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Awareness-Usage Gap of Reference Management Tools Among Social Science Researchers in Universities of Bihar: A Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the awareness, usage patterns, and barriers to adopting Reference Management Tools (RMTs) among PhD research scholars in the Social Science Faculty of five state government universities in Bihar, India. Utilizing a mixed-methods design, a survey was conducted with 267 scholars, yielding an 89% response rate. Findings reveal a critical paradox: while 88.39% of scholars are aware of RMTs, only 44.07% are active users. The primary barriers identified include a lack of training (73.39%) and perceived tool complexity (65.46%). Usage is highly irregular, with 65.57% utilizing tools only during the final thesis or paper writing phase. The study concludes that institutional efforts must shift from basic awareness to mandatory, practical training to bridge the significant awareness-adoption gap.

Introduction

In scholarly research, accurate citation and bibliographic management are fundamental to maintaining academic integrity. Traditional manual methods of managing diverse digital and print sources are increasingly inadequate and time-consuming in the digital age. Reference Management Tools (RMTs) such as Mendeley, Zotero, and EndNote offer automated solutions for collecting, organizing, and citing bibliographic data.

This study investigates the awareness and utilization of RMTs among 267 research scholars within the Faculty of Social Sciences in Bihar. The demographic profile of the participants reveals a predominantly young, early-career cohort (66.67% aged 26–35) with high gender parity and a balanced representation across subjects like Political Science, History, and Economics. Despite a high baseline awareness of

these tools (88.39%)—largely driven by Ph.D. coursework—preliminary observations suggest a disconnect between knowing about these tools and successfully integrating them into daily academic workflows. This paper seeks to analyze this “awareness-usage gap,” explore the barriers to adoption, and identify the specific support mechanisms required to foster a more digitally proficient research culture in the region.

Review of Literature

Wachira and Gwademba (2025) applied the Diffusion of Innovation (DIT) Theory, finding that 70% of respondents perceived Reference Management Tools (RMTs) as superior to manual referencing due to improved efficiency. **Patil et al. (2025)** noted that despite these benefits, many scholars

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still rely on Microsoft Word for references due to inadequate training. From an ethical standpoint, **Plevris (2025)** explored how RMTs can help mitigate unethical citation practices like self-citation inflation and coercive requests. **Nguyen et al. (2024)** found that Mendeley significantly boosted research productivity and quality among postgraduates in Vietnam, though technical issues remained a hurdle. **Kayusi et al. (2024)** analyzed specific predictors in Kenya, concluding that “Ease of Navigation” and “Training Effectiveness” significantly influenced software adoption, whereas institutional resources had a negligible impact. **Kavitha and Sathya (2024)** provided a critical meta-analysis, underscoring that while the role of RMTs is globally recognized as crucial, the challenge of transition from “awareness” to “usage” persists across academic groups. **Mvula (2023)** reported that despite high awareness in Zambia, usage remained low due to a lack of technical support. Similarly, **Mhokole (2023)** found low usage at the University of Dar es Salaam attributed to unreliable power and internet connectivity, despite students having a positive attitude toward the tools. **Singh, Mahawar, and Singh (2023)** emphasized that the primary value of the 30+ available Reference Management Tools (RMTs) lies in their ability to facilitate error-free, rapid style switching (APA to MLA, etc.). **Panda (2023)** and **Proske and Queitsch (2023)** both noted that modern systems have evolved into “research assistants” that integrate social bookmarking and collaborative annotation. **Nitsos et al. (2022)** and **Singh, Mahawar, and Singh (2022)** identified Mendeley and Zotero as the dominant choices among postgraduates. **Jegan and Balasubramanian (2022)** found that among faculty in Tamil Nadu, the APA style was the most prioritized referencing format. **Motlhake and Bopape (2021)** explored demographic factors, finding that academic discipline and degree level significantly influenced tool awareness. However, **Setiani et al. (2021)** noted that awareness of bibliographic software remained critically low in certain regions, such as Indonesia, during this period. **Rangaswamy and Babu (2021)** highlighted that 30% of researchers remained unfamiliar with RMTs due to a lack of library and technical support. **Wahyuningsih (2020)** identified that features like Word plug-ins and PDF management were the most valued but underutilized functions. **Adeyemi and Sulaiman (2020)** confirmed that while faculty members were aware of EndNote and Mendeley, acceptance did not always result in high-frequency use.

