Perceived benefits of reference management software among postgraduate students at Tangaza University, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Higher education in Kenya has placed greater emphasis on research, with postgraduate students expected to engage in activities such as writing academic articles, theses, and research projects. These research studies aim to advance our understanding and make valuable contributions to organizational enhancement and policy development. This study examined the importance of Reference Management Software as perceived by the users, focusing on postgraduate students at Tangaza University. The study was anchored on the diffusion of innovation theory, which helped explore the various factors influencing the adoption of Reference Management Software (RMS). The study applied a mixed-method approach and data was collected through survey questionnaires. The study revealed that at least 70.2% of respondents found reference management software more beneficial in their research and academic workflow than manual referencing, although to a varying extent. Some of the benefits perceived by the respondents include improved efficiency, ease of use, integration with other tools, and time-saving. Despite the benefits, respondents faced various limitations that inhibited their adoption and usage of Reference Management Software. This reveals the need for more focused and comprehensive training to expose users to potential benefits and promote the adoption and continued usage of Reference Management Software.

*(**Key words**: referencing; reference management software; citation; research; perceived relative advantage; perceived benefits)*

I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, higher education has placed greater emphasis on research, with postgraduate students expected to engage in activities such as writing academic articles, theses, and research projects. Research aims to advance understanding and make valuable contributions to organizational enhancement and policy development. Nevertheless, many research papers produced by postgraduate students and researchers go unpublished as they fail to meet requirements, such as proper citation and reference management.

Citing multiple authoritative sources in research work may be considered a great move. However, when these sources are not properly cited, the quality of the research work is questionable.

According to Walsh and Nikolaou (2022), accurate referencing and citation are essential indicators of academic and scientific writing quality. Therefore, it is quite beneficial to have a system that expedites and enhances the process (Francavilla, 2018; Proske et al.,

2023). Thus, researchers can focus more on the content of their work rather than on formatting issues when the citation procedure is simplified. Subsequently, Reference Management Software (RMS) tools are believed to enhance the quality and accuracy of academic and research works (Rincón Castillo et al., 2022).

Manual citation and referencing were previously perceived as a time-consuming and tedious burden, while others perceived it as boring. (Glassman, 2018). Conversely, although technology has both positive and negative effects on users, Rincón Castillo et al. (2022) Denotes that RMS plays a crucial role in academic research as it aids users in three key research activities including searching, saving, and writing. Tremblay and Walker (2019) and Murphree et al. (2018) identify Zotero, Mendeley, EndNote, and RefWorks as the most common Reference Management Software.

Ivey and Crum (2018) examined the features and capabilities of four RMS tools: EndNote, Mendeley, RefWorks, and Zotero. They realized that all four tools

offer plug-ins for word processors, while all except RefWorks can be used offline. Each tool provides browser plug-ins and allows users to import references. Mendeley and EndNote have mobile applications, whereas Zotero and RefWorks offer mobile-friendly websites. These tools also facilitate collaboration and social networking, enabling users to share resources and work together on projects. Mendeley and Zotero offer free versions, while RefWorks and EndNote require a paid subscription. Although all four products provide standard referencing functions, they have distinct strengths and weaknesses that may make one more suitable than the others depending on user needs (Glassman, 2018).

Despite the recognized importance of RMS in enhancing research efficiency and accuracy, leading to more robust and reliable outcomes, there remains a significant gap in understanding how postgraduate students perceive the benefits of these tools, particularly in the context of Tangaza University. While the use of RMS has been well documented in broader academic settings (Amrutha et al., 2018; Motlhake, 2021; Speare, 2018), little research has been conducted to assess the specific benefits that postgraduate students experience or expect when using these tools. Addressing this gap is crucial for promoting more effective use of RMS and supporting students in their academic endeavors.

The study aimed to establish the relative advantage of RMS in relation to manual referencing, the perceived benefits of RMS, and the challenges encountered by users in their utilization of RMS. This was in a bid to understand the indicators of the utilization of RMS and consequently propose mechanisms to educators and developers to promote its adoption among students and researchers. RMS is an academic innovation that enhances research writing and academic integrity leading to higher research quality and productivity.

