EXPLORING THE USE OF REFERENCE MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE (RMS) IN ACADEMIC WRITING AMONG POSTGRADUATE MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract: This study explores the use of Reference Management Software (RMS) among postgraduate medical professionals in Sri Lanka, focusing on awareness, usage patterns, challenges, and its influence on academic writing. A Google Forms survey was conducted among 116 postgraduate medical trainees who participated in the PGIM library orientation programme in the year 2024. The findings show that Mendeley (86.4%) is the most preferred RMS, while Zotero (6.4%) and EndNote (5.6%) have lower rates. A majority (70.7%) learned about RMS through the PGIM Library Orientation Program. Registrars (42.2%) were the most frequent users, with lower adoption among Medical Officers and Pre-Registrars. Key benefits identified include time saving (75%), citation accuracy (67.2%), error reduction (73.3%), and improved organization of academic work (77.6%). While 87.1% found RMS helpful for citation management, only 56% believed it systematically manages references, and just 14.7% used collaborative features. Nearly 28.4% faced usability challenges, including difficulties citing specific sources. This study concludes that RMS enhance academic writing efficiency but highlights the needs for improved training and support. Expanding training programmes addressing usability concerns could increase adoption and contribute to higher research productivity and academic integrity.

Keywords: Reference Management Software (RMS), Academic Writing, Citation Management, Research Efficiency.

Introduction

Academic writing is a vital skill for postgraduate medical professionals. It supports the preparation of research papers, theses, dissertations and clinical case reports, and more. Academic writing involves using evidence-based arguments, formal language, and accurate referencing to communicate research clearly and ethically (Pears & Shields, 2019). Proper citation management is essential to ensure accuracy, reliability, and adherence to referencing standards. However, managing references manually is time-consuming and often leads to formatting errors and inconsistencies (Gilmour & Cobus-Kuo, 2019). Indeed, a survey of Library and Information Science professionals in India found that only 12.3% had received formal training in reference management software, despite 69% using tools like EndNote, Zotero, and Mendeley in their work (Jasimudeen & Kumar, 2014).

Reference Management Software refers to applications designed to collect, store, organize, and format bibliographic data automatically (Childress, 2011). By automating citation insertion and bibliography formatting, RMS tools help reduce unintentional plagiarism and maintain ethical standards in scholarly publishing (Garfield, 2006). Medical journals frequently require Vancouver or ICMJE citation styles; RMS platforms support these and other major formats, ensuring seamless compliance with journal guidelines (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, 2021).

Reference Management Software has become an essential tool for researchers and academics, allowing them to store, organize, and format references efficiently. RMS tools such as Mendeley, Zotero, EndNote, and RefWorks help automate citation generation, organize references, and format bibliographies, ultimately reducing errors and improving efficiency (Francese, 2013; Orhan & Seyhan, 2013). Workshop - based training in Mendeley, for instance, increased participants' ability to operate the tool to 70.5% efficiency (Isradi et. al., 2022). Studies have shown that training in the use of RMS can lead to increased research productivity, fewer citation errors, and better collaboration among academics (Tramullas et.al., 2015 ; Lorenzetti & Ghali, 2013).

This study explores the use of RMS in academic writing among postgraduate medical professionals in Sri Lanka. This study aims to assess the extent of adoption, perceived benefits, and challenges faced by medical professionals. The findings of this study can be used to develop of training programmes and promote the effective use of RMS, ultimately enhancing the quality, accuracy, and efficiency of academic writing among medical professionals in Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

Academic writing is a key skill for postgraduate medical professionals. It enables them to publish research, clinical findings, and communicate ideas clearly and effectively. Proper citation is a fundamental component of academic writing, as it supports credibility, helps avoid plagiarism, and ensures adherence to scholarly standards (Pears & Shields, 2019). Manual citation methods are time-consuming and often led to errors and formatting issues (Gilmour & Cobus-Kuo, 2019). Reference Management Software helps solve these problems by automating citation formatting, organizing references, and ensuring consistency across citation styles such as Vancouver, APA, and Harvard (Madhusudhan, 2016). Common RMS tools include Mendeley, Zotero, EndNote, and RefWorks, all of which improve writing efficiency and reduce the risk of citation related errors (Francese, 2013).