Objective of the Study

- . To assess the awareness of reference management tools among social science researchers in Bihar.
- . To assess the usage of reference management tools among

social science researchers in Bihar.

. To assess the awareness and actual usage rates of reference management tools.

. To identify the technical and systemic barriers to the adoption of reference management tools.

Research Methodology

. **Research Design:** A Mixed-Methods Design was employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative semi-structured interviews to provide a comprehensive view.

. **Population and Sample:** The study targeted PhD scholars in the Social Science Faculty of five established Bihar universities: Patna University, B.R.A. Bihar University, T.M. Bhagalpur University, Magadh University, and L.N. Mithila University.

. **Sampling Technique:** Stratified Random Sampling was used to ensure proportional representation across six social science subjects.

. **Data Collection:** 300 questionnaires were distributed, with 267 valid responses returned (89% response rate). Additionally, 50 scholars were interviewed.

. **Analysis Tools:** Data were analyzed using SPSS and MS Excel.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Demographic and Academic Profile

Gender of Respondent

Table-1: Gender of Respondents

Gender	No. of Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Male	138	51.69%
Female	129	48.31%
Total	267	100.00%

The data presented in Table 1 illustrate the gender distribution among the 267 research scholars surveyed for this study. The sample demonstrates near-parity in gender representation, with **51.69% (n=138) male** and **48.31% (n=129) female** participants. This balanced distribution (a margin of only 3.38%) enhances the study’s validity by ensuring that findings regarding RMT awareness and usage are not skewed by gender. Consequently, the results are highly generalizable across the broader research scholar population in the region.

Age Group of Respondents

Table 2: Age Group of Respondents

Age Group	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Less than 25 years	24	8.99%
26 to 30 years	97	36.33%
31 to 35 years	81	30.34%
Above 35 years	55	20.60%
Total	267	100.00%

Table 2 presents the age distribution of the 267 research scholars who participated in the study. The data indicate a high concentration of young and early-career researchers, with 66.67% of respondents aged between 26 and 35. This group is led by the 26–30 cohort (36.33%, n=97), followed by the 31–35 cohort (30.34%, n=81), while those under 25 represent a smaller segment (8.99%, n=24).

Subject of Respondents

Table 3: Subject of Respondents

Subject	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Political Science	48	17.98%
History	46	17.23%
Sociology	45	16.85%
Economics	44	16.48%
Geography	42	15.73%
Psychology	42	15.73%
Total	267	100.00%

Table 3 illustrates a highly balanced distribution of the 267 research scholars across the Faculty of Social Sciences. **Political Science** leads at 17.98% (n=48), followed closely by **History** (17.23%), **Sociology** (16.85%), and **Economics** (16.48%), while **Geography** and **Psychology** both stand at 15.73%. The data are notably homogeneous, showing a narrow variance of only 2.25 percentage points between disciplines. This structural parity eliminates disciplinary bias and ensures the study's findings on RMT engagement in Bihar are representative of the entire faculty.

5.1.4 Years of Research Experience

Table 4: Years of Research Experience

Years of Experience	Number of Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
0 - 1 Year	70	26.33
1 - 3 Years	97	36.27
3 - 5 Years	78	29.23
5 + Years	22	8.17
Total	267	100.00

Table 4 shows that the sample is predominantly composed of early to mid-stage researchers, with **91.83%** having less than five years of experience. The largest group consists of those with **1–3 years (36.27%, n=97)**, followed by **3–5 years (29.23%, n=78)** and **0–1 year (26.33%, n=70)**. Only a small fraction (**8.17%, n=22**) has more than five years of experience.

Awareness of Reference Management Tools

Awareness of Reference Management Tools (RTMs)

Table 5: Awareness of Reference Management Tools

Awareness	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Aware of RTMs	236	88.39%
Not Aware of RTMs	31	11.61%
Total	267	100%

Table 5 indicates a high level of baseline awareness regarding RMTs among the 267 surveyed scholars. A substantial majority are familiar (**88.39%, n=236**) with tools like Mendeley, Zotero, or EndNote, suggesting effective institutional outreach through coursework and library orientations. Only a small fraction (**11.61%, n=31**) remains uninformed about these digital resources. While informational efforts have successfully reached nearly 9 out of 10 scholars, high awareness does not automatically equate to adoption.

