
Understanding How Selective Mutism is Portrayed in Public and How it Affects the Individual with Selective Mutism

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Abstract

Selective mutism is a complex anxiety disorder that manifests in childhood, characterized by an individual's inability to speak in specific social contexts despite being able to communicate comfortably in others. This research paper examines how selective mutism is portrayed in the public sphere and explores its impact on affected individuals.

Despite its significant psychological implications, selective mutism is often misunderstood and misrepresented, leading to stigma and isolation. Using a survey distributed to five individuals with selective mutism at WeSpeak camp, this study uncovers key themes related to public perception and personal experiences. Findings reveal a pervasive lack of awareness and a tendency to mislabel selective mutism as mere shyness.

Participants reported varying levels of comfort in explaining their condition, and significant gaps in understanding among parents and educational institutions were identified. The study highlights the inconsistency in school accommodations and underscores the urgent need for increased public awareness and accurate media representations. The results suggest that enhanced education, advocacy, and standardized support systems are essential for improving the quality of life for individuals with selective mutism. This paper advocates for a comprehensive public awareness campaign and better institutional support to foster a more inclusive and empathetic environment.

Introduction

Selective mutism is a complex anxiety disorder that typically manifests in childhood, characterized by an individual's inability to speak in specific social situations despite being able

to speak comfortably in others. This condition is not simply a matter of shyness or reluctance to speak; rather, it is a significant psychological condition that can profoundly affect a child's social interactions, academic performance, and emotional well-being. The impact of selective mutism often extends far beyond childhood, potentially influencing an individual's social development, self-esteem, and ability to navigate various aspects of daily life. Despite its profound effects, selective mutism remains relatively underrepresented and misunderstood in the public sphere.

The general awareness and understanding of the disorder are limited, often leading to misconceptions and stereotypes that mischaracterize those who suffer from it. For example, many people incorrectly view selective mutism as a form of extreme shyness or willful silence, failing to recognize the underlying anxiety that prevents those who are affected by the disorder from speaking in certain contexts. These misunderstandings can perpetuate stigmatization and isolation, compounding the challenges faced by those with selective mutism. In popular media, portrayals of selective mutism are extremely sparse, and when they do occur, they are often inaccurate or superficial. Examples being Violet Parr, from the *Incredibles* franchise, Sam from the 2012 movie *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Ariadne from the 2010 movie *Inception*. What these three characters have in common is that they are misunderstood to have exhibited traits of selective mutism, when instead the quiet and reserved nature of them is part of their personality, in short, they are shy.

This lack of accurate representation contributes to a broader societal misunderstanding of the condition, which in turn affects how individuals with selective mutism are perceived and treated in their everyday lives. The media's role in shaping public perceptions cannot be overstated, as it influences not only how the public understands selective mutism but also how those with the condition perceive themselves. This study seeks to delve deeper into the public portrayal of

selective mutism and its consequent impact on the individuals who live with the disorder. By examining how selective mutism is represented in various public domains—whether through media, educational institutions, or social interactions—this study aims to uncover the ways in which these portrayals influence the experiences, self-perception, and overall well-being of those affected. Furthermore, this research emphasizes the importance of public awareness and education in mitigating the negative effects of selective mutism.

As societal understanding grows, it becomes possible to foster a more supportive environment where individuals with selective mutism can thrive without fear of judgment or misunderstanding. The study aims to contribute to this awareness by highlighting the discrepancies between public perception and the lived reality of selective mutism, thereby advocating for more accurate and empathetic representations of the disorder. To sum it up, this research highlights the critical need for a more informed and nuanced understanding of selective mutism. By exploring the intersection of public perception and personal experience, it seeks to illuminate the challenges that individuals with selective mutism face and the role that increased awareness can play in alleviating these challenges. This study will also find ways to improve the public understanding of selective mutism by providing suggestions on how to spread more knowledge about the condition based on the results of this study. Through a better understanding of selective mutism, society can move toward a more inclusive and compassionate approach to supporting those who live with this often-misunderstood disorder.

Methodology

In this study, a survey was distributed to eight individuals with selective mutism to gather their perspectives on how the disorder is portrayed in the public eye. Out of the ten that I gave, five of the individuals filled it out. The survey consists of seven questions that were designed to

expose the insights into respondents' experiences and perceptions. These questions were presented using a five-point Likert scale, allowing participants to express the degree of their agreement or disagreement with each statement. The Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Provided a nuanced understanding of participants' views, capturing the complexity of their thoughts and feelings about the representation and knowledge of selective mutism in various public domains. This includes media, social interactions and educational environments.

The selection of questions was guided by a desire to explore the specific aspects of public portrayal, that being aspects such as accuracy and stigmatization, and the impact of these portrayals on individuals with selective mutism. By focusing on the lived experiences of those directly affected by the disorder, the survey sought to uncover the often-overlooked perspectives of individuals with selective mutism, providing valuable insights that could give more informed and more accurate representations later in the future.

