VER
Vascular & Endovascular Review

Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Plastic Surgery Among Medical Students at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Unfortunately, plastic surgery is seen as cosmetic. Medical students and the public are guilty of this misperception. Educating these students can help future doctors make better medical referrals. The objective of our study was to explore the perspectives and attitudes of the students about plastic surgery. The conclusion may identify the particular concerns about issues of their opinions that we could aim to improve and adapt for our surgical education.

Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive questionnaire-based study was conducted to study the perception of the medical students in the Faculty of Medicine of University of Tabuk toward plastic surgery for the academic year 2024–2025. A self-administered questionnaire was used in the survey. Results were descriptively presented in terms of percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Results: The overall student perception was 68.8%. The average perception level in relation to any academic year from the second to the sixth year was 66.6%, 66.1%, 65.4%, 72.0%, and 75.1% and significantly different ($p = 0.001$), respectively. There were no statistically significant differences in the attitudes of students with respect to gender or GPA, however. The mean level of attitude (for the whole group) was 3.8 on a scale of 5. There is no statistically significant difference in student attitude by gender, year of study, or GPA. Student source of information was social media (66.5%).

Conclusion: students had an acceptable perception and attitude towards plastic surgery. Social media was identified as a significant source of information and thus plastic surgery subjects should be covered early on in the curricula of second, third, and fourth years..

KEYWORDS: medical students, perception, attitudes, plastic surgery, social media, curriculum integration

How to Cite: Mohammad Shawir , Mohammed Elnibras, Haneen Brnawi, M. Amari, Roaa Ghazi Khan (2025) Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Plastic Surgery Among Medical Students at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia, Vascular and Endovascular Review, Vol.8, No.16s, 94-103.

INTRODUCTION

Hisham Al Ghamdi et al. reported that after graduation, medical students have difficulty selecting a specialty that suits their personality and personal standards. We must make such crucial decisions with clear insight. In addition, raising awareness in this area is crucial to avoid confusion for future doctors through a proper medical referral process [1]. Shubham Gupta et al. mentioned that plastic surgery is a diverse specialty that treats all body regions, age groups, and tissue types; clinical challenges vary from trauma and burns to congenital defects and cancer. Although as much as half the workload of plastic surgery units may consist of trauma surgery, the specialty is often misperceived to revolve around cosmetics, something perhaps magnified by mainstream and social media [2]. The misconception about plastic, reconstructive, and aesthetic surgery (PRAS) is widely spread in Canada and Saudi Arabia as mentioned by Fahad Aljindan et al. [3]. Most of the students (78.3%) reported poor knowledge regarding plastic surgery in the western region of Saudi Arabia, and only 31.1% expressed their wishes to pursue PRAS as a career [3]. According to Sevasti Panagiota Glynoua, many UK-based medical schools' curricula underestimate PRAS, leading to misinformed graduates. This results in improper surgical referrals, poor career choices, and a burden on the health care system [4]. The first Saudi study in this field was conducted by Khalid Ali Fayi in 2018, who found that the primary sources of information for students were family, friends, and social media [5]. Misconceptions persist in Saudi Arabia, and Canadian students also showed limited awareness of PRAS, often associating it only with burns and cosmetic procedures rather than hand or craniofacial surgery [6].

Other groups, including the public, primary care physicians, and residents, also hold these misconceptions. Mortada et al. reported that perception and awareness were higher in female students with a higher GPA, while more male students were likely to pursue a plastic surgery career [7]. In Nigeria, W.L. Adeyemo et al. found that 78.5% of their population had some

knowledge of facial plastic procedures, while only 13% were unwilling to undergo such procedures [8]. Globally, many countries recommend large-scale studies. The inclusion of PRAS in curricula has enhanced attitudes, perceptions, and preferences among final-year students compared to non-exposed students [9]. Social media and the internet have altered perceptions, career prospects, and referral patterns, leading to recommendations that only certified board plastic surgeons disseminate information online [10].

In June 2024, a UK national survey concluded that a unified curriculum could address disparities among medical schools [2]. A UK study found that variety (25%), surgical difficulty (15%), and immediate impact on patient quality of life (12%) were the main attractions of PRAS [2]. Terouz Pasha et al. [11] identified deterrents such as competitive selection (41%), work-life balance (15%), and length of training (12%). Harry V. M. Spiers et al. showed that a one-day course significantly improved perceptions and confidence [12]. Despite PRAS diversity, many students believed orthopaedic surgeons performed hand surgery [13]. H. Bhachoo et al. noted that more studies are needed to assess teaching outcomes [14]. Stereotypes of surgeons and lengthy training programs can deter students [15,16], though short teaching interventions have positive influence [17].