Awareness of Popular Reference Management Tools

Table 6: Awareness of Popular Reference Management Tools

Aware with RTMs	Percentage (N=236) (Multiple answers permitted)
EndNote	39.48%
Mendeley	87.24%
Zotero	84.07%
RefWorks	37.13%
Citavi	22.22%
Other tools	17.67%

(Note: This percentage is calculated based only on the respondents (n=236) who indicated that they were aware of reference management tools.)

Table 6 details the RMT familiarity among the 236 aware scholars, showing a clear preference for freemium models. Mendeley (87.24%) and Zotero (84.07%) dominate the landscape, serving as the primary “standard” tools. In contrast, proprietary software like EndNote (39.48%) and RefWorks (37.13%) sees significantly lower awareness, while niche tools like Citavi (22.22%) remain marginal.

First Learn About Reference Management Tools

Table 7: First Learn About Reference Management Tools

First Learn About RTMs	No. of Respondents (N=236)	Percentage (%)
Ph. D. Coursework	124	46.44
Online Workshop /Seminar	27	10.11
Peers or friends	19	7.12
Social media	46	17.23
Self-Curiosity/ Online resources	51	19.1
Total	267	100

(Note: This percentage is calculated based only on the respon-

First Source of Learning/Acquiring Knowledge about RTMs

Table 8: First Source of Acquiring Knowledge about RTMs

First Source of Learning/Acquisition	Number of Respondents (N=236)	Percentage (%)
Library Workshops/Training Sessions	101	43.07
Fellow Scholars/Peers	64	26.97
Supervisor/Guide (Primary Mentor)	46	19.48
Internet/Self-Learning (Websites, YouTube, Documentation)	25	10.49
Total	236	100

(Note: This percentage is calculated based only on the respondents (N=236) who indicated they were aware of reference management tools.)

Table 8 details where 236 scholars acquired functional RMT skills, emphasizing a reliance on institutional and social support. Library Workshops are the primary source of learning (43.07%), confirming the library's role as a central technical hub. Peers (26.97%) and Supervisors (19.48%) also play significant roles, while Self-Learning (10.49%) is notably

dependents (N=236) who indicated they were aware of reference management tools.)

Table 7 identifies how 236 scholars first encountered RMTs, highlighting the dual influence of formal academia and digital discovery. **PhD Coursework** is the leading source of first contact (**46.44%**), proving that institutional integration in the foundational curriculum is highly effective. Meanwhile, a combined **36.33%** of scholars discovered these tools through **Self-Curiosity (19.1%)** and **Social Media (17.23%)**, reflecting a proactive "bottom-up" adoption trend. Surprisingly, formal **Workshops (10.11%)** and **Peers (7.12%)** were less common as initial sources. This suggests that while coursework successfully introduces the tools, there is a significant opportunity for university libraries to become more proactive earlier in the research lifecycle.

lower for skill acquisition than it was for initial discovery. This data highlights that while discovery may happen independently, scholars prefer human-led instruction for practical application. The heavy reliance on peers suggests that formal training may not always be accessible, leading to informal knowledge sharing.

Utilization of Reference Management Tools

Use of Reference Management Tools for Research Purposes

Table 9: Use of Reference Management Tools

Usage Pattern	Number of Respondents (N=236)	Percentage (%)
Do Not Use Reference Management Tools	132	55.93
Use Reference Management Tools	104	44.07
Total	236	100

(*Note: This percentage is calculated based only on the respondents (N=236) who indicated they were aware of reference management tools.)

