews with CEOs, deaf/hearing consumers, and employees

3. Sample questions:
   1. Why did you start this business venture?
   2. How do you find your consumers?
   3. Do you hire deaf employees only?
Preliminary Findings: 3 Themes
Theme I: Capitalizing on deaf identity in businesses

- Branding itself as “deaf”
- “DEAF CAN DO”
- Some instances of Deaf Universalism/DEAF-SAME-SAME (Friedner & Kusters)
Theme II: Crossing the State and Transnational Boundaries: Building the Market & Network

- Concept of “Deaf Space” (Haualand 2007)
Physical
Liminal (Temporary)
Virtual
Theme III: USA vs. UK

Economic/Social Opportunities

Access to Work

Geography

UK

USA

Vocational Rehabilitation

Putting people and solutions to work

Roadtrip
Limitations of the Study

- First world, Western countries
  - May be different for developing or non-Western countries
- No financial analysis
- Fieldwork done during my summer terms (6 months) over two academic years
- Sampling size
Conclusion

- “Deaf economy” = Ethnic Economic Enclave
- BUT.....
- Not limited to physical boundaries
- Far-reaching and international
Questions? Comments? Ideas?
Looking to Hire? Suggestions for a potential PhD program?
Email me:
sheilaxu@mit.edu

I’m on Facebook too!