The purpose of our study is to evaluate students' perceptions and attitudes toward plastic surgery. Results may provide insight into areas of concern regarding their views, which can improve and update our surgical curriculum. Importantly, no prior study has assessed perceptions among Tabuk medical students, and this research aims to fill that gap.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Study Design

To explore attitudes toward plastic surgery among medical students, we carried out a cross-sectional descriptive questionnaire study. This design was selected, because it facilitates the gathering of data at one point in time, and it offers a view of students' knowledge, perceptions and attitudes about this growing subspeciality. The study sought to better understand the level of understanding of medical students and to reveal where misconceptions exist that the curriculum may need to be corrected.

Study Population

The study took place in the city of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia, in the academic year 2024–2025. The population considered were undergraduate medical students who belong in the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Tabuk. To give a proper consideration for the answers, we were not focusing on students at the preparatory year, as this is a foundation level medical preparatory course in a health college and not part of the medical school course to receive the students' education. Internship students were also excluded because they had started their hospital rotations already, and the bulk of them had already decided on their careers. We selected students from the second to sixth year to capture perceptions at different stages of medical education.

Study Instrument

Data was obtained using self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaire was formulated after a thorough evaluation of the published literature concerning students' attitudes and perceptions on plastic surgery [1]. The content validity of the draft questionnaire was confirmed through expert surgeons from the Department of Surgery (University of Tabuk). Refining the questions and ensuring relevant, clear and comprehensive were addressed through the incorporation of their feedback. To test the reliability of the questionnaire, forty students were pilot-tested. Cronbach's alpha, a commonly used statistical test for reliability, was used for internal consistency. This procedure guaranteed validity and reliability of this instrument for use in the larger study population. Included in the survey were demographic information, knowledge of, attitudes toward, and sources of plastic surgery.

Data Collection

Respondents were invited to participate voluntarily, while questionnaires were administered at scheduled academic intervals. Participants were anonymous and no personal identifiers were collected. It was an approach to encourage honest response and reduce any bias.

Data Analysis

Data were entered and analyzed in SPSS version 22. Results were presented by descriptive statistics including percentages, means and standard deviations. Differences among groups were examined with inferential statistics. A t-test was calculated on variance between gender changes and a one-way ANOVA on variance between academic years and various GPA categories. Values smaller than 0.05 were considered statistically significant. We observed that, based on our statistical analysis, we could deduce if the differences we've observed to a variety of perspectives, were significant or accidental

variations.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research followed and maintained the ethical norms of investigating human subjects in human research. Approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Tabuk University (Permission number: UT-447-252-2024). Participation was completely voluntary, and the questionnaire also indicated informed consent. Responses were free of any data that could have made a respondent's identity known. Students were told they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

This approach utilized a well-structured questionnaire, a representative sample of medical students, and sound statistical analysis to assess attitudes and perceptions of plastic surgery. By excluding preparatory and internship students, focusing on validated instruments for the sample, and meeting ethical guidelines, the research ensured that its findings were reliable, relevant, and will be relevant to curriculum development at Tabuk University.

RESULTS

Response Rate and Demographics

A total of 424 medical students voluntarily participated in our study out of 859 eligible students, yielding a response rate of 49.3%. Male students represented 31.1% (n = 132), while female students accounted for 68.9% (n = 292). Table 1, summarizing the demographic distribution, also indicates its overall perception performance by gender, academic year, and GPA status.

Levels of Knowledge and Perception

The overall score across the entire group of students in perception was 68.8%. In terms of gender analysis, male students rated 69.7% and female students 68.4% with no statistically significant difference ($p = 0.810$). Perceived rating ranged widely by year of academic year, as indicated in Table 1. Second-year students scored 66.6%, third-year 66.1%, fourth-year 65.4%, fifth-year 72.0% and sixth-year 75.1%. The difference was significant ($p = 0.001$), showing that the perception improved from grade to grade of the medical program. For the examination of perception based on academic GPA, no significant differences were found ($p = 0.480$). Among students with GPA levels between 1 and 5, 59.7% to 69.8% were considered high, while the majority of students who scored the highest in the GPA category (n = 306) achieved 69.5%. Results indicate that academic performance has no impact on perception level.

Attitudes Toward Plastic Surgery

The overall attitude score in the entire group was 3.8 (out of 5). The mean scores for both male and female students were 3.8, for male and female students, statistically no difference was observed ($p = 0.294$). And attitudes per year within the years of the study were also nearly unchanged, where students' attitude scores were only a 3.9 in second year, and 3.8 in third, fourth, fifth, sixth. Differences were also not significant ($p = 0.479$). GPA-based attitudes were also not significantly varying ($p = 0.650$). Among those with grades anywhere between 1 to 5 GPA, students scored between 3.6 and 3.9, and most were around 3.8. We illustrate these findings in Table 2 which points to demographic variable consistency of attitudes.

