

Vocal Health Stigma: Perceptions in Undergraduate Music Programs

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Abstract

Vocal health issues are common with undergraduate vocal majors, and many students may experience stigma among their professors, peers, and themselves. This research was conducted through an anonymous online survey that collected responses from participants who are current or graduated music students who experienced a vocal health issue during their undergraduate years. The survey collected information on demographics, career, vocal health encounters, external stigma experiences, and internal stigma experiences. Results indicate stigma is more commonly reported among peers and non-voice professors, whereas voice professors who were generally perceived as more supportive. There is also a reported decline in stigma in recent years. These findings stress the importance of continuing to educate voice students and professors about supporting students with vocal health issues.

Research Questions:

- RQ1: What perceptions exist about vocal health in undergraduate degree programs?
- RQ2: Is there an existing stigma among voice professors, choral directors, opera directors, and peers?
- RQ3: How has vocal health stigma changed over time?
- RQ4: Does vocal health stigma vary based on personal experiences with vocal health challenges?

Subjects, Methods & Analysis

Subjects:

- Eligibility Criteria:** Current voice major undergraduate students and alumni who experienced any type of vocal health issue during their undergraduate years.
- Sample Size:** A total of N=51 participants were included in the final analysis. Two responses were removed due to ineligibility.
- Degrees Represented:**
 - Bachelor of Music (38)
 - Bachelor of Arts (11)
 - Bachelor of Fine Arts (2)
 - Bachelor of Science (2)
- Majors Represented:** Music, Vocal Performance, Music Education, Jazz Studies, Music History, Musical Theatre, Theatre, Music Theory, Music Business, Music Industry, Music Technology
- Graduation Year:**
 - 1980-1990 (3)
 - 1990-2000 (1)
 - 2000-2010 (8)
 - 2010-2020 (6)
 - 2020-2025 (12)
 - Current students (21)

Methods:

- Anonymous online survey on Google Forms
- Mixed Methods:
 - Likert-scale, multiple choice, yes/no, and open-ended questions
- Sections:
 - Section 1A: Demographics + Undergraduate Degree Information
 - Section 1B: Post-Graduation
 - Section 2: Vocal Health
 - Section 3: Your Experience with Supports and Vocal Health
 - Section 4: Your Personal Belief About Vocal Health

Analysis:

- Quantitative data was analyzed by creating statistics of frequencies, percentages and mean of responses.
- Stigma calculations were analyzed through grouping of questions by type (voice teacher, professor, peer, and self perceptions) and mean of these combined Likert-scores.
- Qualitative data was coded using thematic analysis of written responses.

Conclusions

- RQ1:**
 - Participants associate vocal health issues with learned technique and/or external factors.
 - Participants report that their peers have negative perceptions of their voice teacher.
 - Anxiety around vocal health and fear of diagnosis are frequently reported.
 - Participants report insufficient education around the topic.
 - Many participants take vocal pedagogy courses after their health issue, leading to misguided perceptions.
- RQ2:**
 - Data shows voice teachers showing less stigma in comparison to professors and peers.
 - Participants report their school being open and supportive, while others report having little support.
- RQ3:**
 - Data reflects fluctuations in stigma overtime. There is an increased reporting of stigma in 2000-2010, and it decreases as time went on.
 - Data reflects an increase in internalized stigma overtime.
- RQ4:**
 - Respondents report having developed empathy and increased openness after vocal health issue.
 - Overall, there is a high average of participants being more understanding based on their own experience.

Introduction

Vocal health plays a significant role in the experiences of a young singer. A healthy voice can lead to significant vocal growth while studying in an undergraduate music program. However, when one encounters a vocal health issue including disorders, injuries, or impairments, a singer can encounter many health and social issues as a student and pre-professional.

What defines vocal health issues in this study?

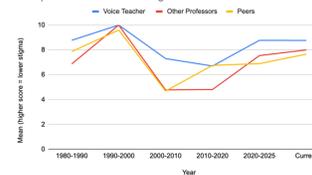
- Any disorder, injury, or impairment of the voice
- Voice disorders are characterized as a condition that interrupts "the quality, pitch, or loudness of your voice" (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). These conditions can be applied to both the speaking and singing voice.

What is stigma?

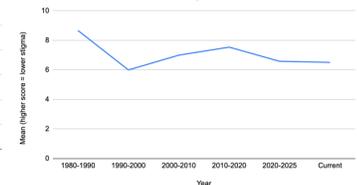
- "a set of negative and unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Results

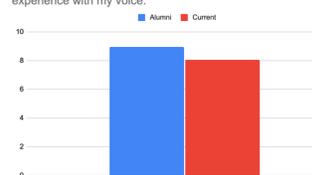
Comparison of Measured Stigma



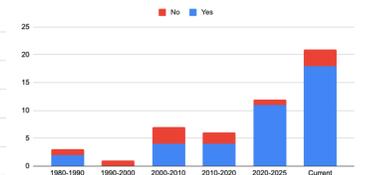
Comparison of Measured Self Stigma



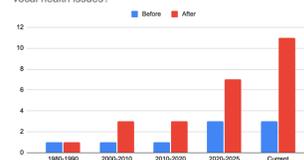
I am more understanding of other's vocal health due to my experience with my voice.



Does your school offer a vocal pedagogy course that discusses vocal health?



Did you take this course before or after your experience with vocal health issues?



Common Themes:

- Fear of Diagnosis (4)
- Anxiety (4)
- Shame (3)
- Open (2)
- Supportive (2)
- Concern of colleague perception (2)
- Concern of professor perception (2)
- Negative perception of voice teacher (2)
- Little support (2)
- Lack of education (5)
- Developed empathy (2)
- External factors causing issue (9)
- Learned technique causing issue (10)

Directions for Future

Future Work Includes Advocating For:

- Normalization of topic
- Earlier vocal health education for students
- Education for professors

Future Research:

- Is there a correlation with higher levels of stigma and different genres of music?
- What do current pedagogy courses cover in terms of vocal health?
- How can education change to provide earlier access to information about vocal health?
- What vocal health issues are more prone to stigmatized views?