Research Article GU J Sci, Part B, 14(2): 275-285 (2026)

Gazi University

Journal of Science

PART B: ART, HUMANITIES, DESIGN AND PLANNING

http://dergipark.gov.tr/gujsb

Investigation of Occupational Health and Safety Perceptions of Final-Year Students in the Department of Industrial Design

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Article Info

Received: 16/04/2026
Accepted:03/06/2026

Keywords

Education
Higher education
Industrial design
Occupational health and safety
OHS perception

Abstract

Education is widely regarded as one of the most effective tools for reducing occupational accidents and occupational diseases. Since human factors constitute one of the primary causes of workplace accidents, increasing individuals' awareness and sensitivity toward occupational risks has become a critical component of sustainable occupational health and safety (OHS) practices. In this context, universities play a strategic role in developing safety awareness among future professionals before they enter working life.

The present study aims to examine the occupational health and safety perceptions of final-year industrial design students and to evaluate their knowledge levels, safety culture perspectives, and awareness regarding OHS practices prior to graduation. The study was conducted with 66 final-year students enrolled in the Department of Industrial Design at the Faculty of Architecture, Gazi University, during the 2024–2025 Spring Semester. Data were collected through a face-to-face survey using a 24-item, five-point Likert-type Occupational Health and Safety Education Scale developed within the scope of the research project coded FPD-2024-9769.

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed to examine the relationship between students' OHS perceptions and demographic variables such as gender, parental education level, and occupational accident experience. The findings revealed no statistically significant differences between demographic variables and students' OHS perception levels ($p > .05$). However, the results demonstrated that although students possessed relatively high theoretical awareness regarding occupational health and safety, significant deficiencies existed in practical applications such as emergency preparedness, fire drills, and personal protective equipment (PPE) training.

The study indicates that current OHS education in industrial design programs remains largely theoretical and that stronger integration of practical and experience-based safety training is required. In this respect, the study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the importance of early, continuous, and practice-oriented OHS education specifically tailored to design-based and workshop-oriented learning environments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Occupational health and safety (OHS) is a multidimensional field that encompasses the systematic analysis of working environments, the identification and mitigation of hazards and risks, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of preventive measures. In Türkiye, OHS practices have been formalized within a legal framework through Law No. 6331 on Occupational Health and Safety (Alpagut, 2013). Despite these regulatory efforts, occupational accidents and diseases remain among the most pressing challenges of working life, with far-reaching individual, societal, and economic consequences (Akıllı & Aydoğdu, 2013; Baybora, 2012). Each year, a considerable number of workers lose their lives or suffer permanent disabilities due to occupational incidents, while productivity losses and workday disruptions

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impose a substantial burden on national economies (Baybora, 2012; Çiçek & Öçal, 2017). Notably, existing evidence suggests that approximately 98% of occupational accidents are preventable, underscoring the critical importance of proactive and preventive OHS practices (Çiçek & Öçal, 2017).
Educational institutions are crucial contexts for fostering OHS awareness, as they are the primary environments where future members of the workforce are trained (Bağcı et al., 2024). However, these institutions are not exempt from risks. School-related incidents may include falls, transportation accidents, poisoning, and injuries associated with the use of cutting or piercing tools, flammable materials, or hazardous chemicals in workshop settings (Canoğlu et al., 2023). Therefore, implementing effective OHS practices in educational settings is essential not only for ensuring immediate safety but also for cultivating long-term safety awareness and behavior (Cereci & Çetin, 2019; Şener et al., 2023).

While ensuring safe and healthy environments is primarily the responsibility of employers under legal regulations, the effectiveness of OHS practices ultimately depends on individuals' awareness and behavioral compliance (Kılkış & Demir, 2012; Kol & Özbek, 2021). OHS awareness refers to individuals' capacity to recognize risks, adopt appropriate preventive measures, and develop safe working habits (Gökçe, 2020). Importantly, this awareness is not formed spontaneously; rather, it is cultivated through structured educational processes and practical experiences (Kol & Özbek, 2021; Uzun, 2019; Yivli, 2018). A strong OHS awareness enhances individuals' ability to assess risks accurately and plays a key role in preventing occupational accidents (Gökçe, 2020; Keskin & Çavuş, 2020). In this context, safety culture can also be understood through organizational models that emphasize shared attitudes, perceptions, and safety-oriented behaviors among individuals and institutions (Reason, 1997).

Despite the growing body of literature on OHS awareness, existing studies have largely focused on employees in industrial or high-risk sectors, with comparatively limited attention given to students as prospective members of the workforce. Moreover, research on OHS in educational settings often emphasizes theoretical knowledge while overlooking potential discrepancies between theoretical understanding and practical application. In particular, there is a notable lack of empirical evidence addressing how discipline-specific training environments—such as design studios and workshops in industrial design programs—shape students' perceptions of OHS and safety culture.

