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Plagiarism Awareness and Practice by Postgraduate Students in Public Universities in Kenya: From an Academic Integrity Standpoint

Stephen Odera Odongo

Technical University of Mombasa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0751-0025>

Rose Wambui Njoroge

Kenyatta University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1755-6860>

George Gitau Njoroge

Kenyatta University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4179-4815>

Corresponding Author: stephen.odera.odongo@gmail.com

Abstract

Rationale of study - The study assesses plagiarism awareness and practice as a means of academic integrity among postgraduate students.

Methodology - The study adopted a descriptive design with a mixed-methods design utilising both questionnaires and interviews to collect data. The population consisted of 711 postgraduate students from three public universities in Kenya.

Findings - The study obtained responses from a sample of 499 participants. The findings revealed a significant discrepancy between the theoretical knowledge possessed by postgraduate students regarding plagiarism and their actual writing practices. The doctoral students' understanding of academic integrity was significantly shaped by their awareness of plagiarism and university policies, their engagement with plagiarism practices, and their use of library resources. However, the emergence of new challenges, such as AI-generated content and paraphrased plagiarism, adds to this complexity.

Implications - It recommends that the focus should shift from theoretical knowledge about plagiarism to developing comprehensive, practically oriented programs that build real skills. A multi-faceted intervention is required, involving postgraduate students, the library, and various departments.

Originality - This study examines plagiarism awareness and practices among postgraduate students in public universities in Kenya.

Keyword

Plagiarism, academic integrity, postgraduate students, AI-generated content

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1 Introduction

Postgraduate studies represent the pinnacle of academic pursuit, where academic integrity serves as the foundation of trustworthy scholarship (Smith & Johnson, 2018). The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA] (2021) defines academic integrity as a set of values and practices encompassing honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility, including ethical behaviours like proper citation and plagiarism avoidance (Johnson & Brown, 2019). Plagiarism, a prevalent form of academic misconduct, involves using another's work without proper attribution (Doe & Smith, 2019). This misconduct exists on a spectrum, ranging from insufficient citation and minor paraphrasing ("patchwriting") to outright copying (Sutherland-Smith, 2008). Such practices negatively impact academic work integrity and hinder students' development of proper citation skills (Das, 2018). The proliferation of online information has created new opportunities for plagiarism and academic deception (Singh, 2017; Das, 2018; Bell, 2018). Furthermore, the emergence of AI language models, such as ChatGPT and Bard, introduces additional complexity, as these tools can generate human-quality content, potentially tempting students toward a new form of plagiarism through AI-generated academic work. Postgraduate students, as future academics and scholars, bear special responsibility for upholding academic integrity

standards (Johnson et al., 2020). Understanding the practice and being aware of plagiarism is crucial for maintaining academic standards within public universities in Kenya.

2 Statement of the Problem

Plagiarism is a concept that continues to evolve, making it a complex issue, yet it has both moral and ethical implications in the academic world. Nakitare and Otiike (2023) and Wekesa and Ombati have noted that plagiarism is growing globally. Despite studies conducted globally by Al-Hussaini (2022), Luyten & Poelmans (2022), Goodwin & McCarthy (2020), and Brown, Miller, & Taylor (2019) showing the negative impacts of plagiarism, there are limited studies available that focus on the Kenyan context. Researchers call for further investigations into student plagiarism (Curtis & Tremayne, 2019) in the wake of persistent cases of plagiarism. The academic community recognises plagiarism as a form of academic dishonesty that undermines integrity. Studies by Tran et al. (2022) and Mohamed (2022) have identified important gaps, as presented in this study. First, a global gap exists between students' understanding of plagiarism policies and their actual application. Research is needed to bridge this gap and improve adherence. Second, libraries play a vital role in providing information literacy programs to prevent plagiarism. However, further studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs across different regions, taking into

account factors such as resource availability and accessibility. Additionally, as technology constantly evolves, libraries must explore how to integrate new tools, such as artificial intelligence (AI), for enhanced plagiarism prevention.

This study examined two objectives:

- i. Assessing plagiarism awareness levels,
- ii. Evaluation of the actual plagiarism practice by postgraduate students regarding the principles of academic integrity.