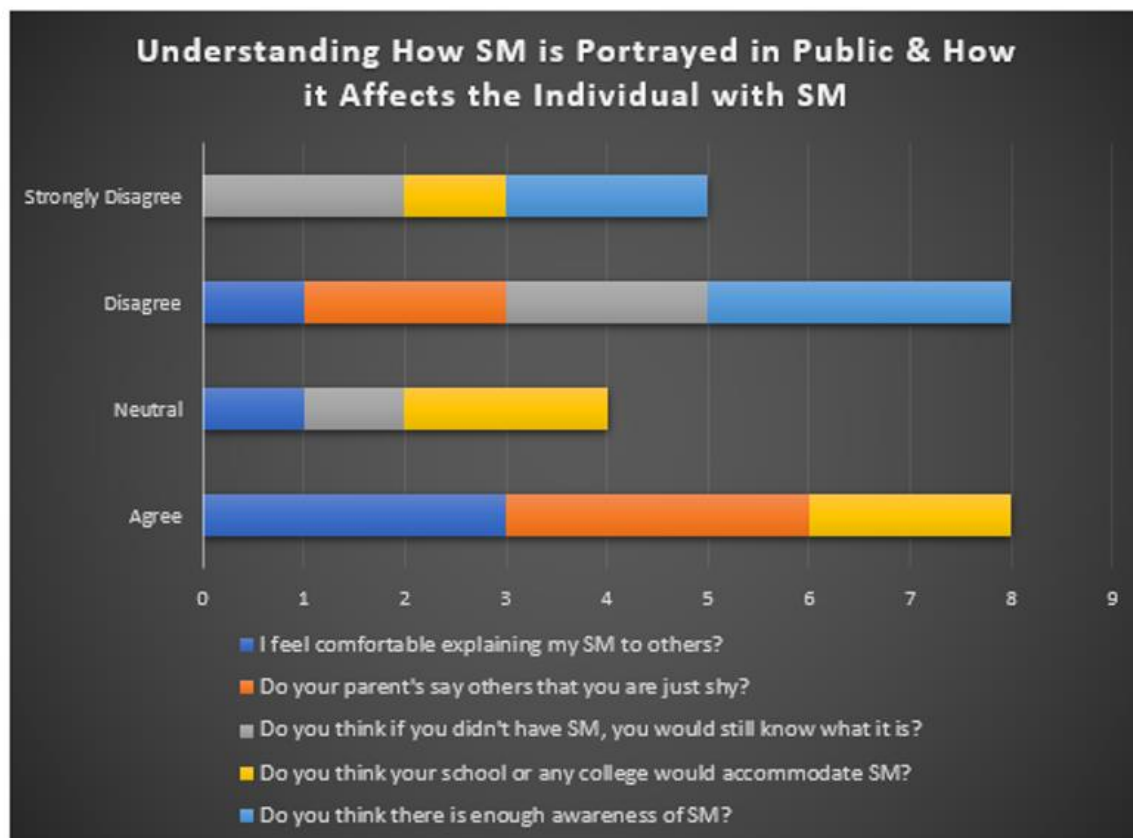
The administration of the survey followed ethical guidelines, ensuring guidelines, ensuring that the participants of the study remain anonymous throughout the process. Respondents were recruited through a one weekday camp known as WeSpeak run by Dr. Shelley Avny. WeSpeak is a camp run and founded by Dr. Avny in order to give exposure therapy to teens with selective mutism. With her permission, I was able to give out the survey to the ten other individuals attending this camp who are diagnosed with selective mutism. Once the camp ended on July 26th, I was able to collect all the filled-out surveys and find common themes and trends within them.

Results

	11-19	20+
What is your age?	3	2

	Yes	No
Do you currently have Selective Mutism?	5	0

	Strongly	Agree	Neutra	Disagr	Strong
	ly			ee	ly
I feel comfortable explaining my SM to others?		3	1	1	
Do your parent's say others that you are just shy?		3		2	
Do you think if you didn't have SM, you would still know what it is?			1	2	2
Do you think your school or any college would accommodate SM?		2	2		1
Do you think there is enough awareness of SM?				3	2



Based on the surveys that were filled out by five individuals at WeSpeak, I have found several common trends with regards to their perceptions of selective mutism in the public eye. First off, three of the individuals were under 20 while the other two were 20 and above. Next, three out of the five individuals picked the agree option on the question “I feel comfortable explaining my selective mutism to others (Ex: friends, family, etc.), whereas one picked neutral and the other picked disagree. This variance in answers to the survey suggests that while some respondents have reached a level of comfort in communicating about their condition, others are still facing challenges in communicating this. This could be due to social stigma or lack of knowledge and understanding of selective mutism.

Then, for the question, “Do your parents say to others that you are just shy?”, it revealed a significant trend in parental perceptions of selective mutism through the eyes of their child. three of the individuals answered with *agree*, reflecting that a common misconception persists among parents who may downplay selective mutism as mere shyness. Meanwhile, the other two individuals answered with *disagree*. This could be an indication that the individuals’ parents either understand the condition better or that these individuals have taken steps to educate their parents about the distinctions between shyness and selective mutism. This trend emphasizes the ongoing need for better education and awareness of selective mutism among the public and to close family.

