

Searching for the Golden Thread: Game-based Learning for Awareness of Gender Equity

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Abstract: Although gender equity has improved across many domains during the 21st century, including higher education, STEM programmes still lag behind. Moreover, we see vertical segregation persisting in working life, with pathways to senior positions remaining unequal across sectors and occupations. This is the underlying problem that this study addresses through the use of an educational game called The Golden Thread. The study explores how an educational game experience can engage students and encourage reflection on women's barriers and unequal pathways to senior positions. The Golden Thread builds on the classic Indian game 'Snakes and Ladders', applied in a contemporary work life setting. It combines a physical board game format (with pieces, tokens, and play money) with instructions delivered through an online virtual game board. Kolb's experiential learning theory was used as a theoretical framework in both the game design and the game evaluation. In a first evaluation, interview and observation data were gathered, during and after, two gaming sessions with students from different master's programmes in Engineering who are also enrolled in a management course. Participation was voluntary and anonymised, with the data analysed using an inductive-deductive thematic approach. Findings show that The Golden Thread generated high energy and sparked meaningful discussions among students. Fruitful topics of conversation included the contradiction between career and family, where some groups perceived an unfair difference between how women and men were treated in the game. Students also identified examples of both gender and age discrimination. The game format fitted well within the Active Learning Classroom environment, where the room layout supported both the hybrid game format and the team-based discussions. Students and the teacher also identified some practical improvements to the game design and the facilitation of the game session. The teacher used insights from the game session to formulate an exam question, indicating the game's relevance for the course. Future research should explore how the game can be adapted to other contexts, including how students relate the gameplay to different workplace norms and organisational cultures, for example in Scandinavia and the UK.

Keywords: Career strategies, Gender in games, Gender equity, Game-based learning, Experiential learning

1. Introduction

Whilst gender equity has improved in many areas during the last few decades, scholarly work continues to show that vertical segregation is prominent in a range of different sectors and occupations (Hill and Sallai, 2025; Muller and Palmen, 2025; Palazzo et al., 2026; Sanchez et al., 2024) with research continuing to highlight a range of different barriers that prevent women from reaching senior positions within public and private sector organisations around the world (Islam et al., 2023; Ramos et al., 2022). Despite progress in workplace entry, women's advancement to senior leadership remains disproportionately slow (Gierke, Schlamp and Gerpott, 2025). This persistent vertical segregation resembles a complex career 'labyrinth' rather than a singular 'glass ceiling' (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Because organizations operate as inherently gendered structures (Acker, 1990), interventions like unconscious bias training or popular directives to simply 'lean in' (Sandberg, 2013) frequently fall short. Scholars and practitioners heavily critique these approaches for problematically attempting to shift the problem onto individuals and 'fixing the women' rather than the structural environment, thereby neglecting the profound impact of entrenched inequalities.

Instead, organizations must 'fix the system' by addressing systemic barriers embedded across the employee lifecycle (Gierke, Schlamp and Gerpott, 2025). These include work-life conflict and the 'flexibility stigma' (Chung, 2020), gendered appraisals where women face stricter standards for counter-normative behaviours (Eagly and Karou, 2002), and developmental feedback that is significantly less actionable than the strategic guidance given to men (Doldor, Wyatt and Silvester, 2019). Critically, navigating this labyrinth demands the 'golden thread', the vital tacit knowledge and insider political acumen required to traverse informal organizational channels (Wyatt and Silvester, 2015). Because women and minority groups are frequently excluded from the networks that traditionally impart this knowledge, relying on informal socialization for career progression is inadequate.

Consequently, there is a clear need for targeted interventions that explicitly surface these hidden organizational dynamics. Building critical awareness of this tacit knowledge and the unequal pathways to senior positions is the specific theoretical problem addressed in this study through the use of *The Golden Thread* educational game.

Game-based learning is increasingly popular within higher education (McFarland et al., 2026; Schrier, Zahradnik and Shaenfield, 2024) yet there are relatively few educational games that have tackled gender inequality. Examples include *The Gender Gap*, *The Gender Game* and *Wage Gap Joyride* (BoardGameGeek, n.d.; Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research [LISER], n.d.; Tallin University n.d.). This game, originally designed for two diversity and inclusion modules within a UK based business school has been adopted by a Swedish university within their project management modules for informatics and engineering faculties. The issues addressed by the game are relevant across a wide range of business and management education contexts. Game-based learning has previously been studied in project management education, as shown in the review by Ahmed et al. (2025), which provides an overview of how serious games have been used in this educational context. However, few studies appear to have focused specifically on the use of game-based learning to address gender inequality and unequal career progression within project management education.