The study was conducted at Tangaza University, an accredited religious university affiliated with the Catholic Church. The university was established as a constituent college of the Catholic University of East Africa to address the capacity development needs of the catholic missionaries. The university has, however, grown to offer other academic programs apart from theology and religious formation to include Arts, education, and social sciences. The university is situated at Karen Ward in Nairobi, a locality that is highly occupied by Catholic Communities.

Use of reference management software in research

Reference management has not always been easy and research reports that manual referencing is tedious and difficult (Rincón Castillo et al., 2022). Proper citation and referencing are crucial for integrity, knowledge sharing, acknowledging sources, and preventing plagiarism (Vijai et al., 2019). Reference Management Software (RMS) has expedited the process, making it more efficient for researchers to search, save, organize, and share their references (Hendal, 2019; Mhokole & Kimaryo, 2023; Wahyuningsih, 2020).

Some Reference Management Software (RMS) have undergone advancements that enable seamless integration with various word processing software, such as MS Word and Libre. This integration simplifies the process of generating citations and reference lists. Some tools can also be integrated with such engines such as Microsoft Edge, Google Chrome, and Mozilla, that enable the user to export a resource directly to the RMS library. Some tools allow the storage of files and bibliographic details and facilitate collaborative annotation of shared sources by teams (Hermanns & Skinner, 2022).

Various studies have revealed that users' attitudes toward RMS significantly influence its initial adoption and continued use (Farag, 2019; Mhokole & Kimaryo, 2023; Motlhake & Bopape, 2021; Setiani et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2023). In Indonesia, RMS received high acceptance from teachers and students (Setiani et al., 2020), leading to high usage. Similarly, in Egypt, scholars have a positive attitude toward the usefulness and ease of use of RMS, which drives its high adoption.(Farag, 2019).

However, despite the benefits of RMS, many researchers and students choose not to use them due to various challenges and limitations (Lonergan, 2017; Nilashi et al., 2019). These include time-consuming familiarization with features, licensing requirements, frequent updates, need for constant internet connection, lack of technical support, lack of awareness of alternatives, difficulty in installation, and technical support (Adeyemi et al., 2020; Nilashi et al., 2019; Osmani et al., 2016).

Mhokole and Kimaryo (2023) also found that most of his respondents faced challenges with internet connectivity, stable power supply, and technical support, resulting in low usage rates. Other challenges include cloud storage costs, learning difficulties, complex software, insufficient training, and language barriers (Rangaswamy & Babu, 2021). Users also find learning and practicing RMS challenging and time-consuming (Speare, 2018).

This discussion is anchored upon the Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DIT), which explains how new ideas, products, or technologies spread through a population over time. The theory identifies key factors that influence the rate of adoption, such as the perceived benefits of the innovation, its compatibility with existing practices, and the role of institutional support in the adoption of RMS.

DIT has been utilized vastly in the academic setting, especially in the adoption of technology in teaching and learning. For instance, Menzli et al. (2022) investigated the adoption of Open Educational Resources (OER) in higher education using DIT. Ayodele et al. (2020) predicted the adoption of Smartphones among Higher Education Institutions Lecturers in Nigeria also using DIT.

The study focused on the perceived benefits of RMS. In light of DIT, perceived benefits of an innovation may include increased efficiency, cost savings, and improved outcomes (Rogers, 2003). The study broke down the benefits into more specific benefits, such as saving time, accuracy, collaboration and sharing, and managing PDF files, that contribute to efficiency and improved outcomes of research activities. The understanding of the benefits of RMS as perceived by users at Tangaza University will provide valuable insights for implementing and improving RMS in other academic institutions (Rogers, 2003).

II. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-method approach and collected quantitative and qualitative data through structured survey questionnaires. The study focused on postgraduate students at Tangaza University with a target population of 150 current post-graduate students. A representative sample was selected from the target population through random sampling. The random sampling method was used to avoid bias and give every postgraduate student an equal chance (Sharma, 2017). Furthermore, the questionnaires were submitted online since most of the students were international students and could not be reached physically at the moment. The sample was derived through Yamane's (1967) formula and amounted to 109 postgraduate students.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where: (n=minimum returned sample size, N=Population size=150, e= Margin error expressed as a decimal=0.05)

$$n = \frac{150}{1 + 150(0.05)^2} \qquad n = \frac{150}{1.375} \qquad n = 109$$

The researcher ensured validity and reliability by administering the questionnaires multiple times to achieve consistency in responses. The researcher also checked the responses from a pilot study to verify if the findings answered the intended questions. The data was analysed using a mixed methods approach, utilizing Excel and SPSS for quantitative analysis and NVivo for qualitative analysis. The raw data was entered into these tools, allowing for a thorough examination across various categories. The researcher verified the results and drew conclusions based on the findings. The data was presented in both narratives and figures, aligned with the study's objectives.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondents' perceived relative advantage of RMS

The research evaluated whether the respondents found RMS tools to be more beneficial than their previous manual referencing. According to Rogers (2003), Relative advantage is the extent to which an adopter finds an innovation to be more beneficial to the one preceding it. To understand this, the respondents were asked to rate how beneficial they felt RMS was to their research practices. Figure 1 illustrates the findings.

Figure 1: Perceived relative advantage[1]
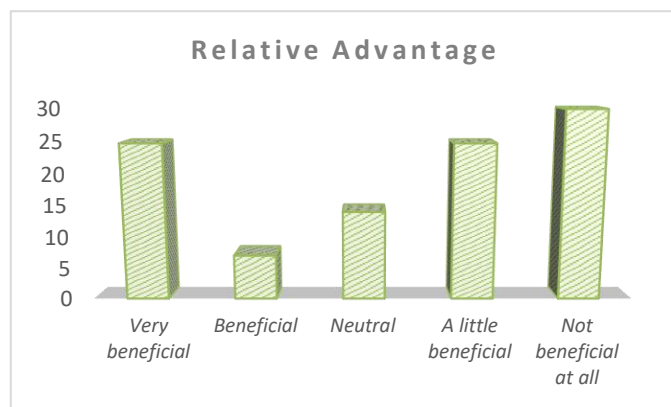
From Figure 1, the highest number of respondents, 29.8% indicated that they did not find RMS tools to be beneficial at all, compared to 24.6% who found RMS to be very beneficial. 45.6% ranged between beneficial and a little

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[1] ***Source: Research data, 2024***

beneficial. When generalized, 70.2% perceived RMS tools as more beneficial than manual referencing, although to a varying extent. These findings suggest that although 29.8% of respondents find RMS tools not beneficial at all, most respondents find RMS tools to be at least more beneficial than manual referencing.

The mixed feelings posed by a notable 38.6% of respondents who indicated that they found the RMS neutral or little beneficial suggest that there may be obstacles that bar respondents from experiencing the full benefits of RMS tools. The users may also have little or no training on RMS and their usage. The findings underscore the need for targeted awareness campaigns and comprehensive training on RMS tools and their benefits. Furthermore, leveraging satisfied users as ambassadors of RMS can motivate other users to explore

and adopt the tools. Trials and demonstrations are also effective tools to sensitize users and showcase features that may benefit them, aiding in informed decisions regarding the use or rejection of RMS.

Perceived benefits of Reference Management Software

The research examined the benefits experienced by the users. Possible benefits guided by the Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003) were outlined. These benefits include saving time, making referencing more efficient, facilitating collaboration and sharing, ensuring consistency, ensuring accuracy, helping manage PDF files, providing search interface to online databases, and integrating with other applications like MS Word. Figure 2 shows the findings:

