

A study of citation accuracy in psychology theses submitted to the University of Mysore

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This paper is an attempt to examine the accuracy of references in five psychology theses submitted to the University of Mysore. Nine hundred and twenty three references were verified for their accuracy. Seventy seven percent of the references had citation errors. The errors were classified as major and minor errors. The major errors included incorrect journal names, articles titles, author and citations such as wrong volumes, issues, years and page numbers. Minor errors included: punctuations, incomplete article titles, and incomplete author names. The study found that 39.54 percent of the references contained major errors. Misspelling author(s) name (21.77%), misspelling of titles (37.93%), mistakes in volume (5.76%) and issue numbers (1.15%), mistakes in year (37.66%) and page numbers (62.33%) were kinds of major errors found in the study. Lack of awareness about referencing techniques and lack of diligence in compilation of bibliography are the reasons for such errors. This study suggest for imparting training for young researcher to follow appropriate reference styles and maintain the accuracy of the references.

Introduction

The doctoral degree is the highest academic degree aspired by the students. Bibliography is one of the important components of a thesis or dissertation. In India, thesis is the research report submitted for award of Ph.D. degree. References cited in a Ph D. thesis provide background material for the subject of the article and support for comments made or theories expanded, and they demonstrate to the reader that the researcher has researched the topic in question comprehensively. A reference list allows the reader access to related documents on the subject of the thesis in order to gain further information when required. In Indian context the supervisor will examine both the content and structure of the whole thesis, including references, tables, figures and figure legends. On many occasions, it is necessary for the supervisor to refer to the references included in the manuscript of the thesis to obtain clarification on certain points. If such a reference is not easily obtainable, it not only frustrates the supervisor, but also points to a lack of care on the part of the researcher in ensuring the accuracy of the thesis.

Errors in references may be due to number of reasons. There are certain guidelines – referencing standards – to be followed in theses. Reference errors commonly occur, because authors fail to adhere to such guidelines. Although the basic format is similar for most journals, there are minor, but significant, differences between the various standards (for e.g., APA Reference Style, MLA Reference Style and Chicago Manual of Style etc). When such instructions are not adhered to, it reflects a lack of care by the researchers in ensuring their references are structurally correct. Other reference errors may be the result of incorrect spellings of author or source name as well as incorrect data, such as wrong page numbers or dates. Such errors may lead to difficulty in locating references when required, or indeed an inability to do so.

Previous studies of the accuracy of references in the medical and scientific literature show that reference errors are common. Although several studies have evaluated the accuracy of bibliographic citations in the published medical literature, we are unaware of any study that has assessed the accuracy of reference

citations in theses. In this context, in this paper an attempt has been made to evaluate the error rate of citations and, also analyze the source and causes of citation errors as found in Ph D theses.

Review of literature

According to Blaise Cronin citations are “*frozen footprints in the landscape of scholarly achievement ... which bear witness to the passage of ideas*”¹. Based on the citations or references found in scholarly publications, researchers continue or try to find solutions to research problems. Citations helps researchers keep an eye on published literature on particular subject domain of interest. Citations found in research reports including journal articles, Ph D. thesis, conference papers and similar documents are one of the important source of information for identifying the previous research. Citation errors impede immediate retrieval of the original articles². In this connection the present study reviewed some of the articles on reference accuracy to understand the importance of error free reference lists in doctoral thesis and scholarly journals.

Broadus in his study has investigated the validity of bibliographic citations. The study observed that the references found in journals were often lifted from others work without refereeing to the original articles. The study found that 23 percent of the citing papers misquoted the title of the cited articles³. In a survey of the five dental science journals, Doms found that 50 percent of the references cited in five dental science journals were incorrect. *Journal of the American Dental Association* was the most erroneous in terms of the accuracy of references. The main reason for reference inaccuracy was, *Journal of the American Dental Association* does not define a specific reference format for authors to follow. The lack of guidelines produced inconsistency in the ways that the references were cited. For example, some references listed first author name with "and others", whereas different references would list the first three authors with "et al" observed by Doms⁴. In a similar study Raja & Cooper have examined the accuracy of references in *Emergency Medical Journal (EMJ)* a major medical journal in the UK. They found that 19 percent of the references in EMJ were not accurate. Of the total 2561 references, 212 (8%) references were reported as containing major errors (some cases first author names were missing; misspelled author

names and titles were found). They suggests that there must be a multiple checking points (submission of photocopies of first and last page of all references cited in the submitted article, directly downloading articles from databases instead of manually copying them from original sources and checking references randomly by the paper reviewers) to minimize reference errors⁵.