Table 9 highlights a significant "Awareness-Usage Gap" among the 236 scholars familiar with RMTs. Despite their

awareness, a majority—55.93% (n=132)—do not use these tools, while only 44.07% (n=104) have successfully integrated

them into their research workflow. This disparity suggests that while introductory efforts like PhD coursework effectively spread awareness, they fail to drive active adoption. The high rate of non-usage among aware scholars points to secondary

Use of Popular Reference Management Tools Data Interpretation: Use of Popular Reference Management Tools

Table 10: Use of Popular Reference Management Tools

Use of RTMs	Number of Respondents * (N=104)	Percentage (%)
EndNote	18	17.23
Mendeley	47	44.94
Zotero	26	25.84
RefWorks	7	6.37
Citavi	2	1.5
Other tools	4	4.12
Total	104	100

*(Note: The respondent counts were calculated based on the pro-

Key Utility of Reference Management Tools

Table 11: Key Utility of Reference Management Tools

Key Utility of RTMs	Number of Respon- dents* (N=104)	Percentage (multiple answers permitted)
Citation generation	77	74.22
Organizing references	79	76.23
Collaboration with peers	12	11.17
Importing references from databases	33	31.39
Note-taking capabilities	25	24.44
Total	104	100

*(Note: The respondent counts were calculated based on the provided percentages and the total sample size (N=104), representing those who actively use Reference Management Tools (RMTs), as identified in Table 4.9.)

Table 11 identifies the primary utilities of RMTs among 104 active users, revealing that the tools are mostly used as administrative aids. **Organizing references (76.23%)** and **citation generation (74.22%)** are the most valued functions, highlighting their role in managing bibliographic data and automating formatting. Conversely, advanced features are underutilized: only **31.39%** use RMTs for **database importing**, **24.44%** for **note-taking**, and a marginal **11.17%** for **peer collaboration**.

barriers such as perceived complexity or a lack of hands-on proficiency. To bridge this gap, institutional focus must shift from theoretical awareness to mandatory practical training that converts informed scholars into proficient users.

vided percentages and the total sample size (N=104), representing those who actively use Reference Management Tools (RMTs), as identified in Table 4.9.)

Table 10 identifies the software preferences of 104 active RMT users, revealing a strong lean toward freemium platforms. Mendeley leads with 44.94% (n=47) usage, followed by Zotero at 25.84% (n=26). Together, these open-access tools account for over 70% of the user base. EndNote maintains a steady presence at 17.23%, while RefWorks (6.37%) and Citavi (1.5%) see minimal adoption. The data confirm that social science scholars in Bihar prioritize tools that are financially accessible and easily integrated with web browsers. Since the top three tools—Mendeley, Zotero, and EndNote—account for 88% of total usage, university libraries should focus their support, customized templates, and workshops primarily on these platforms to maximize institutional impact.

Frequency of Using Reference Management Tools

Table 12: Frequency of Using Reference Management Tools

Frequency of Use	Number of Re- spondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Daily	Nil	Nil
Weekly	8	8.11
Monthly	27	26.22
Once in 6 Months	35	33.34
When writing thesis/pa- per only	34	32.23
Total	104	100.00

*(Note: The respondent counts were calculated based on the provided percentages and the total sample size (N=104), representing those who actively use Reference Management Tools (RMTs), as identified in Table 4.9.)

Table 4.12 reveals an irregular usage pattern among the 104 active RMT users, indicating that these tools are not part of their daily academic routine. Notably, zero respondents reported daily use, while only 8.11% (n=8) use them weekly. The vast majority (65.57%) engage with the software sporadically—either once every six months (33.34%) or exclusively during thesis/paper writing (32.23%). This “project-driven” behavior suggests that scholars treat RMTs as “crunch-time” tools for final bibliography generation rather than as daily workflow companions.

Barriers and Challenges

Main Barriers to Using Reference Management Tools

Table 13: Main Barriers to Using Reference Management Tools

Main Barriers to Using RTMs	Percentage (multiple answers permitted)
Lack of training	73.39
Complexity of tools	65.46
Limited features	12.32
Lack of institutional support	55.39

(Note: The respondent counts were calculated based on the provided percentages and the total sample size (N=104), representing those who actively use Reference Management Tools (RMTs), as identified in Table 4.9.)

Table 13 identifies significant pedagogical and systemic hurdles preventing effective RMT adoption. The primary obstacles are a lack of training (73.39%) and the complexity of tools (65.46%), suggesting that scholars feel technically ill-equipped despite being aware of the software. Additionally, 55.39% cited a lack of institutional support, highlighting a need for dedicated technical assistance. These findings clarify the “Awareness-Usage Gap”: the issue is not the software’s capability—as limited features (12.32%) were the least cited concern—but rather a deficiency in education. Scholars recognize the value of RMTs but find the learning curve too steep without formal guidance.