In response to the question “Do you think if you didn’t have selective mutism, you would still know what it is?” None of the individuals pick either *agree* or *strongly agree*. Instead, two picked strongly disagree, two picked disagree and one picked neutral. This lack of agreement highlights a significant theme of selective mutism remaining unknown to the public. Unlike more commonly recognized and known neurological disorders such as Autism or ADHD, selective

mutism doesn't seem to have the same level of visibility or knowledge, even among those who are close to those who have the condition.

The sixth question in this survey is "Do you think your school, or any colleges would accommodate selective mutism?" yielded the widest range of responses out of any questions in the survey given. For this question, two individuals answered this question with *agree*, two answered with neutral and one answered with *strongly disagree*. This divergence suggests that the availability and quality of accommodations for students with selective mutism vary widely among educational institutions. The mixed responses also point to a possible inconsistency in how schools and colleges address the needs of students with the condition, indicating a need for a more standardized and inclusive support system for those who are in possession of selective mutism.

Finally, the last question is "Do you think there is enough awareness of selective mutism?", three individuals answered with *disagree* and the other two answered with *strongly disagree*. This is common agreement among the participants, revealing a strong and consistent belief among them that the awareness of selective mutism is insufficient. The broad consensus on this issue implies that those who experience selective mutism believe their illness is underrepresented in public discourse, which causes misconceptions and a lack of adequate help for those in need.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper has explored the multifaceted experiences and perceptions of individuals with selective mutism, highlighting significant themes and trends that reveal the ongoing challenges and needs of this community. The survey conducted at WeSpeak provided valuable insights into how individuals with selective mutism perceive the disorder's

portrayal in the public eye, as well as their personal experiences in navigating a world that often misunderstands or overlooks their condition. These findings expose a pervasive lack of awareness and understanding of selective mutism, both within personal circles and in broader public domains.

Many respondents expressed discomfort or uncertainty in explaining their condition to others. This reflects the stigma and misconceptions that continue to surround selective mutism. The frequent misidentification of selective mutism as shyness by parents further emphasizes the need for more comprehensive education and awareness campaigns that differentiate selective mutism from other conditions, such as social anxiety or general shyness. Moreover, the survey highlighted the limited visibility of selective mutism compared to other neurological disorders like Autism or ADHD.

The general public's unfamiliarity with selective mutism, as indicated by the respondents' belief that they would not have known about the condition if they did not personally experience it, points to a critical gap in public health education and awareness initiatives. This gap not only hinders the understanding of the condition, but also affects the availability of appropriate support and accommodations in educational settings for those who have the disorder. The variability in responses regarding the accommodations provided by schools and colleges further illustrates the inconsistency in institutional support for individuals with selective mutism. While some participants acknowledged the presence of accommodations, others were neutral or doubtful, suggesting that the providence of support is not as consistent and may depend on the specific institution or awareness levels within that center of learning. This inconsistency highlights the importance of advocating for standardized accommodations and support mechanisms that can be universally applied to ensure that all students with selective mutism receive the assistance they need to

succeed academically and socially. Finally, the overwhelming unity among respondents that there is insufficient awareness of selective mutism reflects a shared experience of invisibility and marginalization within the broader community. This lack of awareness not only contributes to the difficulties individuals with selective mutism face in their daily lives but also perpetuates the cycle of misunderstanding and inadequate support.

Overall, this research paper sheds light on the critical need for increased awareness, education, and advocacy for selective mutism. By amplifying the voices of those who live with the condition, this study aims to contribute to a more informed and empathetic understanding of selective mutism, ultimately fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment for individuals affected by this disorder. The findings of this study call for continued efforts to raise awareness, improve public understanding, and ensure that individuals with selective mutism are provided with the accommodations and support they need to thrive in all areas of life.

Solutions

To tackle the challenges identified in this study, it is essential to implement strategic solutions that enhance understanding and support for individuals with selective mutism. Primarily, a broad public awareness campaign should be launched to clearly differentiate selective mutism from general shyness or social anxiety. This campaign should leverage a variety of media channels, such as social media platforms, educational websites, and public service announcements, to spread accurate information and share personal experiences from those affected by the disorder.

Moreover, educational institutions need to be encouraged to establish uniform accommodations for students with selective mutism, ensuring that all schools and colleges offer consistent and tailored support. This can be accomplished through policy formulation, educator

training programs, and incorporating selective mutism awareness into professional development. In addition, educational programs for parents should be developed to improve their understanding and support of their children with the disorder, addressing common misconceptions and fostering empathy into their child's experience.

Advocating for more accurate media portrayals of selective mutism is also crucial, as this would help dispel stereotypes and present a true representation of the condition. By pursuing these strategies, we can create a more informed, compassionate, and supportive environment for individuals with selective mutism, thereby enhancing their quality of life and their ability to succeed academically and socially.

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