This study examines *The Golden Thread*, an educational game on gender and career progression designed to engage students and raise awareness of women's barriers and unequal pathways to senior positions. More specifically, it explores how a game-based learning activity can support students' critical understanding of inequalities related to future career opportunities. Kolb's experiential learning theory provides the pedagogical framework for the study and informed both the design of the game and the analysis of how students engaged with it. The study was guided by the following research question:

How can an educational game experience engage students and influence their awareness and perceptions of women's barriers and unequal pathways to senior positions?

2. The Golden Thread Adaptation of the Experiential Learning Theory

Education on issues such as gender inequality, discrimination, and career barriers requires opportunities for reflection, discussion, and engagement with complex real-life situations. Research in project management education suggests that game-based and simulation-based learning can foster discussion and promote critical and reflective thinking when students engage collaboratively with realistic scenarios (Jääskä and Aaltonen, 2022).

The Experiential learning theory (ELT) describes learning as a dynamic, cyclical process involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). Kolb and Kolb (2017) suggest that ELT is particularly well suited to learning situations that invite students to question assumptions about inequality and fairness, which has been the central idea in this study. Taylor, Backlund and Niklasson (2012) suggest that experiential learning in game-based contexts can be strengthened through a coaching-by-gaming approach. In the presentation of the transformational teaching idea by Slavich and Zimbardo (2012) experiential learning was described to have multidimensional importance. Experiential activities can provide students with an opportunity to experience concepts and to give students a richer understanding of course concepts and of how these concepts could be used to operate in the real world. Moreover, experiential activities can lead to significant personal insights and a greater awareness of one's personal perspectives, as well as an awareness of other people's experiences. (Slavich and Zimbardo, 2012).

In this study, Kolb's learning cycle informs both the micro-level design of each game round and the macro-level structure of the lesson (Table 1). At the micro-level, students experienced unequal conditions and choices, reflected on their situation before making decisions, and connected outcomes to broader concepts of inequality and privilege. Then they acted by making new decisions and experiencing their consequences. At the macro-level, i.e. the lesson structure, the gameplay functioned as the shared experiential activity, while the structured debrief enabled reflective observation by allowing students to compare experiences and discuss perceived unfairness. The introductory lecture and debrief supported abstract conceptualization by linking the game experience to theoretical concepts such as vertical segregation and gender inequity. Finally, students were encouraged to consider how the insights gained from the activity could inform future professional practice, thereby opening up opportunities for active experimentation.

Table 1: The adapted learning cycle (based on Kolb's learning cycle)

Kolb's stage	Application in each round of the game	Application in the lesson structure
Concrete experience	Students experience unequal conditions and choices through gameplay	The gameplay serves as the shared experiential activity.
Reflective observation	Groups reflect on their situation before making decisions.	The structured debrief helps students compare experiences and discuss perceived unfairness.
Abstract conceptualization	The reflections connect game outcomes to broader concepts of inequality and privilege.	An introductory lecture and debrief link experiences to theory, such as vertical segregation and gender inequality.
Active experimentation	Students make decisions in each round and experience their consequences.	Students discuss how insights could inform future professional practice.

3. The Golden Thread Game

The Golden Thread was created by the second and third authors, along with an external learning partner, Dragon Learning. It is a tabletop/hybrid app-based board game designed for small group teaching sessions of up to thirty students. The tutorial group is divided into six teams (with 2 to 6 students per team) which play against each other. Each team represents a persona and teams make collective decisions that help navigate their persona to the top of the organisation. The goal is to reach the executive suite in the fewest possible moves.