3 Literature Review

This literature is structured according to the objectives of the study.

3.1 Plagiarism awareness

Several studies by Ho (2021), Nabee et al. (2020), and Nguyen (2021) have emphasised the importance of plagiarism awareness in achieving academic integrity among postgraduate students. One of the reasons for plagiarism is that it is easy to confuse what constitutes plagiarism (Ho, 2021). According to Nabee et al. (2020), plagiarism involves proper referencing, effective plagiarism identification tools, and the proper understanding of the concept itself. Postgraduate students have a varied understanding of plagiarism, argues Nguyen (2021). Globally, studies by Sankar (2020), Ndebele (2020), Raj et al. (2021), Cheers, Lin, & Smith (2021), and Ali (2021) have lamented a concerning increase in plagiarism in higher

education. A part of it, according to Cheers et al. (2021), stems from the fact that students may not be aware, as well as the lack of proper plagiarism education provided by institutions. Research on student plagiarism awareness is increasing, although little is known about postgraduate students (Du, 2020; Ndebele, 2020). According to Tran et al. (2022), existing studies in the US and Europe have shown that variations in public perceptions and interpretations of plagiarism may exist among postgraduate students across different regions. Research suggests that postgraduate students across Asia may have a general understanding of plagiarism but lack clarity on specifics (Guo & Wang, 2022; Kular & Sahu, 2021). Studies in China by Guo and Wang (2022) and India by Kular and Sahu (2021) found that postgraduate students grasped the core concept of plagiarism but struggled to identify it in their work, particularly when it involved proper citation practices for paraphrased content. Although studies specifically on postgraduate students' perception of awareness in Kenya are limited, existing research indicates the need for a deeper exploration in this area. Previous research has identified a potential gap in the plagiarism awareness of Kenyan students. Mutua & Indoshi (2018) stated that undergraduates lack awareness, while Kibiwott, Juma and Mwirichia (2019) focused mainly on the need for more skill-based orientation programs. Ndirangu (2017) argues that there is a need to

raise awareness in specific areas of plagiarism, particularly within a culturally diverse context.

3.2 Plagiarism practice

According to Memon (2020), in countries with low and middle incomes, postgraduate students have shown a high prevalence of plagiarism. There also exists a variation in plagiarism severity, with some blatantly plagiarising, some directly copying, and others committing verbatim plagiarism. Several international studies (Selemani et al., 2018; Smith & Johnson, 2018; Mohamed, 2022; Eimon, Lwin, Tun, Oo, Mya & Silverman, 2022; Tran, 2022) have observed alarming levels of plagiarism among postgraduate students. Mohamed (2022) identified direct copying of text, while Trans (2022) identified a lack of proper paraphrasing. Research from Europe (Smith & Johnson, 2018) suggests that students may not recognise internet sources as primary sources requiring citation. These concerns are echoed by the Kenyan findings, which reveal that plagiarism behaviour among students is about 20%. This encompasses a lack of proper citation due to a culture of copying and pasting (15%) and ignoring attribution when using phrases borrowed from other works. A global pattern is therefore revealed from these results regarding plagiarism among postgraduate students. This highlights the need for attention in this area. Several common plagiarism practices were noted in postgraduate students in a study conducted in South Africa by Selemi,

Chawinga and Dube (2018). Lack of proper attribution due to summarisation (69.8%) and paraphrasing (64.1%) while ignoring the use of quotation marks (56.6%). The study also highlighted the practice of students copying text from various online sources without proper citation. In Kenya, studies conducted by Mungai and Karanja (2021) and Wekesa and Ombati (2019) explored various ways used by students to plagiarise. The study revealed that paraphrasing without citation, copying and use of ghostwriting services were some common methods. Recent research by Chepkong'a and Mutua (2022) even identified fabricated citations and self-plagiarism. Several studies highlight the challenges and importance of preventing plagiarism in postgraduate education. Khan, Richardson, and Izhar (2021) in Pakistan found that library programs are effective in deterring plagiarism but emphasised the need for collaboration among stakeholders.

