

# Knowledge and Attitude of Physiotherapy Students Towards Their Profession in Saudi Arabia

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**Abstract Background:** Physiotherapy is a rapidly evolving healthcare profession in Saudi Arabia, playing a crucial role in rehabilitation and physical well-being. Understanding the knowledge and attitude of physiotherapy students towards their profession is essential for assessing their preparedness, motivation and future contributions to the healthcare system. This study aims to evaluate the level of knowledge and attitude of physiotherapy students regarding their profession, their perception of career prospects and the factors influencing their professional outlook. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted among physiotherapy students enrolled at Al Majmaah University. A structured, self-administered questionnaire assessed demographic details, knowledge about physiotherapy scope and practice and attitudes toward the profession. Data was analyzed using SPSS, with descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to examine group differences. **Results:** A total of 170 individuals participated in the study, comprising 87 females (51.18%) and 83 males (48.82%). Helping people/patients (52.94%) emerged as the primary reason for choosing the profession, while family influence (42.94%) was the most common source of initial information. While 74.71% reported satisfaction with the profession itself, 70% expressed satisfaction with job opportunities in Saudi Arabia. Statistically significant differences in perception were noted based on age and year of study ( $p < 0.05$ ). **Conclusion:** The study highlights a generally positive attitude among physiotherapy students toward their profession, supported by a moderate to high knowledge base. It is recommended that educational institutions implement targeted career counselling, expand clinical exposure and launch public awareness initiatives to enhance professional identity, address misconceptions and improve career satisfaction among future physiotherapists.

**Key Words** Physiotherapy students, knowledge, attitude, professional perception, Saudi Arabia, career prospects

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past century, the field of physical therapy has experienced significant growth, expanding its scope, techniques and environments, as well as the obligations assigned to its practitioners, in response to evolving demography, socioeconomic and political conditions [1,2]. The physiotherapy profession is a dynamic discipline that provides significant prospects for academic study, clinical practice and research advancement. Contemporary physiotherapists are independent practitioners who actively participate in illness prevention, wellness promotion, physical fitness and rehabilitation [3]. Globally, several studies have explored perceptions of the physiotherapy profession among students, healthcare professionals and the general public.

However, many of these studies lack a focused investigation into student perceptions within specific cultural and educational contexts, such as Saudi Arabia [4]. Recent literature, such as Makeen *et al.* [5] and Malhotra *et al.* [6], has emphasized the importance of early professional awareness and interprofessional education among healthcare students in Saudi Arabia and India, respectively, but has yet to explore these issues specifically within physiotherapy education.

The healthcare profession of physical therapy encompasses the assessment and diagnosis of impairments with the aim of enhancing mobility and thereby improving quality of life. In Saudi Arabia, bachelor's degree programs in physiotherapy at several institutions integrate professional

practice with robust scientific and clinical training [5]. Despite the growing enrollment in physiotherapy programs, limited research exists on how physiotherapy students in Saudi Arabia perceive their profession, particularly in relation to their motivations, challenges and career outlook [6].

Physical therapists must develop a clear understanding of their profession's purpose, cultivate a strong professional identity and adapt career goals to meet evolving healthcare needs [7]. This process, known as professional socialization, plays a crucial role in shaping long-term engagement and commitment to the field [8]. Understanding the point at which physiotherapy students form professional awareness and align it with career motivation is critical for designing effective educational interventions.

In recent years, there has been limited empirical investigation on the understanding of physiotherapy among students in Saudi Arabia. While general perceptions of physical therapy are positive, the public and even students may not be fully aware of the full range of practice, career pathways and postgraduate opportunities available in the field [9]. Universities in Saudi Arabia play a pivotal role in shaping future physiotherapists, yet few studies have analyzed whether current curricula address the evolving expectations and professional realities faced by students [10]. Recent studies by Aloraini *et al.* [11] have also highlighted gaps in public and student awareness about professional roles in physical therapy, underscoring the need for enhanced academic and outreach strategies.