Figure 2: Perceived benefits of RMS[2]
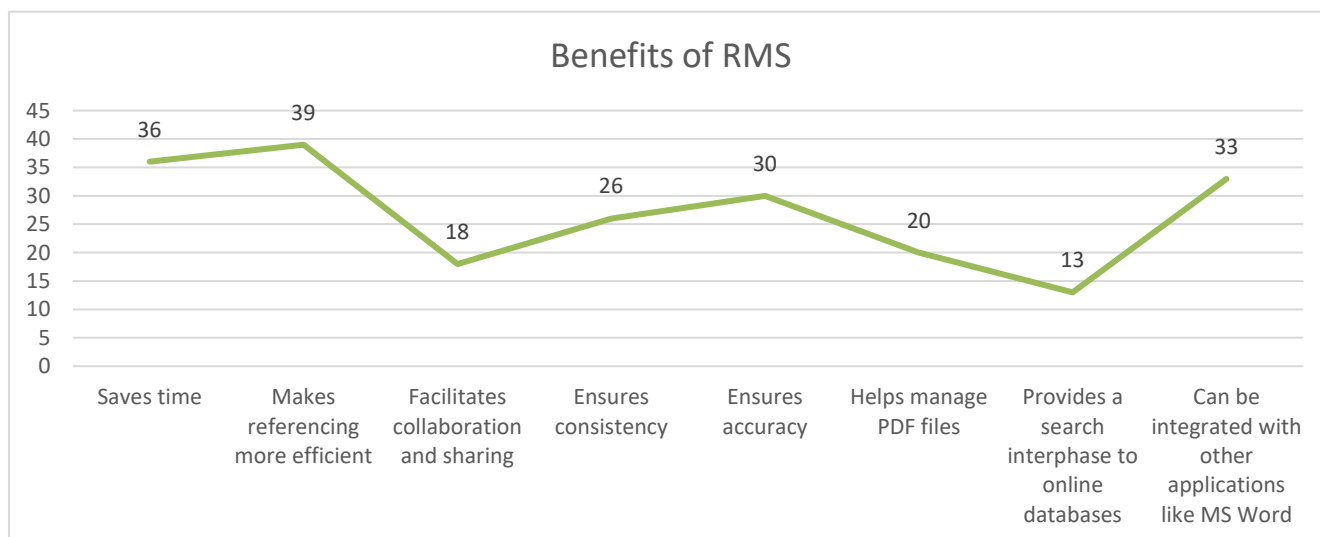
As shown in Figure 2, respondents indicated to have experienced the following benefits in their interaction with RMS: they save time (36%), make referencing more efficient (39%), and can easily be integrated with other applications such as word processing applications (33%). A significant number said that it ensures accuracy (30%), ensures consistency (26%), and helps manage PDF files (20%). Although facilitating collaboration and sharing (18%) and providing a search interface (13%) have less frequency, a significant number still find them beneficial. These findings agree with (Farag, 2019) who indicated that users found RMS to be useful and easy to use

The perceived benefits are further discussed individually below:

i. *Efficiency and time saving*: According to Proske et al. (2023), the primary aim of Reference Management Systems (RMS) is to accelerate the referencing process, which can often be time-consuming and cumbersome for researchers and students. Many respondents reported that RMS tools are beneficial because they save time and enhance the efficiency of referencing. Specifically, these tools allow users to easily organize their sources, cite them in various formats, and automatically generate bibliographies, which

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significantly reduces the effort involved in managing references.

These advantages are essential for streamlining academic workflows, ultimately leading to increased productivity and higher-quality output in research and writing. Additionally, the integration of RMS with word processing software further supports this productivity by making the referencing process seamless and user-friendly, allowing users to focus more on content creation rather than citation formatting. Overall, RMS tools play a crucial role in improving the academic writing process.

ii. *Accuracy and consistency*: The survey results reveal that 30% and 26% of respondents recognize the value of RMS (Reference Management Software) tools primarily for their accuracy and consistency. These attributes are essential in preventing referencing errors, which can undermine the credibility of academic work and violate academic standards. Additionally, the findings emphasize the critical importance of maintaining academic integrity within the postgraduate community.

