



Students' Perception of Zotero Utilization in Reference Setting in the Academic Text Writing Process in Higher Education

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Zotero

RMS

Reference Management

Student

Perception

ABSTRACT

Purpose – Zotero is a Reference Management Software (RMS) that can help students manage references, citations, and bibliographies automatically. However, the background factors and the extent to which students understand and feel the benefits of using Zotero in this process have not been widely studied, especially from a qualitative research perspective. Therefore, this study aims to examine the factors behind using Zotero as a reference management tool and its impact on the process of writing academic texts for students.

Methodology – The research employs a qualitative design with data collected from twelve undergraduate students at Tanjungpura University during the 2023-2024 academic year. Participants were selected based on their confirmed experience using Zotero for academic writing. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns and themes in the responses.

Findings – The research findings indicate three main themes. The first theme is the perception of ease of use, with subthemes of ease of download, installation, and use, as well as ease of understanding and learning. The second theme is the perception of usefulness with the subthemes of time efficiency, improved score, improving writing quality, ease of citation, and bibliography, making it easy to translate. The third theme is the influence of using the subthemes of academic encouragement, friend encouragement, and lecturer encouragement. These findings underscore Zotero's effectiveness in supporting students' academic writing needs.

Significance – This research benefits educators, students, and academic institutions seeking to incorporate practical reference management tools into academic writing practices. It highlights Zotero's potential to streamline the writing process and improve academic outcomes, offering valuable insights for integrating technology into higher education curricula.

Received 21 December 2024; Received in revised form 26 December 2024; Accepted 27 February 2025

Jurnal Eduscience (JES) Volume 12 No. 2 (2025)

Available online xx February 2025

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INTRODUCTION

Managing references is one of the skills a researcher must possess (Basak, 2014; Kurniati et al., 2022). This is in order to produce quality work (Putra et al., 2023) and to avoid acts of plagiarism (Nursidika, Naully, Kania, & ..., 2021; Wibowo, 2012) which can occur due to a lack of expertise in citing the references used (Izzah & Lubis, 2021; Ngibad, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to use technology that can help the writing process (Aidid et al., 2020; Aziz et al., 2022). The technology used to organize references is with the help of Reference Management Software (RMS) (Parabhoi et al., 2017). RMS is one example of the tools developed to support writing tasks, such as organizing and locating various digital references (Ray & Ramesh, 2017). Some popular RMS are Mendeley, EndNote, RefWorks, and Zotero (Parabhoi et al., 2017), as focused on in this research.

Zotero is an RMS developed in 2008 by several librarians at George Mason University's Center for History and New Media (Parabhoi, 2017). Compared to other RMS, Zotero is one of the most popular, freely available programs designed to search, collect, cite, and distribute articles or research findings conducted online (Alshammari et al., 2023; Bonanni, 2022; D'Angelo et al., 2016; Haliq et al., 2021; Puckett, 2010; ud et al., 2023).

When first installed, Zotero automatically integrates with Microsoft Word (Haliq et al., 2021; Wicaksono & Nurpratama, 2017). Users can also integrate Google Docs accounts with popular web browsers like Chrome and Firefox, allowing them to quickly capture and save references while browsing the web (Ahmed & ..., 2011; Asy'ari et al., 2023). It doesn't stop there; users can synchronize their accounts with other RMSs, such as Mendeley (Chawla & Gupta, 2017), and facilitate co-authoring projects (Bonanni, 2022).

Some previous studies have revealed that the advantage of using Zotero is that it can read the source files of websites, PDFs, etc. (Alshammari et al., 2023) or read input via ISBN ID, DOI, or PubMed (Vaidhyanathan et al., 2012). RMS Zotero has the advantage over other RMSs in that it can track the search for research references that have been saved without requiring an internet connection and can save files into articles, making it easier to cite according to the references used (Hanum et al., 2021; Maleha & Pramita, 2023). With several other features, users can create, sort, and filter collections and sub-collections based on desired criteria (Asy'ari et al., 2023; Frantz et al., 2015). Some researchers have even mentioned that Zotero is beneficial for streamlining the maintenance of a reference library (Courraud, 2014; Kurniati et al., 2022).