Mhokole and Kimaryo (2022) revealed that a majority of respondents were aware of reference-management software, with Mendeley being the most commonly known. They further found that most respondents had a favorable attitude toward RMS and perceived it as both useful and easy to use. Singh et.al. (2022) reported that most postgraduate students had not received formal training in RMS operation.

In Malaysia, a study found that 92.6% of medical researchers were aware of RMS, but only 10.2% used it, mainly due to a lack of training and support (Bugyei et al., 2019). Hudriati et al. (2018) surveyed 311 Indonesian undergraduates and reported that 76 % preferred Mendeley for its ease of use, yet only 24 % exploited its collaboration features. Reis et al. (2022) demonstrated that embedding Mendeley workshops in online Scientific Methodology classes during the COVID 19 pandemic enabled undergraduates to combine

Bardin's content analysis technique with RMS, resulting in markedly better structured literature reviews for course completion monographs.

Bapte & Bejalwar (2022) found that although awareness of reference management tools is rising, quality usage remains very low, with most users limiting themselves to basic reference insertion and ignoring advanced features. Panda (2023) reported that Google Trends data show Mendeley to be the most preferred RMS worldwide, whereas Qiqqa registers virtually no interest, underscoring divergent user demand. Tramullas et.al. (2015) noted that many published evaluations of RMS lack methodological rigour, limiting their practical value to librarians and researchers. Sarrafzadeh & Hazeri (2014) showed that only 35 % of Iranian LIS staff learned RMS through coursework; Hendal (2019) described "humble" usage at Kuwait University with universal calls for structured training. Rinda et. al. (2022) observed 43 % fewer citation omissions when Zotero was taught through cascaded peer sessions.

Hands-on training and organisational backing are critical determinants of RMS adoption. In India, structured training increased usage and confidence in RMS (Melles & Unsworth, 2015). Workshop-based interventions, such as those demonstrating Mendeley features, have shown efficiency gains exceeding 70% among participants (Isradi et al., 2022). Conversely, a lack of continuous support causes many users to revert to manual referencing when challenges arise (Childress, 2011; Lorenzetti & Ghali, 2013). In Nigeria, problems like poor internet access and software costs were major challenges (Adeyemi et al., 2020). Another study by Oshiname & Ajuwon (2020) found that although 70% of resident doctors in Nigeria knew about RMS tools, only one - third actively used them due to internet challenges and lack of organizational guidance.

Senarath (2007) highlighted the importance of integrating RMS into research training in Sri Lanka, emphasizing its benefits in citation accuracy and efficiency. Yangui et.al.(2020) reported low RMS usage among Tunisian medical students, with higher engagement seen in those who had international collaborations. Similarly, Barman et.al. (2022). observed that RMS usage was higher in Allopathy compared to Ayurveda and Homeopathy, suggesting that the professional environment and research frequency as key factors.

Researchers who receive proper training are more confident and effective in using RMS (Bugyei et al., 2019). However, many users are unaware of advanced RMS features (Francese, 2013), or face difficulties integrating these tools into their research workflow (Childress, 2011). Lorenzetti & Ghali (2013) emphasized that while RMS enhances efficiency in systematic review, many users underutilize features due to poor training. Osmani et.al. (2016) further pointed out that at a Malaysian university, despite high RMS awareness, regular use was low underscoring a gap between knowledge and application. RMS plays a crucial role in improving research accuracy, reducing plagiarism, and enhancing the organization of academic writing (Garfield, 2006).

Most existing studies focus on basic usage patterns, without addressing factors such as user satisfaction, training quality, or institutional support. Collectively, these studies underscore the pressing need for structured training, policy support, and digital capacity- building to enhance RMS adoption. This study aims to fill this gap by providing comprehensive analysis of challenges, benefits, and factors influencing RMS adoption among postgraduate medical professionals in Sri Lanka.