The game combines a physical board (Figure 1) with the same board on an app that teams are provided with via a link. Teams start at the bottom of the organisation (at square one on the board) and on each tile, information is provided to the teams via the app. The facilitator of the session instructs teams on how many moves they can make per turn and then teams place their playing piece on the physical board that their move enables. The game adapts the movement structure of Snakes and Ladders, where players move around a board towards a finish point. However, unlike the traditional game, progression is not determined solely by chance. After each move, teams (or individuals) open the corresponding square in the online game/app, which presents a workplace scenario and either asks them to make a decision or gives them an instruction. Their response may affect their position on the board or their resources, such as energy, reputation or access to a mentor or sponsor. Teams therefore progress through a combination of their own decisions and the opportunities available to their persona. At the end of each turn, they collect the salary linked to their current organisational level.

Gender inequality is embedded within these mechanics through the 'golden thread', a faster route through the organisation that functions in a similar way to a ladder in the traditional game. For example, male personas receive additional information about informal networking opportunities that direct them onto this route, allowing them to bypass sections of the board and progress more quickly. Female personas do not receive the same information and instead encounter different barriers and career decisions, resulting in slower progression despite making similar choices. The game therefore has two learning outcomes:

LO1. Gain an awareness of the barriers that women face when reaching senior positions within organisations

LO2. Recognise that there are quicker pathways to senior positions than others

The game is facilitated by a single tutor who provides move instructions to the teams and mentors them through the rules of the game, helping with questions and ensures fair play. The winner is the team that reaches the top the quickest but to ensure an effective debrief discussion afterwards, it is recommended that three teams reach the top and three teams do not. Then, members from the winners and losers can be divided into sub-groups for reflective comparative discussions.

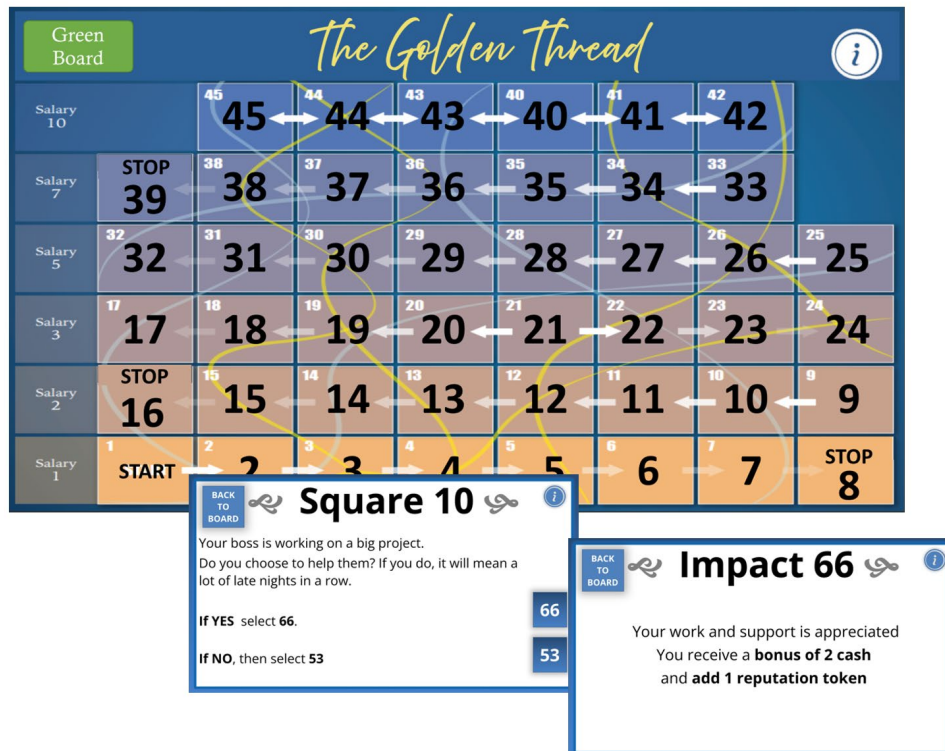


Figure 1: The Golden Thread, a hybrid tabletop board game¹

4. Methodology

The study adopted a pedagogical action research approach, building on the idea of a concrete and systematic method "that enables teachers to investigate their own teaching and their student's learning" (Nolen and Putten, 2007, p. 401). Action research could often be uniquely identified by its dual goal of both improving activities and processes in the organisation participating in the research study, and at the same time involving the strive of generating knowledge (Kock, McQueen and Scott, 1997). Pedagogical action research also comprises the dual roles where an author could have the role of a teacher, instructional designer or a content developer (Norton, 2009). In this research context, one author has earlier had the role of being a teacher and a facilitator in the described management course. These multiple roles bring in the ethical consideration of having a more subjective opinion toward the investigated activity, compared to a researcher and an author without any involvement in the educational context. As pointed out by Kock, McQueen and Scott (1997), an iterative approach to action research, where action is combined with reflection, has the potential to increase the research rigour. These two initial test sessions, in this first iteration, should later be complemented by more similar sessions at other management courses at other universities to achieve more generalisable results.