With an RMS like Zotero, students should be helped writing academic texts. Several studies or trainings have reported the use of Zotero in some universities, such as in Indonesia as reported in several trainings and studies (Aziz et al., 2022; Haliq et al., 2021; Hermawati et al., 2023; Izzah & Lubis, 2021; Kurniati et al., 2022; Ngibad, 2020; Nursidika, Naully, Kania, & Rachmawati, 2021) including at Tanjungpura University, Pontianak. However, from many universities that have used Zotero, not many studies measuring the utilization of Zotero have been conducted, so the application's usefulness level is still not well measured, especially in helping to write academic texts. Therefore, research on student perceptions of Zotero utilization in assisting the writing process of academic texts is important.

To answer that, perception research needs to be conducted. Perception research is important to see the effective use of information (Cheney & Dickson, 1982; Lau & Woods, 2008). It can also improve understanding and prediction of technology utilization, especially in education (Lau & Woods, 2008). Therefore, research on student perceptions of Zotero utilization is important to improve our understanding and predictions of the application, especially in supporting academic activities in higher education.

There are not many previous studies related to student perceptions regarding the use of Zotero. Some studies such as those conducted by Rangaswamy & Babu (2021) mengungkap the reasons for choosing to use Zotero because of its ease of use: it is available for free, easy to download and install, saves researchers time, and is easy to customize the citation style that researchers need. The reasons for choosing Zotero are that it is easy to use, free, download and install, saves researchers time, and easily customizes the citation style researchers need. In addition, there are also several studies, such as those conducted by Izzah & Lubis (2021) and Ngibad (2020), which reveal that Zotero can reduce plagiarism, and those conducted by Hermawati et al. (2023), which reveal that Zotero is more straightforward and consistent in citation and

bibliography. In several trainings held in Indonesia, it was revealed that Zotero is easier and more effective in creating citations and bibliographies and improves students' ability to manage references easily, have a digital library, and efficiently write academic texts (Aziz et al., 2022; Haliq et al., 2021; Kurniati et al., 2022; Nursidika, Naully, Kania, & ..., 2021).

Rangaswamy and Babu (2021) used quantitative research to compare student perceptions of the Zotero and Mendeley applications. Other research, such as that conducted by Basri & Patak (2015), Fauziah & Yuliana (2023), and Zahro & Nugraha (2021), only focuses on Mendeley RMS. Research on student perceptions that specifically discuss Zotero with qualitative research has never been done, so this research must be done to see student perceptions of Zotero from a qualitative research perspective. In addition, these studies did not directly examine the phenomenon of utilizing Zotero as a tool in writing academic texts. Therefore, this study combines previous studies on student perceptions of RMS Zotero in writing academic texts with a qualitative research perspective.

This research is expected to be a reference for universities in developing writing, especially in writing better scientific papers and avoiding plagiarism. The results of this study contain an explanation that can explain directly how students use the Zotero application in writing scientific papers. The novelty of this research is to look deeper into using the Zotero application using a qualitative approach focusing on fourth-semester students. This study aims to understand more deeply how students perceive Zotero, one of the academic supporters, to avoid students avoiding plagiarism. Thus, this research is for application development and for universities to support using applications to improve education and learning outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative and phenomenological research design to understand students' perceptions of using Zotero in the lecture process, especially in writing academic texts. The choice of the method is based on the flexibility and support of the method in exploring more deeply the attitudes, experiences, and intentions of informants (Berg & Lune, 2017; Kitzynger, 1995). In addition, qualitative methods can produce varied ideas and opinions on an issue and can reveal dissimilarities in perceptions between groups (Berg & Lune, 2017). By utilizing qualitative research, researchers can discover areas not exposed by quantitative research (Dolan Mullen & Reynolds, 1978; Hashmi et al., 2017). Therefore, a semi-structured form of research is the best option. In addition, this study also uses a phenomenological research approach, which was chosen based on the function of this approach to describe phenomena by exploring the views of people who have directly experienced the phenomenon being explored and aiming to give meaning to these experiences from the question of what and how these experiences occur (Neubauer et al., 2019; Teherani et al., 2015). This research design, using qualitative methodology and a phenomenological approach, has a strong philosophical basis and is very suitable for interviewing or questionnaire techniques (Ridwan et al., 2022).

Participants

This research was conducted at Tanjungpura University Pontianak, West Kalimantan, which has the third lowest literacy rate after West Papua and Papua (Lukman et al., 2019), with the second highest level of digital literacy after Yogyakarta (Rizki et al., 2022). Therefore, this study seeks to measure the level of technology acceptance, namely RMS Zotero, with the condition that students are low in literacy but high in digital literacy.

