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Research Article

Psychosocial Consequences of NEET Preparation: Examining Stress, Anxiety, and Home Environment among Higher Secondary Students

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Abstract

One of the most competitive gateway exams in India is the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), which determines the course of education and career of aspiring medical students. This research examines the psychosocial effects of NEET preparation among higher secondary students, focusing on perceived academic stress, exam-related anxiety, and perceived quality of the home environment. A cross-sectional survey design was used, and a sample of 400 higher secondary students (Grades 11th & 12th) attending NEET-oriented streams or coaching centers in one urban district in South India was used to collect the data. Perceived academic stress, test anxiety, depressive symptoms, and home environment dimension scales were measured using standardized scales, which included emotional support, parental pressure, and conflict dimensions. Quantitative statistics consisted of descriptive statistics, independent t-tests, ANOVA, Pearson correlations, and hierarchical regression. Findings showed that over two-thirds of the sample experienced high academic stress and moderate to severe examination anxiety. Students who participated in intensive coaching programmes and repeated NEET attempts were found to be experiencing significantly higher levels of stress and anxiety as compared to first-time aspirants and non-coaching students. Perceived parental pressure and critical home climate were risk factors with respect to stress and anxiety, and emotional support and open communication at home acted as protective factors.

Keywords: NEET test, academic stress, exam anxiety, home environment, higher secondary students, psychosocial outcomes, India

Introduction

High-stakes entrance examinations have characterized academic life in India. The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) has especially gained a lot of prominence in this category as it is the main means of admission to undergraduate medical and dental courses all over the country. The stakes linked to NEET are very high, since passing a test run once is seen as a means to access a desired professional path, family status, and future socioeconomic mobility (Sharma, 2025). The psychological costs of this high competition are being increasingly recorded in media and empirical studies, such as high levels of stress, anxiety, symptoms of depression, burnout, and, in extreme instances, self-harm and suicide among the aspirants (Banerjee & Sen, 2025; Vanadhi & Parthiban, 2023). In the case of NEET preparation, many students at the higher secondary level have to combine preparation with the demands of board exams, long study hours, limited leisure time, and insomnia, which become constant features of their lives. The same situation is exacerbated by coaching institutes and residential "NEET schools which impose performance goals, regular mock tests, and public ranking systems.

According to subsequent studies, teenagers who are studying before competitive entrance tests experience a high amount of academic stress, high levels of exam anxiety, and frequent somatic symptoms (Desai, 2024; Reshu et al., 2025). The research dedicated to NEET applicants, in particular, has found a minimum of anxiety and depressive symptoms that are frequently connected with the fear of failure, a perceived absence of parental support, investments in coaching, and doubt about future opportunities (Marimuthu et al., 2022; Sharma, 2025). Meanwhile, the environment at home is also very important in buffering or worsening the stress of examinations. Positive, communicative families may serve as a protective factor, and critical, overinvolved, or highly controlling parenting has been linked to increased levels of stress and reduced mental health among adolescents (Tewari & Pawar, 2024).

The current research addresses these gaps by examining the psychosocial effects of NEET preparation among higher secondary students. The research pays special attention to (a) academic perceived stress levels and test anxiety, (b) variations in these, according to gender, grade, school type, and coaching, and (c) predictive validity of home environment dimension to stress and anxiety. The study will use a quantitative design, grounded in the existing literature, to provide school counsellors, teachers, parents, and policymakers with information on the psychological burden of NEET preparation and potential intervention strategies.

Review of the Related Literature

Though the use of competitive entrance tests in the Indian education system is not new, the growth of NEET has put additional strain on students, especially medical aspirants. Research on students preparing for NEET and similar examinations (such as JEE or state-level engineering tests) indicates high academic stress, with many reporting sleep disturbances, concentration difficulties, hopelessness, and somatic symptoms such as headaches and fatigue (Marimuthu et al., 2022). A study on NEET coaching in Chennai found that coaching conditions are characterized by excessive study time, numerous exams, and comparisons of performance, creating a climate of constant assessment and perceived danger (Gayathri et al., 2021). The national-level studies have focused on the relationship between high-stakes tests and suicide rates among the Indian youth

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(Banerjee & Sen, 2025). Although the relationship between cause and effect is often complicated, these results highlight the importance of studying in greater depth the interaction between exam pressure and individual vulnerabilities, as well as situational factors such as living in a home or school environment.

The mass surveys show that academic stress and anxiety about exams are typical experiences of the Indian adolescent. A recent study of senior secondary students found that over three-fourths experienced significant academic pressure stemming from performance expectations and competitive entrance exams (Pienyu et al., 2024; Reshu et al., 2025). Anxiety about evaluation, fear of failure in close people, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities are linked to exam anxiety, and it often accompanies depressive symptoms and poor well-being (Desai, 2024).In a study about adolescents under exam stress, it was found that anxiety is driven by both internal and external factors (perfectionistic tendencies, low self-esteem) and by the stress of expectations and finances placed on them by their parents (Desai, 2024). Also, academic anxiety among higher secondary students has been reported to vary by gender, type of school, and urban or rural setting, with conflicting results (Reshu et al., 2025).