Previous literature from countries such as Jordan, Canada and across Europe has evaluated student motivations and perceptions in physiotherapy education; however, comparative insights specific to Saudi Arabia remain sparse. [12-14] Moreover, these studies often overlook external influences such as cultural expectations, family guidance and socioeconomic status, which may significantly shape career decisions in the region.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the knowledge and attitudes of undergraduate physiotherapy students regarding their profession in Saudi Arabia. This includes evaluating their understanding of the scope of physiotherapy practice, the determinants influencing their choice of profession, perceived challenges and expectations regarding career prospects. The study also aims to assess how educational programs contribute to professional development and preparedness for clinical roles.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study Design

A cross-sectional, questionnaire-based study was conducted at the Department of Physical Therapy and Health Rehabilitation, College of Applied Medical Sciences, Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia, to evaluate undergraduate physiotherapy students' perceptions regarding their

profession. The design was chosen for its appropriateness in assessing current opinions and trends among a specific population at a single point in time.

### Participants

All students enrolled in the undergraduate physiotherapy program at Majmaah University (total population = 250) were invited to participate, from first to final year. A total of 170 students aged between 18 and 28 years completed the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 68%. Among the respondents, 88 (51.76%) were female and 82 (48.23%) were male. The required minimum sample size of 152 was calculated using the Yamane formula with a 95% confidence level and an acceptable margin of error.

### Data Collection

An adapted survey questionnaire was developed after reviewing relevant literature and aligning it with the study objectives. The tool included both closed- and open-ended items, designed to assess five key dimensions: (1) Determinants influencing admission into the physiotherapy program, (2) Understanding of services provided by physiotherapists, (3) Perceptions of professional standing, (4) Challenges encountered by students and (5) Satisfaction with educational and career aspects. Questions included Likert-scale ratings, Yes/No items, checkboxes and dropdown responses.

The questionnaire underwent face and content validation by five clinical experts, using a four-point Likert scale to assess clarity, relevance and simplicity. Content Validity Index (CVI) was reported as 0.81. A pilot study established internal consistency with a reliability coefficient of 0.758. However, the validation section could benefit from more detail on the piloting process and question refinement steps. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Research Board of Majmaah University (MUREC-Nov 23/COM-2023/29-9). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. However, the study did not explicitly describe how participant confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, which may impact the perceived reliability of responses. Data collection was conducted over a five-month period, from 19 December 2023 to 21 April 2024, during the second academic semester. Each participant required 15-20 minutes to complete the survey.

### Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis of the study was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics software for Windows. The descriptive statistics of correct answers to the questionnaire are mean standard deviation, given as frequency and percentage. A chi-square test was used to compare those who preferred the department with those who did not want it. The probability of error was accepted as  $p < 0.05$ .

## RESULTS

A total of 170 individuals (68%) participated in the study. The mean age of the participants was  $20.41 \pm 1.69$  years. Among the respondents, 87 (51.18%) were female and 83 (48.82%) were male. The largest age group was between 19 and 20 years (24.7%), while only 3.53% were aged between 25 and 28 years. Regarding the source of initial information about physiotherapy, family was the most commonly cited (42.94%), followed by friends (25.88%), daily news (20.59%) and social media (10.59%). This suggests a strong role of familial and social networks in shaping early perceptions of the profession (Table 1).

Figure 1 shows that "Helping People/Patients" was the primary motivator (52.94%) for choosing the physiotherapy program, followed by the desire for an "Independent Profession" (18.82%), "Future Prospects" (16.47%), "Respect in Society" (7.06%) and "Financial Prospects" (4.71%).

In contrast, Figure 2 highlights underlying career choice factors such as "Interest in the Subject" (27.06%), "Family Influence" (27.06%) and "Social Status" (10%). Notably, parental pressure and community service were mentioned by a smaller subset, suggesting internal motivation may outweigh external expectations for many students.

As shown in Table 2, 55.88% of students were aware of physiotherapy as a medical/therapeutic profession before admission, while 17.06% understood it in terms of future prospects and 15.88% viewed it as an independent profession. Only 4.12% reported having no prior knowledge. This reflects a moderately informed cohort at entry, though awareness of specialized roles within physiotherapy may still be limited.

