

Framing Inclusion in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: A Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda

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Abstract: The concept of inclusion is a timeless issue that is increasingly relevant for Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (EEs) and the European policy agenda in general. EEs are dynamic and highly complex structures which are shaped by external and internal forces, and a variety of stakeholders. They present the types of cultural, social, economic, and political resources that surround and support entrepreneurs. Even within the same EE, entrepreneurs with different social and economic profiles (e.g., female entrepreneurs, disabled persons, refugees, etc.) may encounter vastly different support services and opportunities. Many studies also highlight that most current ecosystem approaches do not pay enough attention to factors that structurally exclude and marginalize certain groups in entrepreneurship. Inclusion as a term refers to the process where secure citizens have the same opportunities to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life. Hence, it highlights having a certain standard of living and well-being, considered as normal in the society and context in which they live. Additionally, it encompasses equal access to the labor market, facilities, services, and resources. Applying this approach in the context of contemporary EEs is crucial to provide opportunities for every citizen and capitalize on the capabilities of a more diverse workforce. In this context, the U.N. has called for a review of ecosystems addressing the challenge of developing enterprises by the underserved. Consequently, the question arising is how current literature addresses inclusion in the context of EEs. This study aims to identify the contemporary academic understanding around inclusion in entrepreneurship, provide insights on the challenges for inclusion in EEs, and suggest actions that can enhance EEs in terms of inclusion. This work starts from gender inclusion and expands across the spectrum of excluded groups. To address this issue, a systematic literature review was carried out encompassing the research topic concerning the relationship between EEs and inclusion followed by an analysis of the main topic and issues identified. Using this approach, this work identifies gaps in the existing EE literature around the concept of inclusion while also providing a mapping of under-researched topics and highlighting under-represented groups and their current and potential connection to EEs.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Ecosystems, Inclusion, Inclusive Entrepreneurship, Inclusivity

1. Introduction

The concept of inclusion has been at the forefront of the political, social, and academic landscape for several years and as such it has also increasingly infiltrated discussions within Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (EEs), highlighting the complexities and challenges that various stakeholders encounter in achieving genuine economic participation and representation. As EEs evolve to support a diverse array of entrepreneurial actors, it becomes crucial to explore how these ecosystems can be inclusive of marginalized and underrepresented groups (Hameed et al., 2023). The varying experiences of different groups—such as women, disabled individuals, immigrants, and refugees—within the same ecosystem illuminate significant disparities in access to resources and support, raising questions about the effectiveness of current inclusive policies (Aman et al., 2024; Motoyama et al., 2021).

Framing and defining inclusion play a vital role in understanding how entrepreneurs can fully engage in economic, social, and cultural life. The aspiration for inclusive participation extends to encompass the provision of equitable opportunities for all individuals, thereby promoting broader societal norms of well-being and economic stability (Bernstein et al., 2019; Cordier & Martin, 2022). Policies aimed at fostering inclusion are not only moral imperatives but also strategic approaches through which societies can leverage the diverse capabilities of their populations. The increasing emphasis on inclusion in the context of EEs connects to the larger framework of social equity, where disparities in entrepreneurial outcomes are scrutinized against the broader backdrop of cultural and socioeconomic conditions (Belitski et al., 2021).

Despite the significant attention given to EEs in academic literature, an important gap remains in understanding the intersectionality of inclusion within these systems. Academic investigations have thus far primarily steered towards high-growth entrepreneurship without adequately accounting for the experiences of marginalized demographics (Aman et al., 2024; David, 2025). A review of existing literature reveals various underexplored topics, indicating a need for comprehensive analyses focusing specifically on the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups (Kansheba & Wald, 2020; Malecki, 2018). Furthermore, existing studies frequently overlook

the systemic nature of the barriers that exacerbate exclusion, limiting their capacity to propose holistic solutions (Cantner et al., 2021).

This work aims to delve deeper into the contemporary understanding of inclusion within the sphere of entrepreneurship. Through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), this research identifies gaps within the existing academic landscape and synthesizes insights on how to better facilitate the inclusion of various groups, starting with an exploration of gender inclusion before expanding to cover broader marginalized communities (Aman et al., 2024; Cavallo et al., 2018). By critically assessing the current literature, the study seeks to sketch a mapping of the existing landscape surrounding EEs and inclusion, thus providing a foundation upon which future research can build.