Vargas-Origel et al⁶ have examined the accuracy of references in pediatric journals. They examined key data such as author(s); study title; name and abbreviation of journal; year; volume; and initial and final pages that constitutes citations. The study claims that overall error rate was lowest compared to a similar study done by Siebers and Holt⁷. Wilks and Spivey⁸ have surveyed the authors and editors of highly peer reviewed social works scholarly journals to determine the importance of reference accuracy and who was responsible (author or editors) for the accuracy of the reference lists. The study revealed that journal editors were responsible in maintaining the accuracy of references in journals. On the other side, authors felt that they were the primarily responsible for the accuracy of references and not the editors of the journals. Aronsky et al⁹ have tried to determine the rate and the type of reference errors in biomedical informatics journals. The study found that there was a considerable error rate in the biomedical informatics journals. Of the 656 references examined 225 (34.3%) references contained at least one error. Most of the errors occurred in the author element (39.00%) followed by journal title (31.2%), article title (17.7%), page number (7.4%), year (3.5%), and volume (1.3%) element. The study echoed similar findings reported by Wilks and Spivey⁸ in which authors held the primary responsibility for maintaining the reference accuracy.

Jiao et al² made an effort to identify the psychological causes for making reference errors. They have examined the relationship between reference errors and library anxiety among doctoral students. The study revealed that 31.81 percent references found in doctoral proposals were erroneous. The study argues that if the library anxiety among student community was reduced, the accuracy rate of the references could be increased. Here, an attempt has been made to examine the reference accuracy of doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Mysore in the field of Psychology.

Methodology

In order to conduct this study five psychology theses, shelved at the Mysore University Library, were randomly selected. All the reference sources cited in these five theses were considered for the study. In all, accuracy of 923 references in five psychology theses was examined. In order to identify the accuracy level of the references provided these theses following steps were undertaken:

If the reference was a journal article, the journal website was visited. The details of the articles as found in the journal website were taken as the basis for comparison.

If the details for comparison was not found on journal website for any reason, the citation details as available in the Google Scholar was taken as the basis for comparison.

If the reference was a book or a conference proceedings, the bibliographical details pertaining to the particular book or conference proceedings were compared with the details available in the Library of Congress database or any other national library websites.

For any other genre of items, appropriate online sources were searched for obtaining the correct details for comparison.

A similar approach used by Doms⁴ was employed in this study for the classification of reference errors. The types of errors found in references were categorized as: major errors and minor errors. The major error included: incorrect journal titles, articles titles, author and citations such as wrong volumes, issues, year & first page numbers. Minor errors included: punctuations, incomplete article titles, incomplete author initials and an error in the last page number. All the references in the five theses were checked for major and minor errors. The detailed result of the study is presented in the succeeding section of this paper.

Analysis

Five theses in the field of psychology were randomly selected from the shelves of reference section of Mysore University library. Only those theses that followed the APA style for references were chosen so that comparison among them could be made on equal footing. The five theses were submitted between the

years 2001 to 2006. Table 1 shows the details of the theses considered for the study. Each of the theses has been given a unique code: T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5, which would be the unique identifier for the thesis in the remaining section of this paper. The author and supervisor details have not been revealed to maintain the anonymity of the researchers who have submitted the theses. But a few keywords that appears in the theses title are given to indicate the area of research:

Number of references

Compared to other forms of scientific literature, a thesis contains comprehensive bibliographic references. Thus it is but natural to expect that the average number of references per thesis to be more. In one of the earlier studies, the number of references was between 6 and 20¹⁰. Another study indicates that there were 200 references from 100 papers¹¹.