4 Theoretical Framework

This study explores plagiarism through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). Despite preventive measures (Cronan, Mullins, & Douglas, 2018), plagiarism remains a concern for universities. The TPB model suggests that a combination of attitudes perceived social norms (expectations), and perceived behavioural control (self-efficacy) all influence a person's intention to perform a behaviour, in this case, plagiarism (Maryam & Ahmet, 2023). This

intention then predicts the likelihood of the actual behaviour occurring. The TPB framework was selected for its ability to provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying academic misconduct decisions. Also, because the theory is multidimensional, it captures the complexity of the student decision-making process regarding plagiarism. The application of TPB in this study enables the systematic examination of students' personal beliefs about plagiarism, their ability to avoid or engage in plagiarism, and how these factors shape their intentions and subsequent actions.

5 Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, using both surveys and interviews. Units of analysis were derived from master's and PhD students currently enrolled and undertaking their theses or dissertations at the three public universities in Kenya. The total

population is 9,119 (7,259 master's students and 1,860 PhD students) and three library staff members. The Yamane formula was used to calculate the sample size of the study. The study considers a sample of 330 PhD students, 378 master's students and three library staff tasked with checking and deterring plagiarism. A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from postgraduate students, while qualitative data was collected from library staff through interviews. Qualitative data was analysed using SPSS statistical software, while qualitative interview data was analysed thematically using MAXQDA software.

6 Findings

Three interviews were conducted, and a total of 496 questionnaires were completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 70%.

Objective 1: Postgraduate students' awareness of plagiarism and academic integrity.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics on postgraduate students' awareness of plagiarism and academic integrity

		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Var
1	What constitutes plagiarism	496	4.30	.881	.775
2	Different forms of plagiarism	496	3.98	1.005	1.010
3	When necessary, cite sources	496	4.14	.911	.830
4	Know how to properly cite sources	496	4.03	.907	.823
5	Understand the consequences of plagiarism	496	4.40	.832	.692
6	Understanding the consequences of plagiarism motivates us to avoid it	496	4.25	.998	.996
7	My attitude towards plagiarism has become more negative as my knowledge of it has increased	496	3.64	1.241	1.541
8	Knowing more about plagiarism has made me more vigilant in my research work	496	4.26	.898	.806

		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Var
9	My understanding of plagiarism has strengthened my commitment to academic honesty	496	4.29	.879	.772
10	Knowledge of plagiarism helps me maintain honesty in my academic pursuits	496	4.34	.823	.677
11	My awareness of plagiarism contributes to a culture of trust in my research environment	496	4.22	.829	.688
12	My knowledge of plagiarism helps me ensure fair representation of others' work in my research	496	4.28	.839	.704
13	Being well-informed about plagiarism has increased my sense of responsibility in research writing	496	4.34	.772	.596
14	My knowledge of plagiarism motivates me to take responsibility for the originality of my research	496	4.30	.804	.646
15	My level of knowledge about plagiarism directly influences my adherence to academic integrity principles	496	4.23	.795	.632
16	Understanding the consequences of plagiarism has strengthened my commitment to academic honesty	496	4.27	.805	.648
17	My attitude towards plagiarism is closely related to my overall sense of academic integrity	496	4.14	.911	.830
18	The frequency with which I properly cite sources is a reflection of my commitment to academic integrity	496	4.13	.794	.630

The survey results revealed high levels of self-reported understanding of plagiarism concepts among postgraduate students (Mean = 4.30, SD = 0.881), along with high awareness of citation practices (Mean = 4.14, SD = 0.911). Students also reported a strong commitment to academic honesty (Mean = 4.29, SD = 0.879) and a high awareness of the consequences of plagiarism (Mean = 4.40, SD = 0.832). However, their understanding of different types of academic dishonesty scored comparatively lower (Mean = 3.98), and their self-reported understanding of proper citation practices, although still high, was slightly lower than their general awareness of plagiarism (Mean = 4.03, SD = 0.907).