2. Theoretical Background

The significance of EEs lies in their capacity to foster innovation and economic growth through interconnected networks of actors, resources, and policies (Koniakou et al., 2024). EEs are increasingly recognized as complex systems influenced by a multitude of internal and external factors, with diverse stakeholders playing a dynamic role in shaping these environments (Fredin & Lidén, 2020; Wurth et al., 2021). Within this context, the concept of inclusion emerges as a crucial consideration, serving as a foundational element for maximizing the potential of varied entrepreneurial contributions. Inclusion refers to equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support for all individuals, particularly those from marginalized or underrepresented groups, such as women, immigrants, and individuals with disabilities (Kansheba & Wald, 2020).

Despite the general acknowledgment of its importance, the varying definitions, dimensions, and frameworks proposed reflect the multifaceted nature of inclusion and contribute to conceptual ambiguity and hence a common understanding of what inclusion represents within EEs remains elusive (Jansen et al., 2014; Krischler et al., 2019). The conceptualization of inclusion is intricate and multifaceted, often varying significantly across different academic and policy discourses (Brix et al., 2022; Krischler et al., 2019). It has been noted that operational definitions of inclusion often focus on participation, overlooking broader social dimensions and systemic barriers that inhibit access for many individuals (Kang et al., 2019; Kruger & David, 2020). Consequently, scholars argue for a more holistic understanding that encompasses both social and structural aspects of inclusion (Cantner et al., 2021).

In terms of definition, inclusion in EEs has been defined in numerous ways by different scholars. Some researchers emphasize inclusion as the availability of resources and opportunities for traditionally marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities (Muhtar et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2020). Others view inclusion through a relational lens, focusing on the interconnectedness of various ecosystem actors and how these relationships facilitate or hinder access to entrepreneurial opportunities (Ojeda-Beltrán et al., 2023; Prokop & Thompson, 2022). The diversity of these definitions illustrates a significant gap in unified conceptualization, which has implications for theory building and empirical research in the field (Dele et al., 2023).

Prokop & Thompson (2022) highlight that effective EEs are characterized by their "openness" and ability to include all actors. However, it remains unclear which specific factors contribute to this openness and how they can be systematically measured (Hameed et al., 2023). Furthermore, existing studies highlight a troubling trend: while EEs are designed to nurture and support innovation, they often privilege certain groups over others, perpetuating cycles of exclusion (Motoyama et al., 2021). For instance, investigations into gender dynamics within EEs indicate that women entrepreneurs frequently encounter significant hurdles in accessing essential resources and networks (Aman et al., 2024; McAdam et al., 2018). Moreover, immigrant entrepreneurs also face unique challenges shaped by their socio-economic contexts, complicating their engagement with local entrepreneurial networks (David, 2025; Duan et al., 2021). The implications of these disparities are profound, as they affect individual entrepreneurs and can hinder the overall resilience and capacity of the ecosystem to innovate (Roundy, 2016). As a result, addressing inclusivity within EEs necessitates tailored interventions that recognize and tackle the unique challenges faced by underrepresented groups (Judijanto et al., 2024; Mumbire, 2024).

In this context, the call for inclusion is not merely about increasing participation; it emphasizes the need for multifaceted engagement rooted in social equity and justice (Bernstein et al., 2019). This notion aligns with recent calls to reevaluate the metrics within EEs, advocating for frameworks that prioritize the inclusion of diverse perspectives as a catalyst for innovation and sustainability (Bouncken & Kraus, 2021; Brix et al., 2022). Moreover, including diverse voices in decision-making processes is critical to creating EEs that genuinely reflect

and address the needs and aspirations of all stakeholders, thus enhancing their dynamism (Brito & Leitão, 2020; Roundy et al., 2017).

3. Methodology

A SLR was conducted to identify the contemporary academic understanding around the inclusion in EEs. Systematic methods were used to point out the status of inclusion in EEs, by exploring various inclusion streams. In addition, an extensive database of relevant articles was compiled to guide this research process and outcome. The methodological quality of the included systematic review was assessed with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA2020) Statement (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021).