Table 2 shows the number of references contained in the theses considered in the study. The number of references ranged from 103 to 286. The total number references amounts to 923. An average 184.6 references were found.

Number of errors

Reference citations in scholarly publishing have never been more important than in the age of electronic distribution. Clearly, reference citations are critical,

Table 1—Five psychology theses selected for the study

| Sl. no. | Theses code | Year | Some keywords in the title |
|---------|-------------|------|---|
| 1. | T1 | 2001 | Social behavior, Slender loris |
| 2. | T2 | 2001 | Anxiety disorders, benzodiazepines |
| 3. | T3 | 2005 | Psychosocial factors, Clinical population |
| 4. | T4 | 2005 | Perceptual process, tribal community. |
| 5. | T5 | 2006 | Coping resources, Coronary heart disease patients |

Table 2—Total number of references

| Sl. no | Thesis code | Total number of reference |
|--------|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1. | T2 | 103 |
| 2. | T1 | 124 |
| 3. | T4 | 136 |
| 4. | T3 | 274 |
| 5. | T5 | 286 |
| Total | 05 | 923 |

Table 3—Number of errors

| SL. no. | Thesis code | Total number of references | Total number of errors | Average number of errors | Percentage of errors |
|---------|-------------|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. | T2 | 103 | 105 | 1.01 | 9.54 |
| 2. | T1 | 124 | 124 | 01 | 11.27 |
| 3. | T4 | 136 | 265 | 1.94 | 24.09 |
| 4. | T3 | 274 | 266 | 0.97 | 24.18 |
| 5. | T5 | 286 | 340 | 1.18 | 30.90 |
| Total | 5 | 923 | 1100 | 1.19 | 100 |

Table 4—Major errors

| Thesis code | Number of references | Major errors | Percent |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------|---------|
| T1 | 124 | 15 | 4.11 |
| T2 | 103 | 59 | 16.16 |
| T3 | 274 | 131 | 35.89 |
| T4 | 136 | 79 | 21.64 |
| T5 | 286 | 81 | 22.19 |
| Total | 923 | 365 | 100 |

enabling measurability and discoverability. The problem, of course, is that reference quality and accuracy have been a known issue in journal publishing for many years. Even before the dawn of electronic distribution, periodic reference studies exposed sloppy reference work and exhorted authors and journal publishers to do better. Such studies continue in a number of fields and report reference errors in published articles that range from 4 percent to 48 percent, depending on the community and journal being studied.

Table 3 shows the number of errors found in the theses considered in the study. It may be observed that the ratio of number of errors to number of references is 923:1100. The average error is 1.19. This means every reference in the theses considered in the study contains at least one error. This is a very disturbing result. The earlier studies on medical journals indicate the average error is less than 0.50, which means for every two references there was one mistake in the reference.

It may be seen that each reference cited had 1.19 errors on an average. The researcher and the supervisors have to take responsibility for making the thesis error free. But, it is unfortunate that many errors were found in the bibliographical references found in the theses. This clearly indicates the casual

attitude in compiling the bibliography by the concerned.

Major errors

Errors found in the bibliographical references were classified in to two categories, viz., major errors and minor errors. Major errors in accuracy included errors in journal names (or title of book or book chapter), name of the book or chapter author, page numbers and journal volume or year of publication.

Table 4 gives the details of major errors. Out of the 923 references from the five psychology theses, major errors were found in 365 cited references (39.54%). While T1 has the least major error (4.11%), T3 has the highest error amounting to 35.89%. Even other theses have significantly higher percentage of errors.

Major errors are the serious type of errors. One would expect zero or lesser level of errors with respect to this type of error. It is unfortunate to find that except for one thesis (T1), all others have higher level of errors in this study.

Minor errors

Punctuation errors and format errors are considered as minor errors. Though minor errors may not affect the identification of referenced item, they have an impact

on the consistency and uniformity of the structure of the references. It might have some influence in the automatic extraction of data into the electronic databases and automatic indexing services.