Table 3 outlines participants' understanding of physiotherapy services. The highest-rated service was "Home Physiotherapy Lessons" (mean = 4.36), followed by "Understanding Patients' Problems" (mean = 3.95) and "Providing Required Treatment" (mean = 3.87). "Appropriate Medical Advice" and "Treatment Interventions" were rated lower, with mean scores of 3.62 and 3.54, respectively. The overall dimension mean was 3.87, indicating a high evaluation score. However, variation in scores suggests that certain clinical competencies are more strongly associated with the profession than others.

Figure 3a and b reveal that 74.71% of students were satisfied with the profession itself, and 70% expressed satisfaction with job opportunities in Saudi Arabia. This disparity points to potential misalignment between educational experience and job market realities, warranting further exploration into employer demand and placement services.

As depicted in Figure 4, 35.29% of participants identified physical stress as the most pressing challenge, followed by extensive education requirements (25.88%), emotional stress (12.36%) and financial investment (12.36%).

Table 4 summarizes students' overall perception of physiotherapy. The profession itself was rated highly (mean = 4.5), as was overall happiness with their career choice (mean = 4.3). Scores declined for perceptions of professional opportunities (mean = 3.01) and community awareness of the field (mean = 2.7). The average across all items was 3.72, indicating a generally positive but varied outlook. Students appear optimistic about their training and identity but remain unsure about long-term societal and employment recognition.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics	N (%)
<b>Age</b>	
18 years	16 (9.41%)
19 years	38 (22.35%)
20 years	42 (24.70%)
21 years	35 (20.59%)
22 years	22 (12.94%)
23 years	6 (3.52%)
24 years	5 (2.94%)
25 years	2 (1.18%)
26 years	3 (1.76%)
28 years	1 (0.59%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	83 (48.82%)
Female	87 (51.18%)
<b>Source of information regarding the profession</b>	
Friends	44 (25.88%)
Family	73 (42.94%)
Daily news	35 (20.59%)
Social media	18 (10.59%)

Table 2: Knowledge about physiotherapy before admission

Knowledge before admission	Responses	Percentage (%)
Medical/Therapeutic Profession	95	55.88
Independent Profession	27	15.88
Future Prospects	29	17.06
Specialized profession	12	7.06
I do not know anything	7	4.12

Table 3: Knowledge on type of service offered by physiotherapists

Statement	Frequency	Mean	SD	Rank	Level
Home Physiotherapy Lessons	5	4.36	0.96	1	High
Understanding Patient' Problems	4	3.95	0.95	2	High
Providing Required Treatment	3	3.87	0.97	3	High
Appropriate Medical Advice	2	3.62	1.06	4	Middle
Treatment interventions	1	3.54	1.27	5	Middle
Overall		3.87	0.79		High

Table 4: Perception regarding choice of physiotherapy as a career

Statement frequency	Frequency	Mean	SD	Rank	Level
The Physiotherapy Profession in general	5	4.5	1.07	1	High
Happy with physiotherapy as a career choice	4	4.3	1.05	2	High
Able to continue with the requirements of the education	3	3.91	1.02	3	High
Extensive Opportunities in the professional field	2	3.01	1.06	4	Middle
Community Perception of the Profession	1	2.7	0.92	5	Middle
Overall		3.72	0.69	-	High