Furthermore, the findings suggest a significant need for comprehensive training programs and targeted advocacy initiatives aimed at increasing the adoption and effective use of RMS tools. By enhancing the familiarity and competence of postgraduate students with these resources, institutions can significantly improve the overall quality of academic output, ensuring that students are better equipped to produce reliable and well-cited research.

iii. *Management of PDF files*: Twenty percent of respondents indicated that Reference Management Software (RMS) tools are highly beneficial for organizing and accessing research materials. These tools provide users with the ability to store and manage PDF files directly within the RMS library, which streamlines the research process. By having all relevant documents centralized in one location, users can save significant time and enhance their productivity. This is particularly advantageous as it removes the need to repeatedly search for the same resources in a web browser, allowing researchers to focus more on their work rather than on locating materials. Consequently, the effective use of RMS tools can lead to a more efficient and organized research experience.

iv. *Collaboration and sharing*: Although only 18% of respondents identified this feature as a direct benefit of using Reference Management Software (RMS), it is crucial in enhancing research processes. This feature is especially important for collaborative efforts and shared authorship among researchers. By facilitating teamwork, the RMS allows users to effectively collaborate on projects, exchange ideas, and share

important resources. This improved cooperation not only streamlines the workflow but also fosters a more cohesive approach to producing high-quality research outputs.

v. *Search interface*: The findings of the study reveal that only 13% of respondents noted the utility of the Reference Management Software (RMS) in facilitating quick searches for information materials directly through its search interface. Despite this relatively small percentage, the evidence suggests that the RMS holds significant potential for enhancing user accessibility to valuable information. This limited acknowledgment indicates a critical need for users to receive practical training sessions. Such lessons would not only raise awareness of the RMS's features but also empower users to fully explore and leverage the system's benefits that may currently be overlooked or underappreciated. By fostering a deeper understanding of the RMS, users could significantly improve their research efficiency and overall experience.

Challenges encountered by students when using RMS

The researcher wanted to understand what challenges postgraduate students face while utilizing RMS tools. The responses were categorized into themes and presented as follows:

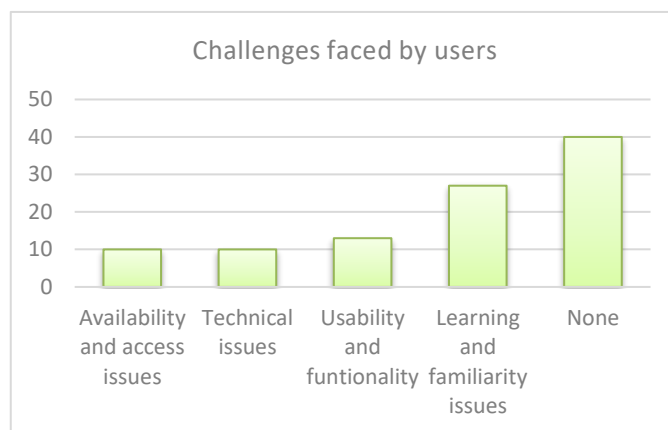*Figure 3: Challenges faced by students in using RMS*

Figure 3 reveals the challenges faced by the respondents in their interaction with RMS. Among the challenges are, availability and access issues, learning and familiarity issues, technical issues, usability and functionality, and training needs. These were earlier identified by other scholars such as Rangaswamy & Babu (2021) and Mhokole & Kimaryo (2023). The challenges are further discussed individually below:

i. *Learning and familiarity issues*: From the findings, 27% of respondents recorded challenges associated

with learning and familiarity issues while adopting and utilizing RMS. Some of the responses given by the respondents include: *"... not conversant, no time to learn how to use it, I need more training, it took me time to understand how to use it, not easily adopted ..."* among others. This reveals that some respondents were not familiar with RMS, its benefits, and/or how the tools work. It also highlights that some respondents find the RMS tools difficult to learn, lack initial training, or have no time to learn new and complex features of the software.