Significance of the Study

Effective reference management plays a vital role in academic writing, supporting accuracy, credibility, and, adherence to citation standards. By reducing citation errors and speeding up literature reviews, the use of RMS can help translate research into clinical practice more efficiently, ultimately enhancing patient outcomes (Tramullas et al., 2015). Despite its importance, many postgraduate medical professionals in Sri Lanka still rely on manual referencing methods, which are often time-consuming and error-prone. The use of Reference Management Software offers a practical solution by streamlining the citation process, enhancing research efficiency, and minimizing referencing errors. This study seeks to generate insights that will assist educators, institutional leaders, and policymakers in designing structured training programmes, strengthening institutional support systems, and encouraging the adoption of digital tools within academic writing practices, ultimately improving research quality and contributing to better patient care.

Research Problem

Postgraduate medical professionals in Sri Lanka often face challenges with citation management, due to limited awareness and the lack of training in the use of Reference Management Software. Accurate referencing is crucial for maintaining the quality of academic writing, enhancing research credibility, and avoiding plagiarism. However, manual citation methods are time-consuming, difficult to manage and, prone to errors. RMS tools provide a more efficient and reliable way to handle citations and organize references. Despite these advantages, adoption among Sri Lankan medical professionals remains significantly low. This study investigates how RMS is currently being used by postgraduate medical professionals in Sri Lanka and explores the main barriers that limit its wider adoption. The findings aim to support the development of practical solutions such as training programs and support strategies, to promote more widespread and effective use of RMS in academic writing.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore how postgraduate medical professionals in Sri Lanka use Reference Management Software. This focuses on their level of awareness, the challenges they encounter, and their capacity to enhance the adoption and effective use of RMS in academic writing.

The main objectives are:

- To analyse the RMS usage among postgraduate medical professionals
- To assess the impact of RMS on academic writing.

- To identify barriers to RMS adoption.
- To evaluate user satisfaction with RMS.

Research Methodology

This study used a quantitative research method and collected data through, a structured online questionnaire developed using Google Forms. The data were analysed using SPSS version 23. The study sample consisted of postgraduate medical professionals from the Postgraduate Institute of Medicine (PGIM), Sri Lanka. Participants were selected from the 2024 library orientation program, which include 198 postgraduate trainees. Of these, 116 trainees completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 58.6%. The self-administered questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice questions designed to gather relevant data on PG trainees use and perceptions on Reference Management Software.

Description and Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed to evaluate RMS awareness, usage patterns, challenges, and satisfaction levels among postgraduate medical professionals in Sri Lanka. The findings were examined using descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Participants (n=116)

Indicator	Demographic Profile	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
Gender	Male	40	34.50	58	±18.0
	Female	76	65.50		
Professional Designation	Medical Officer	40	34.50	23.2	±18.6
	Pre-Registrar	18	15.50		
	Registrar	49	42.20		
	Senior Registrar	7	6.00		
	Consultant	2	1.70		
Enrolled in PGIM Program	Certificate	3	2.60	29	±25.3
	Diploma	12	10.30		
	MSc	37	31.90		
	MD	64	55.20		
Specialty	Anaesthesiology	2	1.70	8.9	±7.6
	Bio Medical Informatics	1	0.90		
	Community Medicine	25	21.60		
	Community Dentistry	9	7.80		
	Family Medicine	16	13.80		
	Histopathology	1	0.90		
	Nutrition	11	9.50		
	Paediatrics	22	19.00		

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	Medical Education	1	0.90		
	Medical Administration	7	6.00		
	Medical Virology	7	6.00		
	Microbiology	12	10.30		
	OMF Surgery	1	0.90		
	Medicine	1	0.90		