The home environment consists of the warmth of parents, their communication, expectations, discipline, and the family's overall emotional climate. Studies conducted on Indian secondary students indicate that home environment variables, including parental involvement, emotional support, and open communication, are predictors of positive mental health and academic outcomes (Mahalakshmi & Pugalenthy, 2015; Tewari & Pawar, 2024). On the other hand, perceived parental pressure and authoritarian control are linked to an increase in academic stress, exam anxiety, and a decrease in well-being (Pienyu et al., 2024). Competitive exams add complexity to a family's routine, and families can restructure their daily lives around the child's exam preparations, either helping or causing more conflict, depending on the quality of interactions (Sharma, 2025).

Research Gap

Despite the growing evidence on exam stress and NEET-related anxiety, little literature exists on higher secondary students at the beginning of NEET preparation who have already been under pressure (Sharma, 2025; Vanadhi & Parthiban, 2023). Also, the simultaneous analysis of academic stress, exam anxiety, and home environment variables within a single quantitative model is scarce (Gayathri et al., 2021; Reshu et al., 2025). This paper fills this gap by analyzing the psychosocial effects of NEET preparation on higher secondary students, specifically in relation to the family background.

Objectives

1. To determine the extent of perceived academic stress in students who are preparing to take NEET in higher secondary.
2. To establish the extent of anxiety among these students towards exams.
3. To investigate variations in stress and anxiety between demographic factors (gender, level of grade, type of school (government vs. private), and coaching status).
4. To investigate the associations among academic stress, exam anxiety, and mutated aspects of perceived home environment (support, pressure, conflict).
5. To derive the level of predictability of academic stress and home environment in predicting exam anxiety among NEET aspirants in higher secondary.

Hypotheses

1. Higher secondary school students preparing for NEET will be found to have a high degree of perceived academic stress and exam anxiety.
2. Academic stress and exam anxiety will differ significantly by gender, grade (11th vs. 12th), school type, and whether there is coaching.
3. There will be a positive correlation between academic stress and exam anxiety and perceived parental pressure, and a negative correlation between academic stress and perceived emotional support at home.
4. Even after adjusting for academic stress and demographic factors, parental pressure, support, and conflict will remain major influences on home environment variables that predict exam anxiety.

Methodology

Research Design

The research paper used a cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative research approach, and standardized self-report measures were used to assess academic stress, Exam anxiety, and perceived home environment among higher secondary NEET aspirants (Reshu et al., 2025).

Population and Sample

Students of higher secondary (grades 11th and 12th) in NEET-oriented streams or coaching programmes in an urban district in South India were the study population. In the Tamil Nadu state, Sivagangai district, 400 students were selected through stratified random sampling to represent all genders, grades, and types of schools. Students: 70% going to external coaching centres or integrated NEET schools; 30% going to school teaching and self-study. These sampling parameters are generally consistent with other studies on competitive examination aspirants in India (Marimuthu et al., 2022; Vanadhi & Parthiban, 2023).

Table 1
Demography Presentation

Baseline characteristic	*n*	%
Gender		
Boys	190	47.50
Girls	210	52.50
Grade		
11th	190	47.50
12th	210	52.50
School type		
Government	170	42.50
Private	230	57.50
NEET coaching status		
Yes	280	70.00
No	120	30.00
NEET attempt		
First time	290	72.50
Repeat	110	27.50

Note. $N = 400$.

Operational Definitions

1. **Perceived Academic Stress:** Subjective rating of pressure on the students with regard to the level of study load, expected performance, and fear of failure in NEET and board exams (Pienyu et al., 2024; Reshu et al., 2025).
2. **Exam Anxiety:** Concern, anxiety, and physical excitement are particular to NEET and academic tests (Desai, 2024).
3. **Home Environment:** Patterns of parental support, performance-related pressure, encouragement, criticism, conflict, and communication affect students' mental health (Mahalakshmi & Pugalenthy, 2015; Tewari & Pawar, 2024).

Tool

1. **Academic Stress Scale for Adolescents (ASSA):** A customized version of a pre-existing academic stress scale, which has been modified to feature questions related to NEET preparation (e.g., "I am overwhelmed by the volume of syllabus I have to cover to prepare to take NEET). Earlier research has shown that such scales have acceptable reliability among Indian adolescents, with Cronbach's alpha estimates exceeding 0.80 (Pienyu et al., 2024; Reshu et al., 2025).
2. **Test Anxiety Inventory – Short Form (TAI-SF)**: Test Anxiety Inventory – Short Form (TAI-SF) – adapted to capture anxiety

related to NEET and board examinations, including worry and emotionality subscales. According to the scale's scoring guidelines, a cut-off score of ≥ 65 (out of 100) was used to identify moderate to severe exam anxiety.