Table 5 depicts the percentage wise distribution of minor errors found in the study. T5 has contributed more minor errors than other theses studied in this paper, where as T2 contributed least number of minor errors. These minor errors may have been easily avoided by following the guidelines given in the referencing standards. The use of good referencing software (EndNote, JabRef, RefWorks etc) would completely eliminate the minor errors. Proper training in referencing technique to the researchers would also minimize the problem of committing minor errors.

Accuracy level

Accuracy is a measure of quality. A high profile publication like Ph.D. thesis needs to have the accuracy level at a very high position with respect to the bibliographic citations also. Craving for the high level accuracy in bibliographic references is one of the good qualities of a researcher

The present study indicates (see Table 6) that only T3 has higher accuracy level than the other theses. Of the

210 correct references, T3 has contributed 37.61 percent. T1, on the other hand, has the least correct references (7.14%).

Errors in citing name of the author

Referencing errors in the name of the authors seems to be common. Even earlier studies have reported the citation errors with respect to authors' name^{4,7}. Errors in authors' names pertain to the wrong spellings, omission of subsequent authors' name, punctuation errors, and errors in capitalization. Some of these errors, particularly wrong spellings and omission constitute a major kind of error.

This study found that errors in the proper usage of the punctuation are the major mistake committed by the psychology researchers of University of Mysore. As can be seen from Table 7 spelling mistake contributes to more than half of the errors (53.13%) committed by the researchers. It appears that lack of training is the major reason for committing such errors. Use of referencing software will reduce the punctuation errors drastically.

Wrongly spelt authors' name is the next major kind of error found by this study (Table 6). Of course, this is a serious category of errors. It is because inaccuracies

Table 5—Minor references errors

| Sl. no. | Thesis code | Number of references | Minor errors | Percent |
|---------|-------------|----------------------|--------------|---------|
| 1. | T1 | 124 | 109 | 19.53 |
| 2. | T2 | 103 | 44 | 7.89 |
| 3. | T3 | 274 | 143 | 25.63 |
| 4. | T4 | 136 | 57 | 10.22 |
| 5. | T5 | 286 | 205 | 36.74 |
| Total | | 923 | 558 | 100 |

Table 6—Accuracy level of references

| Sl. no. | Thesis code | Total references | Correct references | Percent |
|---------|-------------|------------------|--------------------|---------|
| 1. | T1 | 124 | 15 | 07.14 |
| 2. | T2 | 103 | 22 | 10.47 |
| 3. | T3 | 274 | 79 | 37.61 |
| 4. | T4 | 136 | 42 | 20.00 |
| 5. | T5 | 286 | 52 | 24.76 |
| Total | | 923 | 210 | 100 |

in the name of the authors may make it difficult for the prospective readers to retrieve papers from bibliographies and databases. Table 8 below depicts the sample of errors found in the theses considered in the study. It may be seen that some of the mistakes pertain to citing the initials wrongly.

Another serious citation error found by the study is the omission of name of the authors. This kind of error contributes up to 21.77 percent in the present study. The capitalization errors have been committed by the researchers. This error can be minimized for great extent through proper training and/or use of good referencing software for compilation of bibliography.

Errors in the title

Title is the most important component of bibliographic details of a publication. Concern about the accuracy of referencing the titles have been expressed repeatedly by earlier studies. In spite of this there is a tendency to show lack of seriousness by the researchers in citing the titles properly. In this study

also this tendency is revealed by the researchers. The inaccuracies in title may be categorized into four types of errors, viz., incomplete titles; omission of words; spelling errors; and punctuation errors. This study collected the data regarding all the above categories and the results are provided in Table 9.

As per Table 8, punctuation errors are found to be the most common errors among the researchers of psychology. Mistakes committed in spellings form the next highest errors amounting to 37.93 percent. Surprisingly in 11.49 percent of mistakes relate to the omission of words. Incomplete titles constitute the 4.02 percent mistakes in the study. All these errors could have been avoided if the researchers had taken extra care in reproducing the titles of the research papers they cite. Referencing software allow the titles to be downloaded directly from authenticated databases. Probably use of such software would minimize the referencing inaccuracies in the titles.