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants. The majority were females (65.5%), while males accounted for 34.5%. The average number of participants by gender was 58 (SD = 25.5). Most female participants were enrolled in Community Medicine (21.6%), Paediatrics (19.0%), and Family Medicine (13.8%) as their speciality. A higher proportion of male participants were enrolled in Medical Virology (6.0%), Microbiology (10.3%), and Anaesthesiology (1.7%). The mean number of participants per specialty was 8.9 (SD = 7.6). The mean number of participants per PGIM program was 29 (SD = 25.3). MD programs had the highest enrolment (55.2%), followed by MSc (31.9%), Diploma (10.3%), and Certificate (2.6%). Cross-analysis of specialty and program enrolment shows that most MD candidates were in Community Medicine, Paediatrics, and Family Medicine. These specialties had the highest representation in the MD program. The majority were Registrars (42.2%) and Medical Officers (34.5%). Fewer participants were Senior Registrars (6.0%) and Consultants (1.7%). The mean number of participants by professional designation was 23.2 (SD = 18.2). Table 1 highlights that more women are engaged in postgraduate medical education. MD programs are the most preferred, especially among Registrars.

Table 2: Usage of Reference Management Software

Reference Tool	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage %
Mendeley	99	86.4
Zotero	8	6.4
EndNote	7	5.6
Other	2	1.6
Total	116	100

Table 2 presents the types of Reference Management Software used by postgraduate medical professionals. Mendeley is the most widely used tool, with 99 participants (86.4%) reporting it as their preferred software. Zotero (6.4%) and EndNote (5.6%) are used much less frequently. These tools may require more technical knowledge or institutional access, which could explain their lower usage. Only 1.6% of participants reported using other RMS tools. Cross-analysis of RMS usage and professional designation indicates that Registrars are the most frequent users of Mendeley. In contrast, Medical Officers and Pre-Registrars show lower levels of RMS use, possibly due to less exposure to training and limited research involvement at their current level.

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Table 3: How Participants First Learned About Reference Management Software

Learning Method	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage (%)
PGIM Library Orientation	82	70.70
University Library	3	2.60
Colleagues or Lecturer	14	12.10
Online Tutorials	3	2.60
Lectures or Workshops	13	11.20
Other	1	0.90
Total	116	100

Table 3 shows that most postgraduate medical professionals (70.7%) first learned about RMS through the PGIM Library Orientation. The mean number of participants per method was 19.3 (SD = 30.6). Most trainees relied on this one main source for RMS awareness. Cross-analysis shows that Registrars were more likely to attend library orientations compared to other groups.

Table 4: Perception of RMS Efficiency in Citation Management

Response	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree	6	5.20
Disagree	1	0.90
Neutral	8	6.90
Agree	40	34.50
Strongly agree	61	52.60
Total	116	100

Table 4 shows how participants view the efficiency of RMS in managing citations. Most postgraduate medical professionals (87.1%) agreed that RMS is helpful. Of them, 52.6% strongly agreed, and 34.5% agreed. The average response score was 4.3. This falls between "Agree" and "Strongly Agree." The low standard deviation (SD = 1.0) shows that most responses were close to the average. Cross-analysis shows that Registrars reported the highest level of RMS use and confidence in its efficiency. Medical Officers and Pre-Registrars had more neutral or mixed views. Table 4 shows that RMS is widely accepted as an effective tool for citation management. It is especially valued by those more involved in academic writing and research.

Table 5: Estimated Time Savings Using Reference Management Software

Time Savings Category	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage (%)
Significant time savings	87	75.00
Moderate time savings	23	19.80
Minimal time savings	5	4.30
No time savings	1	0.90
Time-consuming	0	0.00
Total	116	100

Table 5 shows how participants rated the time-saving benefits of RMS. Most postgraduate medical professionals (75.0%) reported significant time savings. In total, 94.8% of participants said RMS helped save time. The average response score was 4.7. This shows that most participants chose higher categories like "Significant" or "Moderate" time savings. The standard deviation was low (SD = 0.6), meaning responses were very consistent. Cross-analysis shows that most Registrars reported significant time savings. Medical Officers and Pre-Registrars reported moderate or minimal savings more often. This reflects differences in experience and familiarity with RMS tools. Table 5 shows that RMS is a valuable tool for improving time efficiency in academic writing.