Perception by Specific Variables

Examination of the items identified showed a heterogeneity across the knowledge dimension as stated in Table 3. About 63.2% of students thought "plastic" was synonymous with "cosmetic." A larger proportion (76.9%) accepted that plastic surgery is not restricted to some particular organ, and 75.9% acknowledged that plastic surgeons manage emergency cases. As for institutional practice, 73.1% of students said cosmetic surgeries are performed in Ministry of Health hospitals.

Referral Patterns and Competency

Regarding referral patterns, 61.6% recognized plastic surgery as the specialty for a child that has a facial laceration, and 72.9% that jaw fractures should be treated by maxillofacial and plastic surgeons. When treating nerve injuries, 69.3% indicated plastic surgery as the appropriate specialty. Breast reconstruction after cancer surgery was correctly identified by 85.1% of students, the highest perception score. By contrast, only 41.0% had recognized plastic surgery as the specialty that treated burn injuries, indicating a significant knowledge gap.

Attitudes on Selected Variables

The attitude items analysis indicated several significant trends, with some of these insights found in Table 4. About 69.4% of students expressed an interest in a future career in plastic surgery. A majority (75.3%) felt plastic surgery was favoured by famous and wealthy individuals. About 65.7 percent noticed that social and religious acceptance of plastic surgery were in evidence. There were also negative attitudes. For instance, 77.6% felt that to undergo cosmetic surgery was to feel shame and shy, and 77.8% felt that cosmetic surgery is a waste of money. To date, the presence of positive attitudes emerged in the perception that it can enhance self-image (78.3%) and that the specialty is lucrative (80.6%). Moreover, 82.5% reported women use cosmetic surgery more frequently than men, and 78.9% believed that younger populations are more accepting of cosmetic procedures.

Sources of Information

The sources of information on plastic surgery are tabulated in Table 5 and illustrated in Figure 1. Two-thirds of students reported social media as their main source, with 66.5% explaining it primarily. Digital media plays an important role in shaping perceptions and attitudes, with platforms like TikTok and social media outlets like Twitter/X being particularly impactful. Less cited were traditional sources such as lectures and textbooks, and clinical rotations, particularly among preclinical students.

Summary of Findings

Overall, this study shows that medical students of Tabuk University showed mid-level perception and attitudes toward plastic surgery. Perception was enhanced notably during the clinical year, especially in the fifth and sixth level students, but attitudes did not differ when the sample was divided by the demographic covariates. Knowledge about referrals was highest for breast reconstruction and lowest for burn management. The major source of information indicated was social media, necessitating structured curriculum integration, and teaching led by experts in overcoming misconceptions.

Table 1. Comparison between Perception and Demographic data

Variables	N	Perception %	P value
Overall	424	68.8%	
Gender			0.810
Male	132	69.7%	
Female	292	68.4%	
Academic year			0.001
2nd year	118	66.6%	
3rd year	77	66.1%	
4th year	72	65.4%	
5th year	91	72.0%	
6th year	66	75.1%	
Academic GPA			0.480
1	8	59.7%	
2	19	69.6%	
3	34	65.7%	
4	57	69.8%	

5	306	69.5%	

Table 2. Comparison between Attitude and Demographic data

Variables	N	Attitude (out of 5)	P value
Overall	424	3.8	
Gender			0.294
Male	132	3.8	
Female	292	3.8	
Academic year			0.479
2nd year	118	3.9	
3rd year	77	3.8	
4th year	72	3.8	
5th year	91	3.8	
6th year	66	3.8	
Academic GPA			0.650
1	8	3.6	
2	19	3.9	
3	34	3.8	
4	57	3.9	
5	306	3.8	

Table 3. Perception items for the Whole group

No.	Variables	N	Knowledge %
1	Is the name “plastic” the same as “cosmetic?”	268	63.2%
2	Is plastic surgery limited to specific organs of the body?	326	76.9%
3	Do plastic surgeons manage emergency cases?	322	75.9%
4	Cosmetic operations are carried out by Ministry of Health hospitals	310	73.1%
5	Referral of a 6-year-old child with facial laceration	261	61.6%
6	Referral of a patient with jaw fracture	309	72.9%
7	Referral of a lady with wrist injury (median nerve laceration)	294	69.3%
8	Referral for breast reconstruction after cancer surgery	361	85.1%