Table 10 shows a few exemplars of the title mistakes collected during the course of the study. From the

Table 7—Errors in citing authors’ name

| Errors in citing authors’ name | T1 | T2 | T3 | T4 | T5 | Total | Percent |
|--------------------------------|----|----|-----|-----|-----|-------|---------|
| Omission | 03 | 10 | 02 | 18 | 04 | 37 | 06.44 |
| Capitalization | 00 | 00 | 00 | 107 | 00 | 107 | 18.64 |
| Spelling mistakes | 04 | 10 | 74 | 08 | 29 | 125 | 21.77 |
| Punctuation errors | 40 | 40 | 36 | 65 | 124 | 305 | 53.13 |
| Total | 47 | 60 | 112 | 198 | 157 | 574 | 100 |

Table 8—Sample of errors Committed by the researchers in Citing the authors’ names

| Name of the authors as cited in the thesis | Correct spelling | Thesis Code |
|--|------------------|-------------|
| Abramson C M | Abramson L Y | T3 |
| Aldwine C M | Aldwin C M | T3 |
| Chadda P K | Chadda R K | T3 |
| Evance G E | Evans G W | T3 |
| Dios C D | de Dios C | T3 |
| Coelno M | Coelno M | T4 |
| Kant E | Kant I | T4 |
| Ryan N | Ryan W | T4 |

Table 9—Referencing inaccuracies in titles

| Referencing inaccuracies in titles | T1 | T2 | T3 | T4 | T5 | Total | Percent |
|------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|-------|---------|
| Incomplete titles | 00 | 07 | 00 | 00 | 00 | 07 | 04.02 |
| Omission words | 00 | 03 | 11 | 00 | 06 | 20 | 11.49 |
| Spelling mistakes | 03 | 10 | 10 | 25 | 18 | 66 | 37.93 |
| Punctuation errors | 02 | 07 | 27 | 00 | 45 | 81 | 46.55 |
| Total | 5 | 27 | 48 | 25 | 69 | 174 | 100 |

table one might observe that the chemical names have been misspelled, article titles are incomplete and word in title have been omitted.

Inaccuracies in year and page number

Any inaccuracy in the year and page number of the article can be considered as major error as it would impede the retrieval of original paper. These two elements have been grouped and discussed together in this paper as both of them are numerical data.

It was found that 62.33 percent of the references provided in five psychology theses have incorrect page numbers. Almost 38.00 percent of the references have contained inaccuracies in assigning the year of publication of the research papers (Table 11). Mayer has mentioned that mistakes in page numbers and year in references are major errors, researchers expect accuracy in published information and a high standard

must be set and even slight inaccuracies in citations should be unacceptable¹².

Inaccuracies in volume and issue numbers

Punctuation, volume and issue number of journal articles are very important components of cited references. Researchers rely on volume and issue number of journals to find required article easily and without wasting much time. Punctuation marks help in separating reference elements and make the meaning clear. In other words punctuation helps to clearly distinguish between various bibliographical elements and bring a kind of uniformity wherein researchers would be able to follow same pattern of structuring of references.

Table 12 depicts the inaccuracies found in using punctuation marks and mistakes in assigning volume and issue numbers. Incorrect volume and issue

Table 10—Exemplars of inaccuracies in the titles

| Sl. no. | Title as found in the thesis | Correct form of the title | Type of mistake(s) | Thesis code |
|---------|---|--|---|-------------|
| 1. | Treatment of phobia | Treatment of phobias I: Comparison of imipramine hydrochloride and placebo | a) Spelling mistake (Compare the word phobia) b) Incomplete title (Subtitle omitted) | T2 |
| 2. | Paradoxical reaction to benzodiazepines | Paradoxical reactions to benzodiazepines | Spelling mistakes (Compare the words reaction, benzodiazepines) | T2 |
| 3. | Severe and mild depression | Severe and mild depression: the psychotherapeutic approach | Incomplete titles (Subtitle not present) | T3 |
| 4. | Psychological instantaneous cardiac death | Psychologic factors in instantaneous cardiac death | a) Omitted the word 'factors' b) Wrongly spelt the word 'Psychologic' | T5 |