The data in this study are responses regarding the Zotero application as a tool that helps in writing academic texts. The data population in this study were 70 students of the Indonesian Language Education Study Program, FKIP Tanjungpura University, who took the Scientific Writing Skills course. The research sample was selected consciously using a purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: (1) willing to provide information about the use of Zotero in writing academic texts; (2) able to install RMS

Zotero; (3) have used Zotero at least twice a week and understand the use of Zotero well, (4) have written (are writing) research articles using Zotero assistance. From these criteria, a research sample of 12 respondents was selected, consisting of 11 female and one male respondent with an age range of 19-20 years. The complete demographics of the research respondents can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of Research Respondents

Code	Age	Gender)	Frequency of Use (weekly)
R1	19	Female	15
R2	20	Female	4
R3	20	Female	5
R4	20	Male	2
R5	19	Female	5
R6	20	Female	3
R7	21	Female	3
R8	20	Female	8
R9	20	Female	8
R10	19	Female	2
R11	20	Female	2
R12	20	Female	5

Data Collection

This study used A semi-structured interview as a data collection technique. Interviews with respondents were conducted after an appointment was made. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian because it is the language of education in Indonesia. Each interview lasted for 20 to 25 minutes. Questions were asked, and respondents could express additional views and opinions. The tools used in collecting research data were a recording device/handphone, pen, and notebook to facilitate research into themes that emerged during the interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded, and small notes were taken to avoid errors in data collection. After the interviews, the audio recordings were verified for accuracy and consistency by listening to the recordings.

Data Analysis

The data in this study were tested for validity by utilizing triangulation techniques to get a complete picture of the explored phenomenon. The technique was chosen based on its ability to accommodate the collection of more complete research data from several sources (Jentoft & Olsen, 2019). Based on that, the researcher, in this case, utilizes data triangulation to collect data on student perceptions regarding using Zotero in writing academic texts from more varied data sources, namely several students who have experience using the tool.

After listening to the recording, the researcher transcribed the data from voice to text and then analyzed the transcript line by line. The researcher read the data repeatedly and analyzed it thematically using thematic data analysis techniques. Thematic analysis is used to determine, investigate, organize, describe, and report themes found in a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022; Muzammil et al., 2023). The stages of thematic data analysis in this research refer to the views of Nowell et al. (2017), namely: 1) understanding the research data comprehensively, 2) generating initial codes, 3) uncovering themes, 4) double-checking, 5) providing definitions of general theme and minor themes, 6) making reports.

FINDINGS

Based on thematic data analysis, there are three themes, each with subthemes. The first theme is the perception of ease of use, with subthemes of ease of download, installation, and use, as well as ease of

understanding and learning. The second theme is the perception of usefulness with the subthemes of time efficiency, improved score, improving writing quality, ease of citation, and bibliography, making it easy to translate. The third theme is the influence of use with the subthemes of academic encouragement, friend encouragement, and lecturer encouragement.

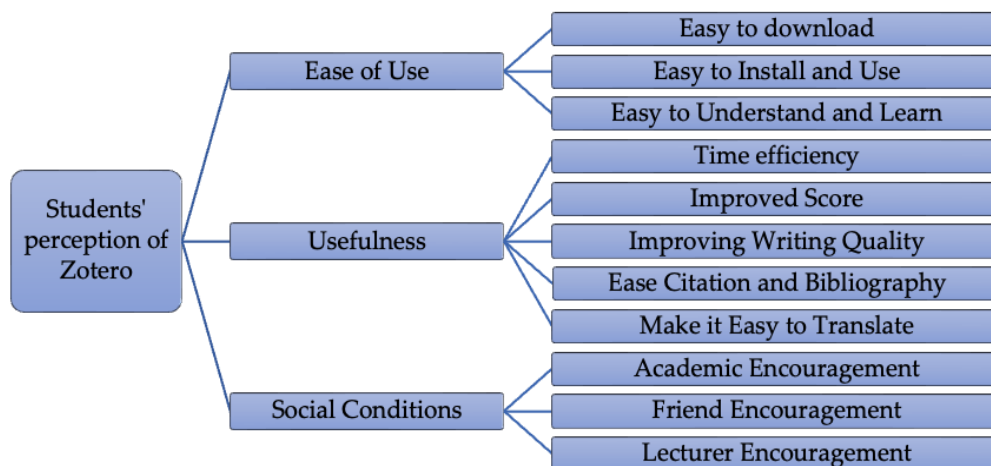


Figure 1. Diagram of Perception of Zotero

Ease of Use

Based on the interviews' results, some respondents expressed perceptions regarding ease of use, such as being easy to download, install, and use and easy to understand and learn. The discussion of these themes and the results of the corroborating interviews are presented as follows.