9	Referral for second-degree burn on the hand	174	41.0%

Table 4. Attitude items for the Whole group

No.	Variables	Attitude %
1	Wish to pursue plastic surgery as a future career	69.4%
2	Plastic surgery is favored by famous and rich people	75.3%
3	Plastic surgery accepted socially and religiously	65.7%
4	Performing cosmetic surgery causes shame and shyness	77.6%
5	Women seek cosmetic surgery more often than men	82.5%
6	Younger populations increasingly accept cosmetic procedures	78.9%
7	Cosmetic surgery is a waste of money	77.8%
8	Plastic surgery is more about beauty and better look	79.5%
9	Cosmetic surgery can benefit a person's self-image	78.3%
10	Plastic surgery is financially attractive	80.6%

Table 5. Sources of Information

Source of Information	Percentage (%)
Social media	66.5%
TikTok	26.9%
Twitter/X	20.0%
Lectures	Lower share
Textbooks	Lower share
Clinical rotations	Lower share

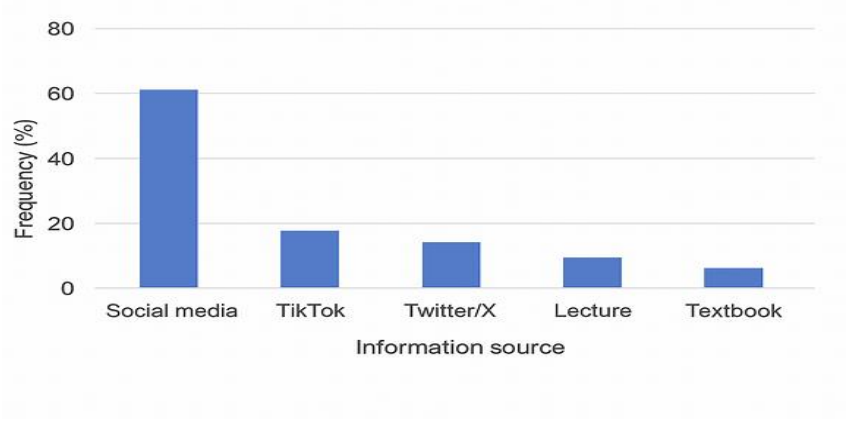

Figure 1. Sources of information about plastic surgery among medical students

DISCUSSION

This study sheds light on medical students' attitudes and perceptions on plastic, reconstructive and aesthetic surgery (PRAS) at Tabuk University. The overall perception score of 68.8% indicates moderate knowledge, superior to most regional and international survey findings. In particular, Aljindan et al. (2019) revealed that 78.3% of students were found to possess poor knowledge about plastic surgery in their western Saudi Arabian area and only 31.1% had a high level of interest in practicing PRAS as a career [18]. In contrast, in our survey, we found a positive perspective, especially among fifth- and sixth-year students, indicating that the exposure of students to the curriculum for clinical years promotes awareness.

CURRICULUM IMPACT

The remarkable improvement of the perception of the clinical-year students (72.0 per cent fifth year and 75.1 per cent sixth year) when contrasted with preclinical students (65–66 per cent) showed structured teaching and clinical rotations as important. Jabaiti et al. reported similar findings (2022) that, if PRAS were included in medical school, the final year students would show greater attitudes and career preferences, reflecting that [19]. The findings of our study support the recommendation that introducing PRAS topics at an earlier point in curriculum would enhance knowledge and referral competency, particularly in areas such as burn management where perceptions are weakest (41%).

Patterns of Referral and Competency

Referral knowledge was different for each clinical scenario. The majority of students (85.1%) identified breast reconstruction after cancer surgery, similar to Yaacobi et al. (2020) which claimed enhanced proficiency of Israeli medical learners past 95% [20]. In contrast, the percentage of our students who considered plastic surgery to be the specialty for burn management decreased to 41%, whereas 55% referred to it in UK studies (Spiers et al., 2018) [21]. This discrepancy could perhaps be attributed to the position of burn management teaching in later years of the school curriculum, and an emphasis on early exposure may also bridge this gap. Moderate referral competency on trauma related cases. For instance, 61.6% of participants had a specialized knowledge of the specialized category for facial laceration that included plastic surgery, and 69.3% mentioned plastic surgeons for median nerve repair. These numbers are above those that were found in South Africa, where a mere 36% of learners linked hand operation to plastic surgery (Makhanya & Madiba, 2021) [22]. Such comparisons further underscore the role of rotation and practical experience in determining the accuracy of a referral.