The interview data provided additional insights into observed behaviours and

challenges within three distinct themes. Firstly, the sophistication of the deceptive practice. All three response sets consistently identified patchwork or mosaic plagiarism as an issue cutting across all disciplines. Staff members reported observing direct copy-paste plagiarism from obscure sources that students believed would not be detected. Second, the fundamental gaps in academic integrity skills. Improper paraphrasing was identified as the most common issue. At the same time, poor citation practices were frequently reported, particularly instances where students list sources in their bibliographies but fail to cite information within the text adequately. Staff noted that students sometimes cite non-existent sources to appear more scholarly. This disconnect between bibliographic compilation and in-text citation is an indication of a

superficial understanding of academic referencing conventions. A third thematic pattern was the emerging challenge posed by technological advancements. Emerging challenges from new technologies were also identified, including issues with AI-generated content, fabricated data, and improper use of

open-access materials. Notably, direct copying was not widely reported as the primary form of plagiarism encountered.

Objective 2: Plagiarism practices among postgraduate students and academic integrity

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on plagiarism practice among postgraduate students and academic integrity

		N	Mean	Std. Dev	Var
1	I directly copy text from sources for use in my research without quotation marks	496	1.87	.934	.872
2	I present someone else's ideas or data as my own without acknowledging the source	496	1.67	.878	.771
3	My research contains paraphrased information from sources without citation	496	2.07	1.065	1.134
4	I have used AI-generated information in my study	496	2.54	1.215	1.477
5	I have included citations in my work that do not correspond to an actual source	496	2.15	1.144	1.310
6	I have included in my research parts of my previously submitted work	496	2.28	1.169	1.367
7	Using ideas from uncited sources undermines the fairness of academic evaluation	496	3.70	1.137	1.293
8	Omitting citations, even unintentionally, reduces the honesty of academic work	496	3.93	.953	.908
9	Changing only a few words when paraphrasing without proper citation shows a lack of academic responsibility	496	3.86	1.028	1.056
10	Paraphrasing without understanding the original text undermines the trust in my academic capabilities	496	4.00	.926	.857
11	The more I engage in copying without citation, the less honest I consider my academic work to be	496	4.02	1.001	1.002
12	The frequency with which I properly cite sources directly relates to the fairness of my academic conduct	496	4.03	.916	.839
13	My effort in proper paraphrasing correlates with the respect I show for academic integrity	496	4.10	.888	.789
14	The extent to which I avoid plagiarism practices relates directly to the trust I maintain in the academic community	496	4.19	.840	.706

Survey data revealed that while self-reported direct plagiarism was low among postgraduate

students, they exhibited higher rates of paraphrasing without citation (Mean = 2.07).

Students demonstrated a strong theoretical understanding of academic integrity principles, with mean values ranging from 3.70 to 3.93, indicating a clear understanding of the effects of plagiarism on academic work. The highest survey score (Mean = 4.19) indicated that students understand the broader impact of plagiarism on academic trust. Regarding emerging technologies, AI-generated content received a mean score of 2.54, indicating moderate engagement with or concern about this issue. Time pressure emerged as a significant factor, with many postgraduate students reporting challenges in balancing full-time work and studies. Interview data complemented the survey findings by highlighting inadequate formal training on referencing styles as a key contributor to plagiarism issues. Time management was a recurring theme identified by respondents as an area where students struggle to meet academic demands.

The interviewed library staff revealed one peculiar theme. There was a disconnect between theory and practice in academic integrity. Responses from library staff consistently highlighted a fundamental disconnect between students' theoretical understanding and the practical application of academic principles. Despite students reporting that they could articulate what constitutes plagiarism and has knowledge of citation principles, they consistently failed to apply this knowledge effectively. The students

demonstrated knowledge (knowing what), although they lacked procedural knowledge (knowing how) and conditional knowledge (knowing when and how to apply specific practices).

7 Discussions

The study's outcome revealed a considerable disconnect between students' self-perception and their behaviour about academic integrity practices. Despite students reporting high levels of awareness and understanding, data from interviews with library staff reveal challenges in applying this knowledge. These findings are supported by Childers and Bruton (2016). This was revealed by the presence of mosaic or patchwork plagiarism in the students' work across all disciplines. Violation of plagiarism is both intentional and unintentional. The intentional nature was through the use of obscure sources, which the student thought would go undetected. The notable issue of improper paraphrasing, which was common, suggested that students understood they should not copy verbatim, though they did so due to a lack of information synthesis skills. These findings align with those of Peršak and Studen (2022), who similarly found that postgraduate students struggled to paraphrase despite understanding the concepts of basic plagiarism. The study identifies academic integrity issues as emerging, a phenomenon not captured by traditional survey approaches. Growing in nature are issues related to contract cheating and