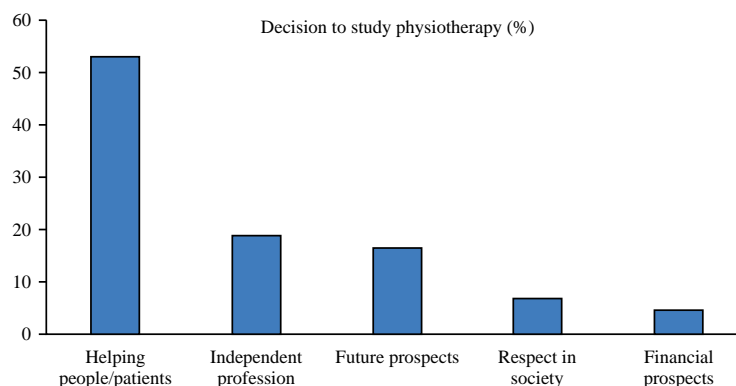


Figure 1: Decision to study physiotherapy

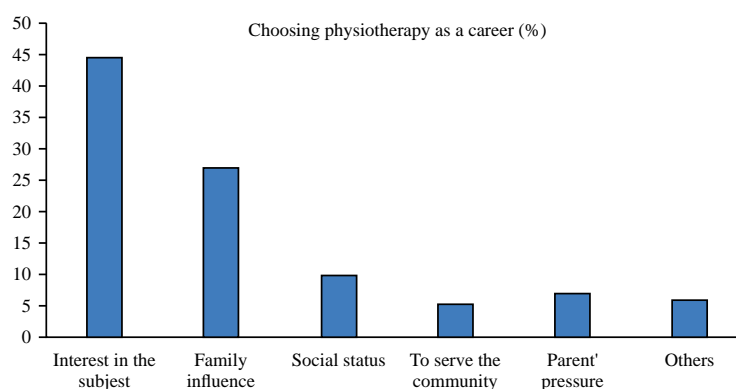


Figure 2: Reasons behind choosing physiotherapy as a career

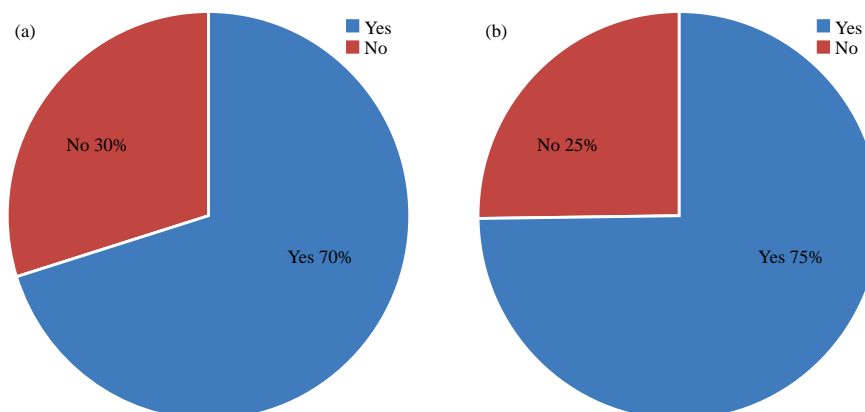


Figure 3(a-b): Satisfaction with the job opportunities and profession

## DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the key determinants of respondents' decision to choose physical therapy were their own interest in the subject, as supported by Hall *et al.* [14], followed by their family influence and to some extent the social status associated with the profession. Familiarity with the work

associated with the profession, its independence as a profession and the prospects regarding its future were deciding factors as to why the respondents thought of pursuing physiotherapy as their career. Moreover, according to the respondents, they have the ability to instruct people with dedicated home regimens and help them out. Majority of

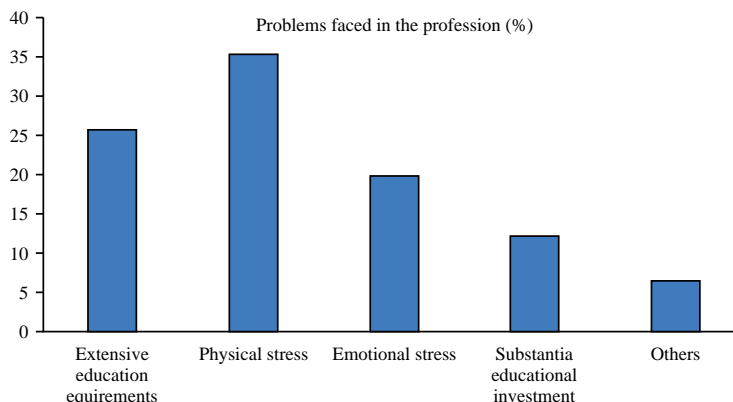


Figure 4: Problems faced in the profession

the respondents were satisfied with the job opportunities as well as the profession of physiotherapy in Saudi Arabia. This discovery supports Turner's claim that the reputation and integrity of the profession are significantly shaped by the common interests of its members [15].