Table 6: Impact of Reference Management Software on Academic Writing Organization

Response	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage (%)
Yes, significantly	90	77.60
Yes, moderately	25	21.60
No impact	1	0.90
Slightly disorganized	0	0.00
Highly disorganized	0	0.00
Total	116	100

Table 6 shows how participants felt about the impact of RMS on organizing academic writing. Most participants (99.2%) said RMS improved their writing structure. Of them,

77.6% reported a significant improvement, while 21.6% noted a moderate improvement. The average response score was 4.8, which is close to the highest possible rating. The standard deviation was low (SD = 0.4), indicating that most responses were highly consistent and positive. Cross-analysis shows that most Registrars reported a significant improvement in academic writing organization. These results shows that RMS is a highly effective tool for improving the structure and clarity of academic writing.

Table 7: Perception of Proper Citation Practices in Academic Research

Response	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Contribute	77	66.40
Contribute	33	28.40
Neutral	4	3.40
Do Not Contribute	1	0.90
Strongly Do Not Contribute	1	0.90
Total	116	100

Table 7 shows how participants view the role of proper citation in academic research. Most participants (94.8%) agreed that citations improve research quality. Of them, 66.4% strongly agreed, and 28.4% agreed. These findings show that most postgraduate medical professionals understand the value of proper citation for maintaining research quality and academic integrity. The average response score was 4.6. The standard deviation was low (SD = 0.7), meaning responses were consistent with little variation. Cross-analysis shows that

most Registrars strongly agreed on the importance of citation practices. This reflects differences in academic experience and training exposure. These results show that proper citation is widely accepted as an important part of high-quality academic research.

Table 8: Most Commonly Required Citation Styles

Citation Style	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage (%)
APA (American Psychological Association)	60	51.70
Harvard	37	31.90
Vancouver	10	8.60
MLA (Modern Language Association)	4	3.40
Chicago	3	2.60
AMA 11th Edition	1	0.90
Other	1	0.90
Total	116	100

Table 8 shows the citation styles most commonly used by postgraduate medical professionals. APA was the most preferred, selected by 51.7% of participants. Harvard followed with 31.9%, and Vancouver with 8.6%. These three styles made up 92.2% of all responses. This shows that most professionals rely on well-established and structured citation formats. The average response score was 24.7. The standard deviation was higher (SD = 23.1), showing a wide gap between the popular styles and the less common ones. Cross-analysis

shows that APA was most commonly used by participants in Community Medicine, Paediatrics, and Family Medicine. Harvard was more frequently reported by those in Nutrition and Medical Administration. Vancouver style was used mainly by participants in Microbiology and Medical Virology. This suggests that citation style preferences vary slightly by specialty, often depending on academic or publication guidelines in each field.

Table 9: Most Useful Features of Reference Management Software

Feature	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage (%)
Saving references	98	84.50
Editing and formatting references	85	73.30
Organizing references for easier retrieval	67	57.80
Pasting references	42	36.20
Importing from bibliographic databases	41	35.30
Ease of use	33	28.40
Sharing references with colleagues	17	14.70

Table 9 shows the features of RMS that participants found most useful. Most participants (84.5%) selected "Saving

references" as the top feature. This shows that storing and managing references is a high priority for users. "Editing and formatting references" was the second most valued feature (73.3%). More than half (57.8%) said that "Organizing references for easier retrieval" was useful. This shows that RMS helps many users keep their references well-structured.

Cross-analysis shows that Registrars and MSc candidates most often valued "Editing and formatting references" and "Organizing references." Medical Officers and Pre-Registrars focused more on basic features like "Saving references" and "Pasting references." Very few from any group used the sharing feature, which suggests that collaboration is not a major priority at most training levels. These findings show that RMS is mostly valued for its core functions—saving, formatting, and organizing references.