translated plagiarism. This has been argued by Foltýnek et al. (2020) as being a challenge to detect through text-matching software, hence creating a false sense of security in academic integrity systems. Another form of sophisticated academic dishonesty in scholarly representation is citing non-existent sources. This contradicts the student's reported commitment to academic honesty. Fabrication of citations is suggested by Eaton et al. (2019) as stemming from pressure to appear scholarly rather than being deliberately dishonest. This suggests a need for targeted intervention through pedagogical approaches rather than relying solely on punitive measures. Technology-related challenges are emerging issues. They include new forms of academic dishonesty, such as the improper use of open-access materials, data fabrication, and the use of AI-generated content. Traditional plagiarism education may not adequately address these issues. These challenging issues could be used to explain the disconnect observed between the theoretical awareness of postgraduate students and the practical application of principles of academic integrity. Finally, while the findings suggest a high awareness of plagiarism consequences that deter intentional plagiarism, they indicate that awareness alone is insufficient unless supported by corresponding skills development. This finding aligns with Sutherland-Smith's (2018) research, which suggests that institutions that prioritise

consequences over skill development tend to experience high levels of unintentional plagiarism, including improper paraphrasing and mosaic paraphrasing.

The study has revealed a considerable disconnect between the theoretical understanding of academic integrity by postgraduate students and their actual application of proper citation skills. A study by Debnath (2022) identified similar challenges in the theory-practical gap related to academic integrity implementations. The low self-reported plagiarism, coupled with high rates of paraphrasing, suggests a lack of comprehension of citations by students. Students are aware they were not allowed to copy, yet they practised it due to a lack of paraphrasing skills. Pressure due to time was a significant factor that was highlighted as contributing to academic misconduct. Postgraduate students found it challenging to balance multiple responsibilities. These findings were in tandem with those of Ismail and Abdulazeez (2020), who demonstrated that time management issues significantly predicted plagiarism behaviour.

Managing academic studies alongside full-time work was a challenge that created compromising conditions, negatively affecting students' ability to maintain rigorous academic integrity standards, even when they possessed the prerequisite theoretical knowledge. Khathayut et al. (2020) confirmed that

although postgraduate students demonstrated a strong theoretical understanding of academic integrity principles, applying these principles proved challenging without proper instructional support. Institutions, when responding to plagiarism, should address knowledge gaps and skills development together to achieve better results. The moderate scores generated by the AI-generated content questions highlighted an emerging area of concern in academic integrity. According to a study by Pamies et al. (2020), new forms of plagiarism have emerged that are currently inadequately addressed by traditional academic integrity frameworks. Updated approaches are therefore required to address technological evolution that impacts both education and policy in academic institutions. Despite students' strong understanding of plagiarism's broader impact on academic trust, the persistent gap between knowledge and practice suggests deeper systemic issues. Eaton (2021) notes that instrumental approaches that prioritise credentials over genuine learning undermine authentic academic integrity, even when students possess theoretical knowledge. This suggests that addressing plagiarism necessitates more than knowledge transfer and must encompass fundamental shifts in how students approach learning and academic work.

8 Conclusions

The study shows a big gap between postgraduate students' self-perceived understanding of plagiarism and their actual application of academic integrity. Postgraduate students claim to be familiar with plagiarism concepts and citation practices, although university staff have found persistent and varied forms of plagiarism. This gap suggests that understanding what plagiarism is and its consequences does not necessarily translate to consistent ethical writing habits. Postgraduate students claim to understand the seriousness of plagiarism and its implications. However, they still engage in poor paraphrasing, among other more sophisticated forms of plagiarism, such as citing non-existent sources. The emergence of new challenges, such as AI-generated content and translated or paraphrased plagiarism, adds to this complexity. The study demonstrates that merely knowing academic integrity theoretically is insufficient to apply it practically. Students may be aware of the knowledge, but they lack the skills or commitment to apply it in their academic work, resulting in a gap between awareness and action.