3.1 Question Formulation

The research question that was raised in this study was “How current literature addresses inclusion in the context of EEs”. This question was raised due to the need for a literature review in this area (Snyder, 2019). Moreover, it initiates an exploration focusing on the status of academic understanding on inclusion in contemporary EEs, on framing the under-researched topics, and on highlighting the under-represented groups in EEs.

3.2 Applying the PRISMA2020 Protocol and Articles Reviewing

In this SLR, PRISMA2020 Protocol guided the research findings to minimize bias and the validity of the review (Mengist et al., 2020). More specifically, it was a road map for describing what was done, what was found, reviewing the data results by setting inclusion and exclusion criteria while it's provided the framework to report the data (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021b). In this work, the complete applied PRISMA's protocol process steps included through identification databases and results, eligibility, inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening articles and final records result. Figure 1 summarizes the document review process which is detailed in the following subsections.

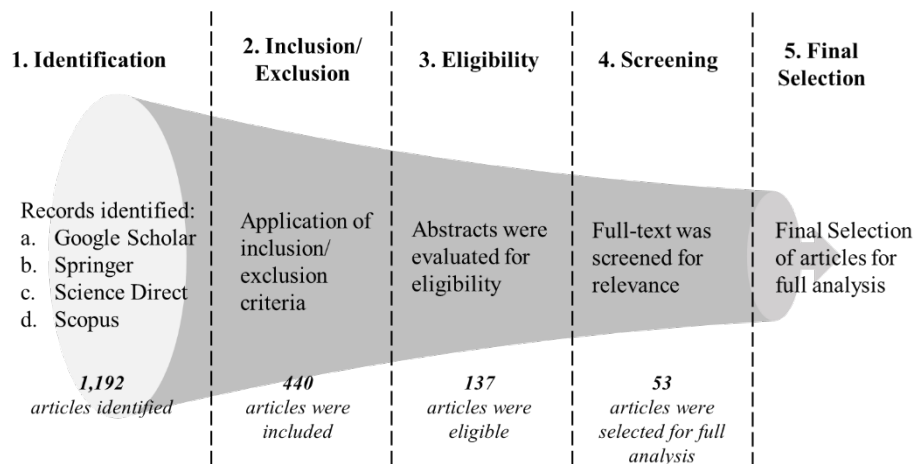


Figure 1: Document Review Process

3.2.1 Sources

Multiple sources and databases were used in this SLR. Google Scholar, journals like Springer, and ScienceDirect were resources to explore and review articles.

3.2.2 Search Strategy

Identified key words and searched for terminology to find appropriate articles. The search string applied in databases used the search terms “inclusion”, “social inclusion”, “inclusivity”, “entrepreneurial ecosystem”, “inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem”, “inclusive entrepreneurship”, “gender in entrepreneurial ecosystem”, “exclusion”, and “discrimination”. The selected articles were exported in the areas of Business Management, Entrepreneurship, Social and Political journals, sites and conferences.

3.2.3 Identify Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The search was framed by the following criteria: (i) Time period (Since 2014), (ii) Language (English), (iii) Publication type (research reports, journal articles, conference proceedings, reports from EU and international bodies), and (iv) Study design (desk research, survey, consultations, EU guidelines and Directives, conferences).

3.2.4 Screening Process-Eligibility

In the eligibility phase, the abstracts were analyzed first making selections and then full-text articles were read making the final selection (Snyder, 2019). Regarding reducing the risk of selection errors or bias, two reviewers screened the results. Both reviewers (i) had a good knowledge of the topic, (ii) had a thorough understanding of the inclusion and exclusion criteria developed in the review protocol (iii) screened independently to avoid influencing each other as they worked. Through this eligibility procedure, 1192 articles were excluded and 53 were analyzed.

3.2.5 Data Export, Organizing and Analysis

The final phase included data export, organizing and analysis. In this phase a Synthesis Matrix, was developed to track notes, overview the literature, and assure the accuracy of the data by verifying its reliability. Following this process, specific results were obtained for a more focused analysis later and future research areas were suggested.