4.1 The Game Session

The two gaming sessions followed the same overall structure. Each session began with a short lecture introducing key concepts related to vertical segregation and gender inequity, including definitions, patterns, and examples relevant to the game. Students were then divided into small groups and given an introduction to the game context and the rules. During gameplay, students were encouraged to note important actions and outcomes, while observations focused on group interaction and emerging discussions. After the game, the personas behind the players were revealed, the results were summarised, and each group reported their total earnings to determine the winner. Finally, the sessions concluded with a facilitated whole-class debriefing, in which students reflected on their experiences of barriers and unfairness, and on the broader organisational and societal conditions shaping unequal career pathways.

¹The numbers 66 and 53 are within the app and are unrelated to the numbered spaces on the board. Ideally, they would be labelled differently, but this is a limitation of the software used.

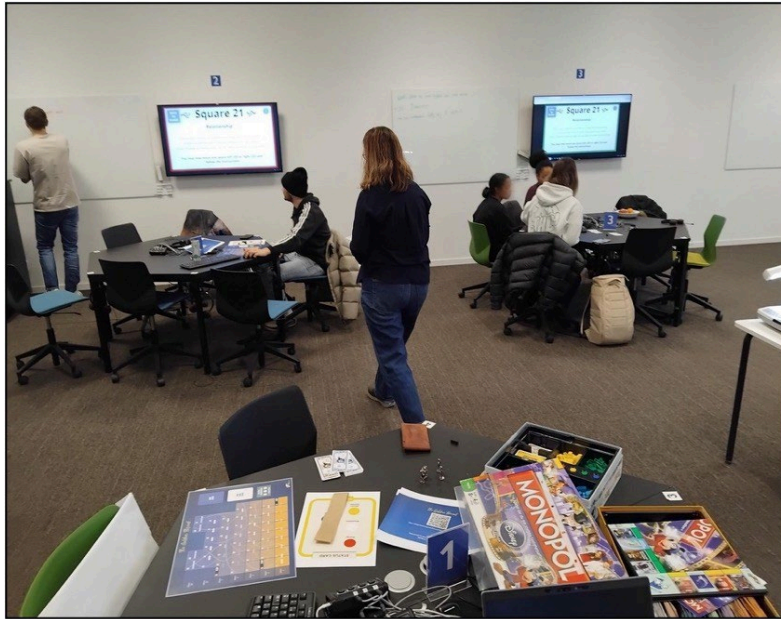


Figure 2: A gaming session in an Active Learning Classroom

4.2 Gaming Environment

Both gaming sessions were conducted in an Active Learning Classroom (ALC), furnished as in Figure 2. This ALC has six round-table units where every student group can use their own Internet connected computer that can be displayed on one, or to all screens in the ALC. Moreover, each round-table unit has a whiteboard on the wall, close to the round-table. All the ALC round-tables are built up by modules that can be rearranged to alter the default six-by-six grouping. Each ALC also has a central teacher desk with a document camera and a large projecting screen for displaying course content and presentation slides as described in (Mozelius and Sundgren, 2018).

The central teacher desk and the cabling are fixed, and the didactic idea is that the teacher, or in this case the game master, should be able to walk around during activities while keeping eye contact with all the student groups. Earlier these ALCs have been used for different teaching and learning activities, but this was the first session building on game-based learning.

4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected in a combination of an interview and observations during and after two test sessions in the gaming environment described in the previous section. Informants were students from different master's programmes in engineering who also are enrolled in the project management course where the gaming sessions were included as voluntary activities. In the first session, 12 students participated and were divided into four teams. In the second session, seven students participated and were divided into three teams. The management course teacher was both an interviewee and part of a team in the game sessions. One of the authors had a game master role while the other, besides minor facilitation, mainly were observing and taking notes.