Addressing this gap is critical, as industrial design students are frequently exposed to practical learning environments involving physical tools, machinery, and materials, thereby increasing their risk of exposure to potential hazards. Understanding how these students perceive OHS, and how their perceptions are influenced by educational practices, can provide valuable insights for improving both curriculum design and safety training strategies.

Accordingly, this study aims to determine the OHS perception levels of industrial design students and to evaluate their pre-graduation knowledge and perspectives on safety culture. By examining both theoretical and practical dimensions of OHS awareness, this study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it extends the focus of OHS research to a relatively underexplored population—students in practice-oriented disciplines. Second, it provides a comparative perspective on the alignment (or misalignment) between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Third, it identifies institutional and experiential factors that shape OHS awareness beyond demographic characteristics.

In line with these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the main differences between industrial design students' theoretical knowledge and their practical applications regarding occupational health and safety?
2. How do the timing and content of OHS education in educational institutions influence the development of students' safety culture?
3. Beyond demographic variables, what institutional and practice-based factors shape students' OHS awareness?

2. METHOD

This section provides a comprehensive description of the study population and sample, the data-collection instrument, and the methods used for data analysis.

2.1. Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of senior students enrolled in the Department of Industrial Design at the Faculty of Architecture, Gazi University, Ankara, during the Spring Semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. The study focuses on measuring students' perceptions of occupational health and safety (OHS). Given the target group's accessibility, the research was conducted with this specific population to obtain a comprehensive understanding of pre-graduation OHS awareness among future professionals.

2.2. Data Collection Instrument

In this study, an Occupational Health and Safety Education Scale was used as the data-collection instrument. The scale consists of 24 items and is structured using a five-point Likert-type format. Responses range from (5) "Strongly Agree" to (1) "Strongly Disagree." The questionnaire was administered through face-to-face data collection to ensure higher response accuracy and completeness.

2.2.1. Scale Development Process

The Occupational Health and Safety Education Scale used in this study was developed within the scope of the scientific research project titled "Investigation of Occupational Health and Safety Perceptions of Final-Year Students in the Department of Industrial Design" supported by the Gazi University Scientific Research Projects Coordination Unit (Project Code: FPD-2024-9769).

The development process for the scale was based on an extensive review of the literature on occupational health and safety awareness, safety culture, risk perception, and safety practices in educational institutions and practice-oriented learning environments. Particular attention was given to the workshop, laboratory, and studio conditions specific to industrial design education.

Initially, an item pool was generated in accordance with the study's objectives and the characteristics of the target population. The draft items were then reviewed by academics in occupational health and safety and industrial design education for clarity, content relevance, and contextual appropriateness. Following expert evaluations, the scale was finalized as a 24-item instrument structured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."

The internal consistency reliability of the Occupational Health and Safety Education Scale was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The analysis indicated a moderate but acceptable level of internal consistency for exploratory educational research purposes (Cronbach's $\alpha = .661$).

2.3. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software package. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between students' OHS perceptions and selected demographic variables, including gender, parental education levels, and residential status. The analysis aimed to identify potential differences and associations to better understand the factors influencing OHS awareness among students.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the statistical findings from the analysis of data collected from 66 participants. The results are reported descriptively based on the tables and figures.

3.1. Demographic Findings

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of the Participants*

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	48	72.7
	Male	18	27.3
	Total	66	100
Working Duration	1–2 hours	1	1.5
	3–4 hours	2	3.0
	5–7.5 hours	13	19.7
	8–10 hours	50	75.8
	Total	66	100
Occupational Accident Status	Yes	12	18.2
	No	54	81.8
	Total	66	100
Mother's Education Level	Primary School	4	6.1
	Secondary School	9	13.6
	High School	25	37.9
	University	28	42.4
	Total	66	100
Father's Education Level	Primary School	2	3.0
	Secondary School	4	6.1
	High School	31	47.0
	University	29	43.9
	Total	66	100

The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. Of the 66 participants, 48 (72.7%) were female and 18 (27.3%) were male, indicating a predominance of female students in the sample.

Regarding working duration, the majority of participants (75.8%) reported working between 8–10 hours, while smaller proportions reported working 5–7.5 hours (19.7%), 3–4 hours (3.0%), and 1–2 hours (1.5%).
In terms of occupational accident experience, 12 participants (18.2%) reported having experienced a work-related accident, whereas 54 participants (81.8%) indicated no such experience.

Parental education levels showed that mothers' education was distributed as follows: primary school (6.1%), secondary school (13.6%), high school (37.9%), and university (42.4%). Similarly, fathers' education levels were primary school (3.0%), secondary school (6.1%), high school (47.0%), and university (43.9%). These findings indicate that a considerable proportion of participants come from relatively well-educated family backgrounds.