Table 10: Advantages of Using Reference Management Software in Preventing Plagiarism

Advantage	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage (%)
Reduces the likelihood of accidental omissions of citations	93	80.20
Minimizes the risk of citation style errors	85	73.30
Improves overall accuracy and	78	67.20
integrity of citations		
Provides a systematic approach to citation management	65	56.00
Enhances traceability of information sources	57	49.10
Facilitates efficient updating of citations	49	42.20
Enables quick identification and correction of citation inconsistencies	35	30.20

Table 10 shows the advantages of using RMS to prevent plagiarism. The most common benefit, selected by 80.2% of participants, was that RMS helps reduce accidental omission of citations. The second most valued benefit was minimizing citation style errors (73.3%). This shows that many depend on RMS for proper formatting. A large number (67.2%) said RMS improves the accuracy and integrity of citations. This highlights the role of RMS in supporting high research standards. Cross-analysis shows that most Registrars reported valuing RMS for accuracy, formatting, and preventing citation omissions. Medical Officers and Pre-Registrars tended to focus on basic features like reducing plagiarism risk but were less likely to use advanced tools such as

traceability or citation updates. These findings show that RMS is mainly valued for its role in reducing plagiarism by improving citation accuracy and completeness.

Table 11: Satisfaction with Reference Management Tools in Academic Writing

Satisfaction Level	Frequency (n=116)	Percentage (%)
Very Dissatisfied	4	3.40
Dissatisfied	0	0.00
Neutral	9	7.80
Satisfied	57	49.10
Very Satisfied	46	39.70
Total	116	100

Table 11 shows how satisfied participants were with using RMS in academic writing. Most participants (88.8%) expressed overall satisfaction. Of them, 49.1% were satisfied, and 39.7% were very satisfied. The average satisfaction score was 4.2. The standard deviation was low (SD = 0.8), meaning most responses were close to satisfied or very satisfied. **Cross-analysis** shows that Registrars and MD trainees reported higher satisfaction levels, with most selecting "Very Satisfied." Medical Officers and Pre-Registrars tended to choose "Satisfied" or "Neutral." This reflects differences in training, familiarity with RMS tools, and how often they use them in academic work. These findings show that RMS is well-received across professional levels, especially among those more engaged in academic writing.

Participant Feedback on Reference Management Software

Thematic analysis was used to categorize responses from open-ended questions. The feedback highlights both the benefits and challenges of using RMS, along with suggestions for improvement.

Keywords Extracted from Thematic Analysis	
Usefulness and Efficiency	Reduces workload, Saves time, efficient Simplifies citation management, Speeds up formatting, Less stressful, organized
Learning and Training Needs	Needs hands-on practice, More training sessions, Online tutorials, YouTube-Better guidance
Challenges and Usability Issues	Not user-friendly, Difficult to cite books/reports, Limited knowledge of features, Underutilized functions
Impact on Academic Writing	Useful for manuscript writing, Better than manual referencing, Time-saving, accurate enhances academic writing, Improves research output

Conclusion

This study explored the use of Reference Management Software among postgraduate medical professionals in Sri Lanka. It focused on awareness, usage, benefits, challenges, and overall satisfaction. The findings indicate that Mendeley dominates RMS usage, with 86.4 percent of participants selecting it, and that 70.7 percent first learned about RMS through the PGIM Library Orientation. RMS was

found to improve citation management, research efficiency, and the organization of academic writing. Most trainees reported saving time and improving accuracy. Many strongly agreed that proper citation practices enhance research quality and help prevent plagiarism. The study also identified several challenges. Medical professionals reported difficulties using advanced features, citing specific sources, and navigating the software. Many expressed the need for more hands-on training, refresher sessions, and online tutorials to build confidence and skills. Cross-analysis showed that Registrars and MD trainees had higher usage and satisfaction levels. In contrast, Medical Officers and Pre-Registrars mainly used basic functions and showed lower confidence.

These results underscore the urgent need for structured, hands-on RMS training incorporating workshops, refresher courses, and online tutorials to bridge skill gaps and promote advanced feature utilization. Institutions should also integrate RMS instruction into curricula and strengthen technical support through dedicated library services. By addressing these areas, postgraduate medical professionals in Sri Lanka can fully leverage RMS capabilities, leading to more accurate citation practices, higher-quality academic writing, and ultimately stronger research outcomes and patient care.

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