The findings also suggest that some of the challenges faced by the respondents may have been due to individual differences in learning styles and preferences. Additionally, the difficulties could be attributed to technical issues or the complexity of the tools. The responses above suggest the need for more effective training, continuous support, and improvement of software to become more user-friendly.

ii. *Usability and functionality*: From Figure 3, 13% of respondents reported having issues associated with usability and functionality. For instance, difficulty editing entries, formatting citations in required styles, entering items manually, and learning new features. This insinuates that although the software offers a range of features that are meant to improve efficiency in referencing, users may find these features difficult or complex to learn and use. For instance, a respondent stated, "For citation in line with 7th APA style is a problem." This was reiterated by another respondent who stated that "the citations are not always correctly done as expected." These responses suggest hindrances in usage which may explain the lower adoption rates. Therefore, to address this challenge, the tools need to be improved to make the features more user-friendly, and regular practical training for the users to familiarize themselves and acquire technical skills to use RMS tools.

iii. *Availability and access issues*: A significant group of respondents (10%) indicated that they had faced challenges associated with the availability and access of RMS tools. These challenges included the need for internet connectivity to work with the tools; software that were free before becoming proprietary, which meant that the users had to pay to access; and institutions not subscribing to any RMS tool. For instance, one of the respondents stated "*... I cannot access it unless I have internet connectivity ..."*
Another respondent reported that "… *availability in the institution is not always there* …" This was reiterated by other respondents who indicated that the shift from free to proprietary tools posed a challenge for new and continuing users who were accustomed

to accessing the tools at no cost. Thus, without institutional subscriptions to RMS tools, researchers are unable to access and utilize RMS in their academic and research work. These findings highlight the importance of institutional support in providing access to RMS and other technological tools that enhance and support research and learning.

iv. *Technical issues*: Technical issues were also mentioned as challenges faced by the respondents in their adoption and usage of RMS with a frequency of 10%. For instance, some respondents highlighted the following challenges, "… *word plugin sometimes is disabled; duplication of entries; low internet; lack the technological skill of using different programs at the same time; and managing PDF files* ..." These issues may be the key hindrance in the adoption and continued use of RMS which suggests the need for technical improvement to have better and more stable software functionality, thus gaining the users' confidence.

v. *No Challenge*: A significant of 40% of respondents indicated that they had not faced any problem yet, which may either mean that they were satisfied with their experience with RMS, or they had not faced any significant challenge worth mentioning. On the other hand, this number may be associated with those who are not aware or have never used RMS, thus they were not exposed to any challenge. More investigation is needed to understand better the overall satisfaction of users and the possible areas of improvement. Regular feedback would also enable an institution to address issues as they arise, thus improving users 'engagement with the software and consequent academic productivity.

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study highlights the relative advantage of Reference Management Software (RMS) and its perceived benefits, including improved research efficiency and productivity for students and researchers. By underlining the challenges that users face when utilizing RMS, the findings suggest a pressing need for increased awareness and targeted training to enhance familiarity and proficiency with the software.

The implications of these findings are significant. First, promoting awareness of the benefits of RMS can lead to greater adoption among students, ultimately enhancing their research capabilities. Additionally, addressing the identified challenges through tailored training programs can empower students to effectively use RMS, thereby maximizing its advantages. Additionally, the study calls for institutions to develop strategies that incorporate

collaborative learning and capacity building. By doing so, they can create an environment conducive to the adoption and effective use of RMS, ensuring that students realize its potential benefits in their academic endeavours.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the adoption of Research Management Systems (RMS), the researcher proposed several comprehensive recommendations. First, awareness campaigns should be launched to inform potential users about the key benefits of RMS through various media platforms, including webinars and academic presentations. Next, collaborative learning can be encouraged by organizing workshops and discussion forums where users share their experiences and insights, fostering a supportive community. Promoting success stories through case studies and testimonials can motivate others by showcasing the tangible improvements in research efficiency and productivity that RMS offers.

Additionally, targeted training programs should be developed for different user groups, ensuring that students, researchers, and administrative staff receive tailored instruction that meets their specific needs. Establishing comprehensive support services, such as a helpdesk and online resource centres, will assist users with technical issues and promote continuous engagement. Lastly, gathering user feedback through regular surveys and focus groups is essential for continuous improvement, allowing the RMS to evolve in line with users' needs. Collectively, these initiatives aim to educate students and researchers about the advantages of RMS, foster knowledge sharing, and inspire more efficient academic workflows, ultimately leading to long-term adoption and success in academic settings.
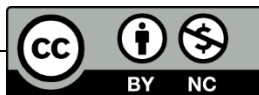
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