The teacher interview was guided by the following questions:

- How did you experience the overall design and implementation of the game session?
- How did you perceive the students' level of engagement during the game session compared with other teaching activities in the course?
- How did the learning environment and facilitation affect the activity?
- How relevant was the game to the course content and learning outcomes?
- To what extent did the game contribute to students' awareness of gender barriers and unequal career pathways?
- What improvements would you suggest for future iterations of the game and the learning session?

4.4 Data Analysis

Data from the observation and classroom discussions were analysed using a thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to identify patterns and themes in the data that could contribute to meet the aim of the study. The recommended six-steps that guided the analysis were: 1) To become familiar with the data, which started early during the gaming sessions and the student discussions, 2) To generate initial codes, which also started out early with the observational notes, 3) To search for themes, which has been done both individually and in author discussions, 4) To review the themes, which was done in collaboratively in a Zoom session, 5) Defining the final themes, which also was carried out in a collaboration between two of the authors with the idea of investigator triangulation, and finally 6) Writing up and creating a coherent narration to present the findings was done in collaboration between the authors. A retroductive analysis was conducted using an inductive–deductive approach, involving several rounds of coding that moved iteratively between mutually clarifying empirical themes emerging from the data and connecting them to the experiential learning framework (Ragin, 1994).

5. Findings

The thematic analysis resulted in five themes that describe central aspects of the learning sessions. The following themes were identified in the observation data and supported by the teacher interview: reflection and awareness, active participation, pedagogical relevance, active learning environment, and prototype refinement.

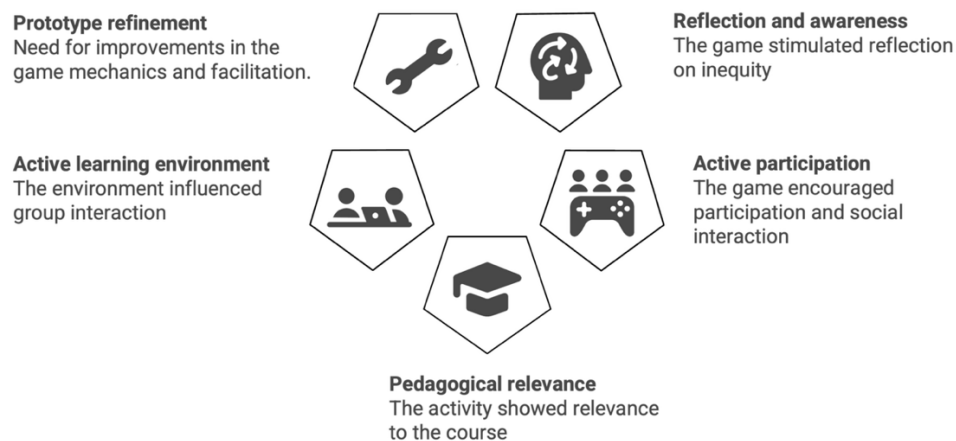


Figure 3: Themes identified through inductive data analysis

The theme *Reflection and awareness* captures how the game stimulated reflective discussion about inequality, norms, life choices and unequal career pathways. Students reflected on fairness and discrimination and discussed how different circumstances could influence career progression. Different approaches to decision-making were also observed. Some students appeared to make choices based on what they themselves would have done, while others selected the options they believed would help them progress more quickly in the game.

Active participation is a theme that refers to the high level of engagement and involvement generated during the game sessions. In the gaming session the Golden Thread game generated interaction and discussion within the groups during gameplay. Students appeared willing to participate and to discuss the situations openly during the debriefing session afterwards. This was confirmed by the teacher who commented the high level of student engagement, but at the same time noted that the voluntary nature of participation may have partly influenced it.

The activity showed *Pedagogical relevance* by connecting broader issues of inequality to project management competence and by creating opportunities to link the game to learning goals and possible assessment. Moreover, the activity created opportunities to discuss how project managers need to understand that individuals may enter working life and organisational settings with different conditions and opportunities. An interesting comment from the teacher was the suggestion that the game could be even more closely connected to course learning outcomes through an individual reflection task or assessment activity.