4. Results

4.1 Literature Review: Analysis

The concept of Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (IEEs) gained traction, with various academic and policy-oriented programs discussing the importance and practices regarding inclusion in EEs. The International Labour Organization (ILO) published a report highlighting the need for holistic strategies to support entrepreneurs from all backgrounds (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2024)

The analysis shows that reviews of inclusion and EE studies accept IEEs as an upcoming research stream. As an upcoming theoretical stream, IIEs have been explored by researchers through conceptual methods. Hence, several articles analyze the concept of IIEs and set theoretical frameworks. Thus, longitudinal studies are essential for answering questions of this field and for understanding the impact of space and time on them (Cho et al., 2022). There is also an increasing interest in constructing an IEE Index by utilizing platforms from globally recognized databases to enhance understanding and support future empirical investigation of them (Hameed et al., 2023).

IEEs are designed to provide equitable opportunities for all, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, or other potentially marginalizing factors (Stam Erik, 2016). However, several persistent gaps hinder the realization of truly IIEs. These include structural and cultural biases to networks and resources for underrepresented groups, and insufficient policy support (ILO, 2024; Brush et al., 2019). Drawing from recent scholarship, the following gaps have been identified and discussed in relation to gender, governance, and systemic inequality within EEs.

Regarding gendered disparities, women entrepreneurs frequently face structural barriers in accessing and leveraging entrepreneurial networks, which are critical for acquiring resources, gaining legitimacy, and scaling ventures (C. Brush et al., 2019). Research shows that women possess less social capital than men within EEs and often encounter gender perceptions that undermine their credibility and legitimacy, especially in male-dominated settings (Xaver Neumeyer et al., 2019). These challenges limit their ability to engage in the reciprocal exchange of support and information, further marginalizing them from key opportunities within the ecosystem (Lene Foss et al., 2019). Consequently, many networks inadvertently perpetuate inequality by privileging dominant actors and norms.

In addition, the persistent underrepresentation of women and other marginalized groups in decision-making roles such as in venture capital firms, startup incubators, and policymakers, has significant implications for the inclusivity and functioning of EEs. The imbalance contributes to biased funding decisions, limited access to strategic resources and the perpetuation of gender power structures within ecosystem (C. G. Brush et al., 2017; DANA KANZE et al., 2017). Research indicates that decision-making bodies with greater gender diversity are more likely to recognize the potential of women-led ventures and allocate resources more equitably (Gry Agnete Alsos et al., 2013).

Additionally, EEs in many regions remain fragmented due to lack of coordination, collaboration, and information sharing among key stakeholders. This fragmentation disproportionately affects entrepreneurs from marginalized backgrounds who rely on intermediary institutions for access to resources and support (Isenberg, 2010; Stam, 2015).

Moreover, IEEs frequently fail to address the deep-rooted cultural and institutional barriers that hinder participation by underrepresented groups. Societal norms, gendered expectations, and structural discrimination shape the ways in which opportunities, legitimacy, and resources are distributed (Helene Ahl & Susan Marlow, 2012). These barriers are embedded in policy frameworks, funding practices, and informal norms, often leaving women, migrants, and minority entrepreneurs with limited access to support structures or influential networks (C. Brush et al., 2019; Kwong et al., 2019). Despite growing recognition of the need for IEEs, many national policy initiatives remain inadequate in scope and impact. Often, these policies are poorly resourced, disconnected from ecosystem needs or too narrowly focused on symptom-based interventions without addressing structural inequalities (Lene Foss et al., 2019). The OECD describes many women-focused entrepreneurship policies as “fragile, time-limited, small-scale, sparse” highlighting the need for more holistic and systemic approaches (OECD/European Union, 2017). Without disaggregated data by gender, ethnicity, disability, or migration status, policy makers and ecosystem designers cannot effectively assess the inclusivity or impact of their interventions (ILO, 2024). Both OECD and ILO emphasize that stronger evidence-based evaluation practices are critical for improving policy design and ensuring that inclusive practices are scalable and transferable (ILO, 2024; OECD/European Union, 2017).