3.2. Perceptual Findings Related to Educational and Workplace Contexts

Table 2. *Independent Samples t-Test Results for OHS Perceptions by Gender*

Variable	Group	n	M	SD	SE	t	df	p
OHS Perception	Female	48	3.18	0.37	0.053	1.057	64	.295
	Male	18	3.07	0.32	0.074			

The independent-samples t-test results presented in Table 2 indicate no statistically significant difference in OHS perception levels by gender ($t(64) = 1.057$, $p = .295$). Although female participants ($M = 3.18$) reported slightly higher perception levels compared to male participants ($M = 3.07$), this difference is not statistically meaningful.

Table 3. *Independent Samples t-Test Results for OHS Perceptions by Occupational Accident Experience*

Variable	Group	n	M	SD	SE	t	df	p
OHS Perception	Yes	12	3.14	0.57	0.060	-0.071	64	.943
	No	54	3.15	0.57	0.032			

Similarly, as shown in Table 3, no significant difference was found in OHS perception levels based on occupational accident experience ($t(64) = -0.071$, $p = .943$). Participants who had not experienced an occupational accident ($M = 3.15$) demonstrated perception levels nearly identical to those of participants who had ($M = 3.14$).

Overall Statistical Summary

The results of the statistical analyses indicate that there are no significant differences in students' OHS perception levels across the examined demographic variables ($p > .05$):

- Gender: $t(64) = 1.057$, $p = .295$
- Occupational accident experience: $t(64) = -0.071$, $p = .943$
- Working duration: $F(3,62) = 0.152$, $p > .05$
- Mother's education level: $F(3,62) = 1.586$, $p > .05$
- Father's education level: $F(3,62) = 1.022$, $p > .05$

These findings suggest that demographic characteristics do not play a significant role in shaping students' OHS perceptions.

3.3. Students' Core Perceptions (Likert-Based Findings)

The descriptive analysis of Likert-scale items provides important insights into students' perceptions and experiences regarding OHS. An examination of the findings in Table 4 provides important insights into students' perceptions and experiences regarding Occupational Health and Safety (OHS).

Table 4. *Students' Main Views*

Statement (Summary)	**Participation Rate (Agree + Strongly Agree)**	**Key Findings**
Risk Awareness (I know the risks at the faculty and internship site)	75% (A: 33%, SA: 42%)	Students have a high level of risk awareness.
Environmental Hazard Awareness (I am aware of elements that pose occupational health and safety threats, e.g., air, noise)	88% (A: 32%, SA: 56%)	Students are aware of environmental hazards.
Perceived Productivity (Paying attention to OHS increases work efficiency and quality)	94% (A: 17%, SA: 77%)	Students have a strong belief in the contribution of OHS to productivity.
Sensitivity to OHS Rules (As a student, I show the necessary sensitivity to OHS rules)	74% (A: 27%, SA: 47%)	Students expressed willingness to comply with safety rules.
Receiving OHS Training at Faculty (I received training before the last class)	24% (A: 4%, SA: 20%)	56% responded "Strongly Disagree," indicating a lack of early training.
Appropriateness of Early Training (Training before the last class is appropriate)	93% (A: 17%, SA: 76%)	Students think the timing of the training is inappropriate.
PPE Application Training (Training on PPE at faculty)	5% (A: 4%, SA: 1%)	61% responded "Strongly Disagree," indicating that practical PPE training is largely absent.
Emergency Drill (Fire drills conducted during university training)	1% (A: 1%, SA: 0%)	91% responded "Strongly Disagree," indicating drills were almost never conducted.
Knowing Emergency Assembly Points (I know the emergency assembly points at the faculty)	13% (A: 4%, SA: 9%)	Practical knowledge on emergency situations is insufficient (61% strongly disagreed).

A substantial majority of students reported a high level of risk awareness, with 75% indicating awareness of potential hazards in both faculty and internship environments. Similarly, awareness of environmental hazards was notably high (88%), suggesting that students are generally conscious of workplace risks such as noise and air quality. Perceptions regarding the impact of OHS on performance were particularly strong. An overwhelming 94% of participants agreed that adherence to OHS principles enhances work efficiency and quality. In addition, 74% of students reported demonstrating sensitivity to OHS rules, reflecting a generally positive attitude toward safe behavior.

However, notable deficiencies emerge regarding the timing and practical implementation of OHS education. Only 24% of participants reported receiving OHS training before their final year, while a large proportion reported not having been exposed to such training at earlier stages. In contrast, 93% of students stated that OHS education should be provided before the final year, highlighting a clear mismatch between expectations and current practice.