Easy to Download

The research findings show that some respondents admitted that Zotero was easy to use because it was easy to download. Interviews and discussions regarding this are shown below.

... the Zotero application is easy to download and does not cause errors when used (R3).

...The Zotero application is easy to download via Google Web, which makes it easier to do lecture assignments (assignments using RMS) (R12).

The interview results above show that Zotero is considered easy to obtain because it is easy to download. Users, in this case, students, feel helped by the Zotero application, which is available for free. Users, namely R3 and R12, go to the official Zotero website and download it with a few clicks.

Easy to Install and Use

The findings revealed that the Zotero app was easy to download, install, and use, as shown below.

...Zotero is relatively easy to access because the features it provides are appropriate for its use. In addition, the size of the Zotero application is also not too large, so it does not hamper the laptop's speed when accessing it (R7).

My laptop is compatible with Zotero because, after downloading the application, its integration feature with Microsoft Word is already useful (R10).

...The devices I use, especially laptops, are very compatible with Zotero because after I download the Zotero application, it is automatically listed in the Word application, which will be very useful when I cite an article I made (R11).

The interview results above show that Zotero is seen as an easy application to install and use, as stated by R7, R10, and R11. This is because the application does not require a lot of memory, so it does not take a

long time to install and does not error when used. After installing, Zotero will automatically connect with MS Word so that it does not make it difficult for students when installing.

Easy to Understand and Learn

The research findings show that some respondents admitted that Zotero was easy to use because the application was easy to understand and learn how to use. Interviews and discussions regarding this are shown below.

...The Zotero application is easy to understand and has apparent features that make it easy to use (R12).

...The features contained in Zotero are easy to learn, making it easier to do assignments in lectures (R9).

The interview results above show that Zotero is considered easy to understand and learn. With its easy-to-understand and learn nature, users, in this case students, feel helped, as expressed by R12 and R9. In the interviews conducted with R12 and R9, they admitted that their interest in Zotero was because it was easy to understand and learn, which was very helpful for more utilization of the application.

Usefulness

Based on the data analysis, there is a theme regarding the usefulness of the Zotero application. The theme is further divided into several subthemes, such as time efficiency, improved score, improving writing quality, ease of citations and bibliography, and making it easy to translate. The discussion of these themes and the corroborating interview results are presented as follows.

Time Efficiency

The research findings show that some respondents recognized that Zotero speeds up the process of writing academic texts. The interviews and discussion on this matter are presented below.

...Using Zotero can help me speed up the research process because Zotero can store various quality research articles from other researchers (R5).

...In my personal experience, Zotero is a valuable application in my learning during lectures (academic text writing assignments) (R6).

The results of the interviews above show that Zotero accelerates students' writing, especially their work on lecture assignments related to research article writing projects, as expressed by R5 and R6. With Zotero, students can more easily manage quality references.

Improved Score

The research findings show that some respondents admitted using Zotero helped them get better grades. Below are interviews and discussions regarding this.

...Using Zotero increases my chances of getting better grades because my lecturer requires using Zotero instead of other applications (R5).

Using Zotero can increase my chances of getting better grades in that field (R6).

The interview results above show that by using Zotero students can get better grades as expressed by R5 and R6. Respondents recognized that with Zotero, citations and bibliographies are well connected, and the sources used are reliable so that they can improve lecture grades.

Improving Writing Quality

The research findings show that some respondents admitted that using Zotero could improve the quality of their writing. Below are interviews and discussions regarding this.

...Using Zotero can improve my literacy of articles, exceptionally high-quality articles (R5)

Using Zotero requires serious accuracy, which can often make me literate enough to retrieve accurate references (R6).

The interview results above show that by using Zotero, students can improve the quality of their writing, as expressed by R5 and R6. With Zotero, students are more motivated to use quality and accurate articles because of several features, such as the translator feature and the automatic article document search feature, making it easier for students to reach articles from the metadata collected by article collection tools

such as Publish or Perish.