Support for Better Use of Reference Management Tools

Table 14: Support For Better Use of Reference Management Tools

Main Barriers to Using RTMs	Percentage (Multiple answers permitted)
Workshops and training sessions	75.48
Online tutorials	33.44
Access to guides/manuals	11.21
Peer support groups	43.69

Table 14 outlines a clear hierarchy of needs for RMT support, favoring interactive, human-led instruction over passive resources. The primary demand is for **Workshops and training sessions (75.48%)**, followed by **Peer support groups (43.69%)**. While **Online tutorials (33.44%)** show moderate interest, static **Guides and manuals (11.21%)** are the least preferred, as scholars find them insufficient for mastering complex software. This data provides a strategic roadmap for closing the “Implementation Deficit.”

Major Findings

- . **Representative Demographics:** The study features a highly balanced sample across **gender** (51.69% male, 48.31% female) and **academic subjects**, ensuring that findings are not skewed by disciplinary bias or gender.
- . **The “Awareness-Usage Gap”:** While **88.39%** of scholars are aware of RMTs, only **44.07%** of that group actually use them. This reveals that awareness (often gained through PhD coursework) does not automatically lead to adoption.
- . **Early-Career Target Group:** Over **91%** of respondents are in their first five years of research, and **66.67%** are aged 26–35. This “digital native” cohort is in the most intensive writing phase but lacks the technical training to adopt RMTs.
- . **Preference for Freemium Tools:** Active users overwhelmingly prefer free/open-source tools, specifically **Mendeley (44.94%)** and **Zotero (25.84%)**, over expensive proprietary software like EndNote.
- . **Superficial Utility & Sporadic Use:** RMTs are treated as “**crunch-time**” **administrative aids** rather than daily research companions.
 - . **74%–76%** use them only for basic citation and organization.
 - . **65.57%** use them only once every six months or only during final thesis writing.
 - . **Zero** respondents use them daily.
- . **Barriers to Adoption:** The primary obstacles are a **lack of formal training (73.39%)** and **perceived tool complexity (65.46%)**. Systemic issues, such as a lack of institutional support (55.39%), further hinder adoption.
- . **Strategic Support Needs:** Scholars explicitly reject static manuals (11.21%) in favor of **interactive workshops (75.48%)** and **peer support groups (43.69%)**. This highlights a demand for hands-on, social learning environments.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- . **Bridge the awareness-to-usage gap through practical training:** Since 88% of individuals are aware but only 44% actually use these tools, institutions must move beyond introductory lectures. The theory-heavy orientation in PhD coursework should be replaced with essential hands-on lab sessions.
- . **Promote Mendeley and Zotero support:** Given the 70%+ dominance of these free tools, these platforms should be prioritized. Customized citation style templates (aligned with university guidelines) should be developed for Mendeley and Zotero.
- . **Encourage workflow integration (daily use):** To address the “lack of implementation,” where no scholar uses RMTs daily, the mindset regarding their utility must change. Scholars should be trained on advanced features such as PDF annotation, real-time note-taking, and database syncing.

. **Formalize peer-to-peer learning networks:** Since 27% of scholars learn from their peers, this organic social learning should be leveraged. An “RMT Student Ambassador” or “Train-the-Trainer” program should be implemented in each department.

. **Strengthen library-led support systems:** Over 55% of scholars cited a lack of institutional support as a barrier. A dedicated RMT help desk (physical or virtual) should be established within the university library.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that social science PhD scholars in Bihar have a good understanding of reference management tools (RMTs) like Mendeley and Zotero, but a significant “implementation gap” persists. Although 88.39% are aware of or familiar with these tools—primarily through their PhD coursework—more than 55% do not use them. The main obstacles are not software limitations, but rather a lack of hands-on training (73.39%) and the perceived difficulty of using the tools (65.46%). Scholars prefer interactive support such as workshops and peer learning over passive manuals. To bridge this gap, institutions should shift from theoretical orientation to practical, daily workflow integration, enabling researchers to move away from manual citation methods and adopt efficient digital workflows.

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