The theme *Active learning environment* highlights the importance of the physical and social learning environment for the success of the activity. To conduct the session in an Active Learning Classroom supported collaboration, social interaction and discussions within and between the groups. At the same time, the observations showed that facilitation, pacing, group size, and waiting time influenced the flow of the activity.

Finally, the students and teacher pointed to the need for improvements and *Prototype refinement*. These included clearer instructions, more transparent game mechanics, improved facilitation, and stronger visibility of the other groups' progress. Further suggestions included developing more detailed personas that represent dimensions beyond gender, such as socioeconomic background. The teacher also suggested reversing the sequence of the activity by allowing students to play the game before the mini-lecture, so that the teaching could build on their experiences and reflections from the gameplay.

As the game is still in a prototype phase, the findings from this first iteration were important in informing future testing. These themes address the research question by identifying both the factors that supported student engagement, awareness, and the areas in need of further refinement in the game and its implementation.

6. Discussion and Future Research

The findings support the relevance of experiential learning theory (ELT) as a pedagogical framework for *The Golden Thread*. The game gave students a shared experience of unequal conditions and career-related choices, while the discussions during and after gameplay created opportunities for reflection on fairness, discrimination, and gender barriers. In this way, the activity seemed to support key elements of Kolb's learning cycle by combining experience, discussion, and conceptual understanding. This is in line with Kolb and Kolb's (2017) view that ELT is useful in learning situations that challenge assumptions about inequality and fairness. Without the ELT framing an isolated gaming session would have been entertaining, but not with the same added value to the course and the student discussions.

The findings are also consistent with earlier research on game-based learning. Taylor, Backlund and Niklasson (2012) argue that learning in gaming contexts is strengthened by facilitation and debriefing, where the educational value of the game depends not only on gameplay itself but also on the structure of the session, the discussion prompts, and the classroom environment. Authors' observations confirm that the combination of these factors led to an activity that stimulated curiosity and reflection. Slavich and Zimbardo (2012) have suggested that experiential activities can deepen students' understanding of course concepts and increase awareness of both their own and others' perspectives. The study supports this view, as students engaged actively and reflectively with issues of gender inequality, fairness, and career barriers. This also resonates with Jääskä and Aaltonen's (2022) findings that game-based and simulation-based learning can support discussion and critical reflection through collaborative work with realistic scenarios.

Overall, the findings indicate that *The Golden Thread* game is valuable as a learning activity and helps students engage with and talk about issues of gender inequity in a more concrete way. It can also be linked to the understanding of women's unequal career progression, as the game appeared to make gendered career barriers more visible. However, the study is based on two initial test sessions in one course context, and the game was still in a prototype phase, and the outcomes need to be understood in relation to that.

Future research should build on the present findings with further iterations of the ELT framed gaming session carried out in different higher education settings. This aligns to the action research cyclic concept (List, 2006), a continuous, iterative process where practitioners systematically investigate a problem, implement changes, observe the results, and reflect to improve future outcomes. In order to explore how students engage with the gameplay in relation to different cultural contexts, norms, and learning environments this should be staged at different universities and in different countries. As the next step the discussed activity should be conducted at another university, in the same country and at a resembling university programme. This should later be followed up by a repetition of the ELT framed gaming session at a university in another country with a slightly different student group. Finally, a fourth iteration is planned for the Educational Games Playday at the ECGBL 2026 conference in Darmstadt, Germany.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how an educational game developed to address women's barriers and unequal pathways to senior positions could increase knowledge and raise awareness on gender inequity in working life. The findings show that the game engaged students through active participation, energy, and discussion, while encouraging reflection on fairness, discrimination, and unequal career barriers. The study contributes to

research on game-based and experiential learning in higher education by showing the potential of a hybrid educational game to address complex issues. The results highlight the pedagogical value of combining gameplay, reflection, and debriefing in ways that support Kolb's experiential learning theory, as well as the importance of factors such as facilitation, room design, pacing, and the connection to course content. At the same time, some areas for improvement were identified in both the game design and the learning session format. Future work could further refine the prototype and test it in other educational settings, including online environments, with students from different cultural and disciplinary contexts.

Ethics Declaration: Data have been collected with informed consent, and all students and teachers have participated on a voluntary basis.

AI Declaration: AI tools (Grammarly and ChatGPT) have been used to improve spelling and grammar.

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