Ease of Citation and Bibliography

The research findings show that some respondents acknowledged that Zotero was easy to use because the application was easy to use when creating citations and bibliographies. Interviews and discussions regarding this are shown below.

... Zotero is very easy to use, especially when we want to make citations in scientific papers. Compared to the Mendeley application, the Zotero application is easy to use for beginners who are just entering the world of writing scientific papers because they can directly cite (R1).

... The use of Zotero for the lecture process is straightforward, mainly citing citations in other people's articles that we want to quote. Zotero also makes it easy to create a bibliography manually to avoid plagiarism (R2).

The interview results above show that Zotero is seen as easy to use in citations, as expressed by R1 and R2. Zotero is seen as an easier tool to use than similar applications. With the ease of citation, students, in this case, are helped to avoid plagiarism.

Make it Easy to Translate

The research findings show that some respondents acknowledged that Zotero was easy to use because the application was easy to use when translating articles into foreign languages. Interviews and discussions regarding this are shown below.

...There is no need to use Google Translate to translate foreign language articles because Zotero can directly translate foreign language articles, which is a plus point of Zotero (R9).

...It can make it easier to translate foreign-language articles into Indonesian. Using Zotero, we do not need to translate word by word from a foreign language to Google Translate (R10).

The interview results above show that Zotero is considered easy to translate foreign language articles, as revealed by R9 and R10. Features in the Zotero application can be added according to the availability of plugins, such as translation features, making it easier for first-semester students to understand articles in foreign languages, including English. With this feature, students no longer need to use other translator applications. They need to shade the part they want to translate, and Zotero will automatically translate it while connected to the internet.

Social Conditions

Based on the research data analysis, a theme was found regarding the perception of social conditions as an influence on the use of the Zotero application in the university environment. The theme is further divided into several subthemes: academic encouragement, friend encouragement, and lecturer encouragement. The discussion of these themes, along with the results of the corroborating interviews, is presented in full as follows.

Academic Encouragement

The research findings show that some respondents admitted that using Zotero was also suggested by the academic side, especially the study program. Interviews and discussions regarding this are shown below.

...Zotero, especially in the study program, suggests using the application because it makes it easier for students to write scientific articles and is very helpful for completing assignments given by lecturers (R4).

...The academic department advises students to use this Zotero application because it can help facilitate students in doing assignments and finding quality articles (R7).

The interview results above show that Zotero is recommended for use in academia, as expressed by R4 and R7, who were advised by their academic administrators to use Zotero. With the encouragement of academics, students are becoming more massive users of RMS, one of which is Zotero, especially when writing academic texts.

Friend Encouragement

The research findings show that some respondents admitted that friends also suggested using Zotero. Interviews and discussions regarding this are shown below.

...I was influenced by friends who had already used the Zotero application, so I could use Zotero well because the environment also used Zotero a lot. (R4)

...My friends helped me use Zotero. If I do not understand, my lecturer or friends will help me to use Zotero. (R8)

The interview results above show that the use of Zotero is influenced by the environment around students, such as their peers. With friends who have used it first, students find it easier to ask questions and model the use of the RMS as a tool to help write academic texts.

Lecturer Encouragement

The research findings show that some respondents admitted that using Zotero was also influenced by the lecturers teaching the courses, especially courses related to academic textwriting. Interviews and discussions regarding this are shown below.

Some lecturers require the use of the Zotero application because their course is related to writing scientific papers. The lecturer requires the use of Zotero because it facilitates assignments, especially for writing scientific articles (R4).

...My lecturer recommends using the Zotero application because there are so many functions that we can utilize by using Zotero. In addition to using it to cross-reference the articles we make, it can also help us translate articles that use foreign languages. (R8)

The interview above shows that lecturers greatly influence students' intention to use RMS, in this case Zotero, as expressed by R4 and R8. Some respondents even admitted that they are required to use Zotero because of the many conveniences that students can receive.

DISCUSSION

This study successfully revealed that students have a positive response towards using the Zotero application, which can be seen from the themes that emerged from the results of the research data analysis. Students generally perceive Zotero as an easy-to-access, download, and install application. It is very relevant to the applications used by students in writing academic texts, such as MS Word, so it affects their comfort in using the application when writing academic texts in college. The findings align with previous research, which reveals that the ease of downloading makes students choose the application for doing citations and writing bibliographies. That way, students can easily download and use the Zotero application to support learning activities in college. This convenience influences students in choosing other RMSs, which are seen as having difficulties registering or creating an account. For example, the Mendeley RMS (Muzammil et al., 2024) revealed that some students had difficulty connecting Mendeley with Ms Word.