Influence of Social Media

Perhaps most surprising, with 66.5% of students reporting social media usage as their main source of information, TikTok and Twitter/X were the main sources. This aligns with Ford et al. according to researchers in 2020, over 50% of medical students have experienced that social media sites are their primary place of exposure for plastic surgery [23]. Social media can enhance awareness among users, but it risks reinforcing misconceptions, especially when PRAS is associated with cosmetic procedures. One study reported that 63.2% of students used “plastic” to mean “cosmetic,” a phenomenon influenced by media coverage. As Fraser et al. (2017) suggested, this highlights the importance of expert led dissemination of accurate information (e.g. what we see in the media) [24].

Attitudes Toward Plastic Surgery

We found a 5-point Likert attitude in our study to be on average higher, at a mean score of 3.8 out of 5. Importantly, 69.4% of students had an interest in PRAS as a career compared to the 34.1%, which was mentioned by Aljindan et al. (2021) [25]. This indicates increasing excitement in the specialty especially among the Saudi medical students, which may be led by more prominence of PRAS through clinical training and its visibility in social media. Nonetheless, some negative perceptions continue to prevail. 77.6% of students also thought cosmetic surgery leads to a feeling of shame and shyness in them; 77.8% considered it a waste of money. These results are counter to the findings in Jabaiti et al. (2022), reported [26] that clinical exposure decreases negative perceptions. The persisting in our group of respondents could be attributed to sociocultural practices, such that an attention to the ethical and societal dimension of the PRAS should be a priority in medical education.

Comparative International Outlook

Internationally, barriers to the pursuit of PRAS as a profession were competitive selection mechanisms, work-life balance and training duration (Pasha et al., 2021) [27]. Although our study specifically did not address these aspects, the high proportion of students who are interested in PRAS means that at least three variables, including

the exposure to the curriculum and social media, are likely to outweigh long-term or competitiveness worries. Spiers & Giele (2019) showed that even brief interventions with a brief duration, such as a one-day course, can increase perceptions and confidence in PRAS [28]. Our results are consistent with this, as the higher clinical year exposure scored the higher perception. Similar short courses or workshops, introduced in the preclinical years could ease this knowledge deficit and prevent misconceptions associated with PRAS.

LIMITATIONS

However, there are some limitations of this study. First, the use of self-administered questionnaires may induce response bias. Second, the study was performed at one institution with limited generalizability to the Saudi medical school literature. Third, although attitudes were quantified, qualitative information on career interest or negative attitudes were not considered. Interviews or focus groups could have better understanding in future studies.

CONCLUSION

In summary, medical students of Tabuk university showed a moderate level of beliefs and positive attitudes towards plastic surgery, with average improvement for clinical years. Referral competency was strongest for breast reconstruction, while it was lowest for burn management, revealing opportunities for curriculum implementation. Social media was cited as both the primary source of information, and the key threat. Comparative observation with national and foreign literature reveals that awareness of the content and expert instruction plays a vital role in enhancing knowledge, attitudes, and the accuracy of referrals. The integration of PRAS early in a subject or Programme and structured workshops and quality information sources being used will help in dispelling myths and assisting in good career decisions is suggested.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study indicate that medical students in Tabuk University have a better perception of plastic, reconstructive, and aesthetic surgery in comparison to other report, yet there can be more. We propose to incorporate structured PRAS outline in the second to fourth years of studies, early curriculum integration will strengthen knowledge and referral competency. Educated people should instruct students, as basic science students utilize social media, including TikTok and Twitter, for the vast majority of information. Additionally, further exploration of student motivation to pursue PRAS as a career in the field should be conducted in line with the positive primary findings of this study. Finally, because of the low perception of burn injuries, conventional lecture about burn management should be replaced by more interactive practice including team-based learning and problem-based learning, which may improve perception and performance in learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors sincerely thank the medical students of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Tabuk, for their voluntary participation and dedication to this research. In addition, the authors gratefully acknowledge the Faculty of Medicine itself for providing institutional support and an encouraging academic environment that made this study possible. The collective commitment of both the students and faculty has provided valuable insights that will inform curriculum development and contribute to the advancement of surgical education.

Ethical Approval

This study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Tabuk, Ministry of Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Approval No. UT-447-252-2024). The approval was granted on 3 November 2024 and formally signed by the Head of the Local Research Ethics Committee.

Funding

No external funding was received for this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

Data Availability

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to institutional restrictions but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. All data supporting the findings of this study have been anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

Abbreviations

PRAS: Plastic, Reconstructive, and Aesthetic Surgery

MOH: Ministry of Health

SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

TBL: Team-Based Learning

PBL: Problem-Based Learning

GPA: Grade Point Average.

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