5. Discussion and Future Research

5.1 Main Dimensions Framing Inclusion in EEs

Examining the literature through this SLR process reveals several key dimensions that frame inclusion, each of which contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how diverse participants interact within these ecosystems (Figure 2).

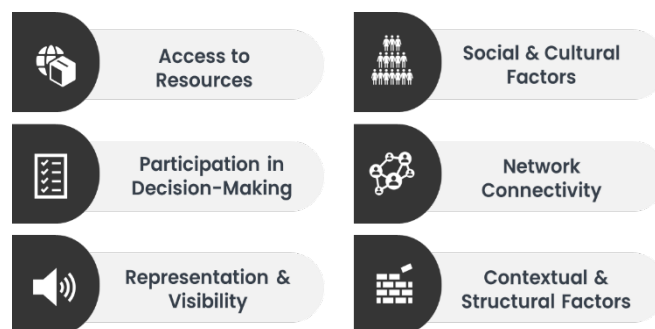


Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 2: Dimensions Framing Inclusion

5.1.1 Access to Resources

One of the primary dimensions of inclusion in EEs is access to resources, which encompasses financial, social, and informational capital. Yeasmin & Koivurova (2019) emphasize the importance of recognizing sustainable opportunities for immigrant entrepreneurs, suggesting that access to capital is significant for business success. This encompasses not only financial resources, such as startup capital and microloans, but also access to mentorship, networks, and educational resources that are critical for developing entrepreneurial capabilities.

5.1.2 Participation in Decision-Making

Participation in decision making involves empowering diverse actors to have a voice in shaping the policies, programs, and initiatives that govern the EE. Inclusion is achieved when marginalized groups can influence decisions that impact their entrepreneurial experiences (Kang et al., 2019). The active involvement of various actors enhances resource sharing and knowledge exchange, which is vital for the success of entrepreneurial ventures (Belitski et al., 2021; Cavallo et al., 2018). Furthermore, inclusive networks can significantly enhance participation in decision-making processes, ensuring equitable representation and access to resources (Aman et al., 2024; Duan et al., 2021).

5.1.3 Representation and Visibility

Representation within the EEs is critical for fostering an inclusive environment. This dimension highlights the need for diverse demographic groups to be visible in entrepreneurial activities, leadership roles, and success stories (Orser et al., 2019). The absence of representation can perpetuate biases, undermining efforts to build inclusive culture (Bruin et al., 2022). Ultimately, enhancing representation requires targeted actions to dismantle systemic barriers and foster inclusive practices (Cantner et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2019).

5.1.4 Social and Cultural Factors

Factors such as societal norms, attitudes toward entrepreneurship, and cultural barriers can significantly affect the experiences of marginalized entrepreneurs. For immigrant entrepreneurs, their embeddedness in local social networks is crucial for recognizing sustainable opportunities and overcoming barriers to business initiation (Duan et al., 2021; Yeasmin & Koivurova, 2019). Furthermore, the relational dynamics (Spigel, 2017) show that the sociocultural context determines the efficacy of networks and resource flows, which are critical for entrepreneurial success (Duan et al., 2021). Understanding these social dynamics is essential for developing inclusive policies that resonate with the diverse cultural backgrounds of entrepreneurial actors.

5.1.5 Network Connectivity

Network connectivity refers to the degree to which actors can establish relationships and engage with others within the EE. Strong networks are essential for resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and support systems that facilitate entrepreneurial growth. Enabling this connectivity empowers the broader socio-economic landscape by ensuring diverse participation and inclusion within the entrepreneurial community (Cantner et al., 2021; McAdam et al., 2018) as barriers can lead to social exclusion and a lack of opportunities for marginalized entrepreneurs (Aman et al., 2024).

5.1.6 Contextual and Structural Factors

Contextual and structural factors, including geographic location, socio-economic conditions, and regulatory environments, also play a significant role in shaping inclusion in EEs. The concept of mixed embeddedness highlights how local contexts can affect the entrepreneurial opportunities available to marginalized groups (Aman et al., 2024; Bouncken & Kraus, 2021). Differences in institutional quality and the availability of supportive infrastructure can create unequal opportunities for entrepreneurship (Fredin & Lidén, 2020). Additionally, inclusivity requires adaptive institutional frameworks that respond to the specific needs of different groups, thereby creating a more equitable and dynamic ecosystem (Orser et al., 2019). The interplay of these factors ultimately determines the inclusivity and sustainability of EEs (Kang et al., 2019). Tailoring strategies to the local context is essential (Brix et al., 2022).