The evidence highlights the gap that existed between the postgraduate students' theoretical understanding and practical application of academic integrity, particularly in the area of plagiarism. Students mostly avoid overtness by not directly adopting the words or ideas of

others. Frequent errors in paraphrasing and in citing sources correctly show an essential aspect of the misinterpretation of the requirements for citation. The new issue in AI content places it among the emerging and parallel challenges in maintaining ethical standards. Though they recognise the importance of proper citation in establishing trustworthy relationships within the academic community, students find it hard to implement such activities due to poor research skills and other factors. In other words, the survey and interview findings suggest that there is a systemic issue that stems from the cultural acceptance of copying and pasting.

9 Recommendations

Universities need to move beyond disseminating theory and policy about plagiarism toward developing practical skill-building programs. Instead of just campaigns and rules, institutions should implement mandatory workshops where students actively practice advanced paraphrasing, proper citation techniques, and critical evaluation of sources (including AI-generated content). The emphasis should be on developing practical writing skills that enable students to write ethically in real-world contexts. Universities and libraries should integrate these programs throughout the curriculum, offering continuous support throughout students' postgraduate journeys rather than relying on one-time training sessions.

10 Implications of the Study

This study is significant because it sheds light on how postgraduate students at Kenyan higher education institutions navigate academic integrity challenges while engaging in knowledge exchange. The research highlights to policymakers and education stakeholders how understanding plagiarism behaviours can be instrumental in transforming ethical academic practices among students and enhancing their scholarly performance through proper attribution and original thinking. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by alerting professionals in the fields of information science and academic administration to how plagiarism manifests in postgraduate environments and the factors influencing ethical academic behaviour among Kenyan higher education institutions. More research in this area may lead to the development of comprehensive theories on academic integrity in African higher education contexts, particularly regarding the intersection of cultural practices and Western academic standards. The application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour in this study provides a foundation for culturally responsive theoretical frameworks that acknowledge the unique challenges faced by students navigating between traditional systems of knowledge and contemporary academic expectations.

The study holds significant policy implications by demonstrating how plagiarism behaviour can be instrumental in transforming policy

development and promoting ethical academic practices. The findings provide insights based on evidence, which can inform the creation of comprehensive, intervention-based academic policies that address the root causes of academic misconduct rather than merely its symptoms.

Lastly, this study findings, from a practical standpoint, enables enable higher education institution administrators to create a conducive environment for ethical scholarship, including ensuring the availability of academic writing support services, enabling proper understanding of plagiarism prevention among students and staff, and ensuring that existing knowledge about academic integrity best practices is shared to produce ethically-minded graduates who understand intellectual property principles.

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Author Bios

Stephen Odera is a Tutorial Fellow at the Technical University of Mombasa with over a decade of experience in library and information management. He teaches information science courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and previously served as Senior Library Assistant and Head of

Cataloguing and Technical Services. Odera has extensive experience in digital library systems administration and has successfully implemented Koha library management systems at multiple institutions. He is currently pursuing his PhD at Kenyatta University, holds an MSc in Library and Information Science from Kenyatta University, and a Bachelor's degree in Information Science from Kenya Methodist University.

Dr Rose Njoroge is a Lecturer in the Library and Information Science Department within the Directorate of Elearning at Kenyatta University. She holds a PhD in Library and Information Science from Kenyatta University. Her research expertise spans Information Science, Data Mining, and Computer Security and Reliability. Dr. Njoroge's interdisciplinary approach encompasses Educational Technology and Teaching Methods, positioning her at the forefront of integrating technology with information science education. Through her role in the Directorate of Elearning, she contributes to advancing digital learning methodologies while conducting research that addresses critical issues in data security and information management within educational contexts.

Dr. George Gitau Njoroge is a Senior Lecturer in Computing and Information Science with a PhD specializing in information science, organization and retrieval, library management and automation, and knowledge management. His research focuses on information organization and retrieval, plus research data management within open science frameworks. As an established scholar, Dr. Njoroge contributes to educating future information professionals while advancing the field through research that bridges traditional information management practices with emerging technological solutions. His work is particularly relevant to modern academic environments where proper data stewardship and open science principles are increasingly vital.