Table 11—Referencing inaccuracies in year and page number

| Inaccuracies in the year and page number | T1 | T2 | T3 | T4 | T5 | Total | Percent |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|-------|---------|
| Page numbers | 04 | 08 | 21 | 04 | 11 | 48 | 62.33 |
| Year | 01 | 04 | 03 | 19 | 02 | 29 | 37.66 |
| Total | 5 | 12 | 24 | 23 | 13 | 77 | 100.00 |

Table 12—Inaccuracies in punctuation marks, volume and issue numbers

| Type of error | T1 | T2 | T3 | T4 | T5 | Total | Percent |
|-------------------|----|----|----|----|-----|-------|---------|
| Punctuation error | 67 | 7 | 70 | 2 | 96 | 242 | 93.07 |
| Wrong volume | 0 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 15 | 05.76 |
| Wrong issue | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 03 | 01.15 |
| Total | 67 | 10 | 77 | 5 | 101 | 260 | 100 |

numbers are considered as major errors. The study found that 93.07 percent of the references examined in all five theses contained punctuation errors. Three theses, T1, T3 and T5 have contained highest number of punctuation errors. Majority of the punctuation errors were related to confusion in putting full stop (.), comma (,), or colon (:), in appropriate place as recommended by American Psychological Association (APA). Almost 6.00 percent of the references contained wrong volume number. Very few (1.15%) of the references provided wrong issue number. Volume and issues are major access points for research articles; these two bibliographical elements must be free of any errors.

Discussion

Except 210 (22.75%) references, all other 713 references (77.24%) were incorrect. Of the 713 incorrect references, 39.54 percent (365) of the references contained major errors and remaining 60.45% (580) references have contained minor errors. The major error found in this study is relating to misspelling of the author names, misspelling of titles, mistakes in volume & issue numbers, etc. This result is in line with a previous study on reference accuracy of public health journals¹³. In terms of title of the research articles or papers, punctuation marks were used differently in 46.55 percent of the references. Almost 38 percent of the references have made spelling mistakes in titles. Title is one of the key indicators for identifying research papers. Automatic extraction of titles from indexing databases could avoid misspelling in titles as well as misspelling author names. The study found that 62.33 percent of the references have contained wrong page numbers. Wrong page number and wrong year are two other major errors.

As emphasized in the previous study¹⁴ the primary responsibility of checking the references lies with the author. Especially, in doctoral studies the onus is mainly on the researchers where no reviewers/editorial board would suggest/point out mistakes in references. In such a case the researcher must be bit cautious and verify the very authenticity of the references carefully.

Conclusion

Citations play an important role in identification and retrieval of earlier works. The accuracy of citations in

the scientific communication cannot be undermined. In a PhD thesis, the references and bibliography have to be brought out as meticulously as possible. However, it is unfortunate to observe that not sufficient attention is accorded by the researchers for recording the citations accurately. This study is an attempt to show the kind of errors that could creep in theses.

It can be suggested that Indian universities and research organizations must create awareness among doctoral students in using reference software tools such as Endnote, Reference Manager, Refworks, and JabRef, etc. Nowadays many free online reference tools are available for efficient management of citations, to name few: BibMe, Connotea, Citation Machine, and Zotero, etc, these tools can be easily taught for researchers where financial constraints impede the use of commercial reference management software. Many online indexing databases such as SCI (Science Citation Index), SSCI (Social Science Citation Index), A&HCI (Arts & Humanities Citation Index), LISA (Library & Information Science Abstract), and major journal publishers like Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Sage Publications and other major online journal publishers allow researchers to import citations from their databases to reference management tools. This facility helps researchers to reduce the number of incorrect references.

The University of Mysore where the accuracy of references in doctoral theses checked for this study hardly provided any guidelines in following specific format of referencing in Ph D thesis. Hence, it is high time for Indian Universities to take active role in imparting information literacy skills for researchers to use reference management tools and thus minimizing the inaccuracies in references. This study examined only 5 doctoral dissertations and that too of a particular subject—Psychology. Future research may be carried by including more number of theses, universities and subject domains.

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