5.2 Research Gaps

While the above dimensions provide critical insights into framing inclusion within EEs, the literature reveals challenges related to the lack of a common understanding of what inclusion truly means. The various definitions and conceptualizations contribute to ambiguity and can hinder consistent policy application and empirical investigation. In this context, this work identifies a set of gaps that researchers can focus on to enhance our understanding of inclusion within EEs.

5.2.1 Empirical Evidence on Inclusivity Practices

One notable gap is the lack of extensive empirical research investigating the effectiveness of specific practices across diverse EEs. Although certain studies provide preliminary insights into how marginalized groups navigate entrepreneurship, such as female or immigrant entrepreneurs, there remains a scarcity of comprehensive datasets that systematically analyze these experiences (Aman et al., 2024; Yeasmin & Koivurova, 2019). Furthermore, studies investigating the effectiveness of targeted programs for diverse groups could benefit from longitudinal research examining the long-term impacts of such programs on entrepreneurs' sustainability and growth (Orser et al., 2019).

5.2.2 *Theoretical Framework Development*

Most existing research tends to focus on anecdotal evidence or case studies without adequately grounding their findings in robust theoretical frameworks, leading to the concept being under-theorized (Cantner et al., 2021; Kansheba & Wald, 2020; Wurth et al., 2021). Moreover, more comprehensive theoretical models that integrate cultural, socioeconomic, and geographical factors impacting inclusivity in entrepreneurship are needed to fully understand how to foster equitable EEs across different regions.

5.2.3 *Intersectionality and its Implications*

Another critical gap is the need for an intersectional understanding of IEEs, which takes into consideration the complex identities that influence entrepreneurial outcomes. Most studies tend to examine demographic factors, in isolation without accounting for how the intersection of these identities shapes entrepreneurial experiences (Brixiová et al., 2020; Cavallo et al., 2018). Research has shown that the challenges faced by a female Latina entrepreneur may differ significantly from those encountered by a male African American entrepreneur (Kang et al., 2019). This highlights the need for frameworks that can effectively analyze the interplay of multiple identity factors.

5.2.4 *Focus on Marginalized Populations Beyond Gender and Ethnicity*

While studies have significantly focused on women and ethnic minorities, our research has identified that other marginalized populations, such as individuals with disabilities and LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs, have received far less attention. More research is needed to understand the specific barriers these groups face within EEs.

5.2.5 *Measurement and Assessment Frameworks*

There is a notable absence of standardized frameworks for measuring inclusivity within EEs. Current metrics are often qualitative, lacking the quantitative underpinnings that can produce robust assessments of inclusive entrepreneurship initiatives (Bernstein et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2022). Comprehensive measures are needed to assess the output (e.g., number of businesses started) but also the depth of inclusion (e.g., support for diverse groups). Such frameworks would enable better comparisons and help establish best practices grounded in evidence.

6. Conclusion

In this SLR, the current state of art regarding inclusion-with particular emphasis on gender dynamics- within EEs was explored. The concept of inclusion in EEs is shaped by a complex interplay of structural, institutional, socio-cultural and individual-level factors. These determine to extent to which underrepresented entrepreneurs (such as women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and others) can access, participate in, and benefit from EEs.

Through a comprehensive examination of literature, this work delineates the foundational dimensions of while also uncovering notable conceptual and empirical deficiencies. By integrating these insights, this study advances the development of a more robust and theoretically grounded framework for inclusion in EEs and proposes key trajectories for future scholarly inquiry.

Ethics Declaration

We declare that this material is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere. Ethical clearance was not required for this research.

AI Declaration

We acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (model 04-mini) to proof-ready our own work. This work pasted into ChatGPT with the instructions to "Identify in this essay the typos and grammatical errors, repeated words or rephrase sentences, and all unnecessary adverbs" to detect errors.

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