In addition to being easy to access, download, install, and relevant to writing applications, research respondents also revealed that the first time they used Zotero, they could easily understand and learn how to operate the application to assist the citation and bibliography writing process. With that, students were more encouraged to use Zotero in the future. This is in line with other research (Muzammil et al., 2023), which reveals that the main reason for choosing an application to help the learning process is the ease of understanding and learning how it works. In addition, some other researchers (Muzammil et al., 2024) also revealed that the reason for RMS utilization was its usefulness in the citation process and the appearance of the bibliography.

The following finding concerns the usefulness of the Zotero application, which significantly facilitates students' lecture process. In this case, RMS Zotero can speed up the writing process faster than using manual methods to cite and bring up the bibliography. This automation makes writing time more efficient, and students can focus on improving the quality of their writing. This is in accordance with previous research (Muzammil et al., 2024), which revealed that the use of RMS can help writing tasks be completed faster.

Students in this study considered Zotero an application that can help them improve their scientific

work assessment. This is because Zotero makes citation easier and makes it easier to create a bibliography (Aziz et al., 2022; Haliq et al., 2021; Kurniati et al., 2022; Nursidika, Naully, Kania, & ..., 2021). With that, plagiarism will be easier to avoid so that lecturers no longer have difficulty checking student writing results (Nursidika, Naully, Kania, & ..., 2021; Wibowo, 2012). Previous research related to Zotero utilization analysis has also revealed similar things (Baso et al., 2023; Haliq et al., 2021), namely the reason for helping to create a bibliography automatically. Previous research related to Mendeley has also revealed similar things (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2019; Iskandar & Patak, 2019; Patak & Tahir, 2019; Patak et al., 2016) namely, the reason for choosing Mendeley as a reference managerial tool is because of the ease of citation.

Another interesting finding was the effect of Zotero on the quality of students' writing, which would improve their grades in the scientific writing course. The research findings reveal that Zotero facilitates students' access to scientific publications and motivates them to use reputable scientific articles. This is due to features such as the automatic PDF search feature with unlimited pages, which gives students more choices in utilizing articles in their literature review process that are incredibly relevant and quality. With this feature, of course, students' scientific reading is increasing. This is based on the statement of previous research (Kaur, 2017), which reveals that using RMS can improve the quality of student writing in the future.

This research also reveals the influence of students' use of Zotero, namely the influence of academic parties, friends, and lecturers who suggest using the application. With this encouragement, students massively use RMS, including using Zotero. Previous research related to Mendeley Reference Manager has also revealed similar things (Arifiyana & Prasetyawan, 2023), namely the reasons for using Mendeley because academics, suggested by friends, require it. In addition, several other studies have also revealed that the big reason for using RMS is the encouragement of lecturers (Muzammil et al., 2024).

This research brings novelty by using a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore students' perceptions of Zotero utilization, which is rarely discussed in previous literature, mainly using quantitative methods. With a focus on early semester students at Tanjungpura University who are in an area with low reading literacy but high digital literacy, this study offers unique insights into how Zotero helps students transition toward quality academic writing. This research also explores the influence of social factors such as peer, lecturer, and academic support in driving Zotero adoption. Findings show that Zotero improves students' time efficiency, writing quality, and academic grades while reducing plagiarism. Thus, this study contributes to the development of higher education by recommending the integration of Zotero in the curriculum, opening further research opportunities, and reinforcing the importance of RMS in supporting academic literacy in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully revealed that students positively respond to utilizing the Zotero application in writing academic texts. The main findings show that Zotero is considered easy to access, download, and install and relevant to writing applications such as MS Word, thus providing convenience. Students also rated Zotero as easy to learn and have features that support time efficiency in the citation process and the automatic creation of bibliographies. This makes it easier for students to produce quality scientific work, prevent plagiarism, and improve their academic grades.

In addition, Zotero's features, such as automatic search of PDF files, motivate students to utilize reputable scientific articles, which improves the quality of their writing. Influences from academics, friends, and lecturers also contributed significantly to encouraging the massive use of Zotero among students. Thus, the Zotero app has proven effective in supporting students' academic needs and improving the quality of their learning in higher education.

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