From a practical training perspective, the findings reveal significant shortcomings. Only 5% of students reported receiving hands-on training related to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), indicating a substantial lack of applied learning opportunities. Similarly, emergency preparedness appears to be highly inadequate. A striking 91% of participants reported that no fire drills had been conducted during their university education. Furthermore, awareness of emergency assembly points was very low, with only 13% of participants indicating they knew these locations. The majority of students reported a lack of knowledge in this area, underscoring insufficient preparedness for emergencies.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that while students exhibit a high level of theoretical awareness of OHS, their practical experience and preparedness—particularly regarding emergency procedures and applied safety training—remain limited.

4. LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted with final-year students from a single university, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other institutions and disciplines. Second, the sample size was relatively limited. Third, the study relied on self-reported perceptions obtained through a survey instrument, which may introduce subjective bias. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study reflects students' perceptions at a specific point in time and does not allow for longitudinal evaluation of changes in OHS awareness and behavior.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the occupational health and safety (OHS) perceptions of senior students in the Industrial Design Department, with a particular focus on whether the courses they have taken contribute to raising awareness. Education in OHS aims to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to perform their tasks safely, with the ultimate goal of preventing accidents, injuries, and occupational diseases (Kılkış & Demir, 2012). In this regard, OHS training plays a critical role in helping individuals identify potential hazards and increasing their overall awareness levels (Keskin & Çavuş, 2020). Furthermore, such training contributes to the development of a safety culture within institutions; early exposure to OHS education is particularly effective in fostering long-term safety-oriented behaviors.

The study's findings indicate that industrial design students exhibit a relatively high level of theoretical awareness of the importance of OHS. A substantial proportion of participants reported being aware of potential hazards in the working environment (Taşdemir & Gür, 2021) and acknowledged that adherence to OHS principles enhances both productivity and quality. These findings are consistent with the existing literature emphasizing the positive impact of OHS education on awareness levels.

However, a notable gap emerges between students' theoretical knowledge and their practical application of OHS principles. Although many participants expressed the opinion that OHS education should be introduced before the final year, a significant number reported that they had not received such training at earlier stages of their education. More importantly, training related to emergency preparedness and hands-on safety practices appears to be insufficient. This discrepancy suggests that current OHS education may be overly theoretical and insufficiently integrated with practice, limiting its effectiveness in shaping safe behaviors.

This finding suggests a systemic disconnect between theoretical OHS awareness and practical safety preparedness within industrial design education. Although participants demonstrated relatively high levels of awareness of workplace risks and the importance of safety culture, practical aspects such as emergency

drills, PPE use, and operational safety procedures were found to be insufficient. This finding suggests that OHS education within industrial design programs may remain predominantly theoretical rather than practice-oriented.

This situation may be associated with the structure of design education itself. Industrial design programs generally emphasize creativity, technical production, and workshop-based applications; however, safety-oriented practices may not always be systematically integrated into the curriculum. As a result, students may develop conceptual awareness of occupational safety without sufficiently internalizing safe operational behaviors within real or simulated working environments. Therefore, integrating scenario-based safety training, applied emergency practices, and continuous safety education into studio and workshop courses may significantly strengthen institutional safety culture.

The results of the demographic analyses revealed that individual characteristics such as gender, parental education level, and residential status did not produce statistically significant differences in OHS perceptions. This finding implies that the development of safety culture is influenced less by individual demographic factors and more by the quality, timing, and context of educational and practical experiences. In other words, institutional structures and learning environments appear to play a more decisive role in shaping OHS awareness.

From a practical perspective, these findings highlight the need to redesign OHS education to integrate theoretical knowledge with applied learning experiences. Embedding OHS training in earlier stages of the curriculum, increasing the emphasis on practical applications, and incorporating scenario-based and emergency-response training may enhance the effectiveness of such programs. As emphasized in the literature, training individuals to recognize and mitigate hazards fosters a culture of safety and responsibility, ultimately contributing to safer, healthier, and more productive work environments (Erdoğan & Genç, 2023). Employees who operate in safe environments are more likely to exhibit higher levels of satisfaction and productivity.

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that industrial design students possess a considerable level of theoretical awareness regarding occupational health and safety; however, this awareness does not fully translate into practical preparedness and safe operational behavior. In this respect, the study not only identifies an important gap between theory and practice, but also highlights the necessity of establishing earlier, continuous, and practice-oriented OHS education within industrial design curricula. Integrating applied safety training, emergency response practices, and scenario-based learning activities into educational processes may contribute significantly to the development of a sustainable safety culture among future professionals.

Acknowledgement

This work is supported by Scientific Research Projects Coordination Unit with project number ID: 9769 Project Code: FPD-2024-9769. Authors thank to Scientific Research Projects Coordination Unit of Gazi University for supporting the study.

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