This study confirmed that education and training are essential methods for developing skills and competences in decision-making and problem-solving. The findings of this study align with the results of Lindquist *et al.* [16] which indicate that older individuals had access to work prospects in physiotherapy and were considered highly trustworthy by other health professionals in practice. Furthermore, the occupation of physical therapy is transitioning into one of the most prestigious professional roles. The physiotherapy profession is currently facing a critical problem of excessive working hours which puts a continuous drain on them both physically and mentally. Optimally, an individual should choose a vocation that corresponds with their particular interests and skills. Recent empirical findings suggest that individuals' concerns about the future impede their capacity to confront the future with confidence and impact their professional choices. They articulate dissatisfaction with the disciplines they have chosen and this dissatisfaction endures even after the completion of their academic pursuits [17].

The significant gap between students' satisfaction with their profession (74.71%) and satisfaction with job opportunities (70%) aligns with findings from recent regional studies suggesting that while academic preparation is perceived positively, the professional landscape may not offer adequate employment options or career advancement opportunities [18,19]. This misalignment may discourage future engagement and contribute to early burnout or emigration among young physiotherapists.

Ohman *et al.* [20] in Canada investigated the career choices and professional preferences of a cohort of Canadian physiotherapy students studying Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation. The students cited the opportunity to secure a better job and the potential for a higher salary as the reasons for choosing this profession. Kunduracilar *et al.* [21] found that physiotherapy students choose this department for its

work chances and compatibility with their interests. Gotlib *et al.* [22] investigated the attitudes of European physiotherapy students on their chosen professions.

The influence of family as a primary information source (42.94%) highlights the role of sociocultural factors in shaping career decisions. Studies by Alshahrani *et al.* [23] and Ramdani and Mohamed [24] emphasize that cultural values, parental expectations and limited high school counseling continue to guide health career choices across the Gulf region. Targeted school-level awareness campaigns and mentorship programs led by practicing physiotherapists could help diversify and inform career choice motivations.

Moreover, the students' moderate understanding of professional services, particularly in areas like treatment planning and clinical advice, suggests that academic programs may need to strengthen clinical integration earlier in the curriculum [24]. Expanding interprofessional learning and simulation-based instruction could enhance real-world readiness.

The physical and emotional stresses reported mirror findings from global research indicating high burnout rates among healthcare students [25,26]. Institutions should consider proactive mental health resources and time-management training to mitigate these challenges and improve academic satisfaction and retention.

Finally, while this study involved only students from Majmaah University, its findings align with national and international studies, suggesting broader applicability. However, to better understand evolving perceptions across Saudi Arabia, future studies should include a more diverse sample from multiple institutions and track students' changing attitudes over time.

## CONCLUSION

This study revealed that physiotherapy students in Saudi Arabia generally hold positive attitudes toward their profession and demonstrate a fair level of knowledge. However, challenges such as limited job opportunities, professional stressors and variable awareness about career pathways remain prominent. To address these concerns,



academic institutions should strengthen career counseling, enhance clinical exposure and introduce interprofessional learning early in the curriculum. Educational policy-makers should also focus on building public awareness and improving job market integration for physiotherapy graduates. Future initiatives must consider sociocultural influences, career development strategies and student support services to better align academic training with professional realities.

### Limitations

This study was limited by its single-university sample and exclusion of postgraduate students, affecting generalizability. Self-reported data may have introduced bias. External influences on career perception, such as peer or societal expectations, were not assessed. Language barriers, question interpretation and participant fatigue during data collection were also not addressed. Future research should involve diverse institutions, include qualitative methods and explore sociocultural and academic factors influencing physiotherapy students' perspectives for broader, more accurate insights.

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