3. **Home Environment Perception Scale (HEPS)**: A research-based composite variable that is based on the possible existing home environment and parental pressure scales. The scale comprised three subscales, viz. Emotional support (e.g., My parents listen when I talk about my problems), Parental Pressure (e.g., My parents often remind me of the sacrifices they made on my NEET coaching), and Conflict or Criticism (e.g., Arguments about my studies are common at home). The test's reliability is 0.89.

Procedure

The researcher approached the school authorities and the coaching centres to get permission. Parental informed consent and student assent were obtained, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality. The questionnaires were administered in small groups in the classroom, and the researcher was available to answer questions. Students were told that none of their answers would be forwarded to teachers or parents and that their answers would not affect grades or their coaching position. The time required to complete the survey was approximately 30 minutes, compared to other school-based psychological surveys in India.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was performed using statistical software. All the important variables were calculated using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and percentage). Independent-samples t tests and one-way ANOVA were used to compare groups, with post hoc tests as needed. A correlation analysis was conducted using the Pearson correlation coefficient to examine the relationships among academic stress, exam anxiety, and the home environment subscales. The predictive value of academic stress and home environment was tested by hierarchical multiple regression after adjusting for demographic variables, as in other quantitative studies of the same topic.

Limitations of the Study

All data were collected through self-report instruments, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias and recall inaccuracies. The sample was drawn exclusively from one urban district in South India, limiting the generalizability of findings to rural settings, other states, or diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The study focused narrowly on academic stress, exam anxiety, and home environment, omitting potentially influential variables such as individual resilience, coping strategies, peer relationships, and digital media use.

Results and Discussion

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Academic Stress, Exam Anxiety, and Home Environment

Variable	Min.	Max.	*M*	*SD*
Academic stress	48	96	76.40	9.20
Exam anxiety	41	95	68.70	11.40
Home environment				
Emotional support (Home)	15	40	31.60	5.80
Parental pressure	12	45	29.40	6.10
Conflict/criticism at home	10	44	26.10	6.50

Note. *N* = 400. Min = minimum; Max. = maximum.

In general, students said that they experienced high stress levels in academics and moderate to high levels of exam anxiety. The average stress score for academics (*M* = 76.40, *SD* = 9.20) was on a scale of 20 to 100. The mean score for exam anxiety (*M* = 68.7, *SD* = 11.40) was on a scale of 20 to 100. Based on the cut-off criteria, 72% of students were classified in the high academic stress category, and 61% fell within the moderate-to-severe exam anxiety range. The results are in line with previous studies that reported a high level of stress and anxiety in the Indian adolescents who were taking competitive exams (Marimuthu et al., 2022; Reshu et al., 2025).

Regarding the home environment, students reported moderate to high perceived emotional support from their families (*M* = 31.60, *SD* = 5.80) on a scale of 10 to 40. Parental pressure was also considerable (*M* = 29.40, *SD* = 6.10), indicating substantial emphasis on academic performance and expectations. Family conflict or criticism related to studies was moderate (*M* = 26.10, *SD* = 6.50). Approximately 42% of students rated high on perceived emotional support, whereas 34% reported high parental pressure, and 32% indicated high levels of family conflict or criticism concerning their academic pursuits.

Table 3
Group Differences in Academic Stress and Exam Anxiety

Variable	Group	*n*	*M*		*t*-value	*p*-value
			Stress	Anxiety		
Gender	Boys	190	75.80	67.00	2.900	.010
	Girls	210	76.90	70.20		
Grade	11th	190	74.30	66.10	4.300	.001
	12th	210	78.10	70.50		
School type	Government	170	74.80	67.40	1.900	.060
	Private	230	77.90	69.40		
Coaching status	Coaching/integrated	280	78.50	70.80	5.800	.001
	No coaching/self-study	120	71.30	64.10		
NEET attempts	First attempt	290	75.20	66.30	4.100	.001
	Repeaters	110	79.40	73.80		

Note. *N* = 400.

The female students reported slightly higher exam anxiety (*M* = 70.20, *SD* = 10.90) than the boys' students (*M* = 67.00, *SD* = 11.80), with a significant difference, *t* (398) = 2.900 *p* < .05. Nonetheless, academic stress in terms of gender did not have statistically significant differences. This trend is generally in agreement with the past results, which have found that girls tend to have greater anxiety levels in school.

These students were in grade 12th (*M* = 78.10, *SD* = 8.70) and grade 11th (*M* = 74.30, *SD* = 9.40), *t* (398) = 4.300, *p* = .001, showing the closeness of board exams and NEET. Grade 11th also had higher levels

of exam anxiety, albeit with a medium effect size, similar to the values reported for other samples of senior secondary students.

Students in privately run, NEET-oriented schools reported slightly higher academic stress than those in government or government-aided schools. The difference was nearly statistically significant, which might be explained by greater competition and a higher frequency of testing in state-funded institutions.

Students in external coaching centres and integrated NEET schools had a greater academic stress (*M* = 78.50) and exam anxiety (*M* = 70.80) than students who only used school teaching and self-study (*M* of stress = 71.30 and *M* of anxiety = 64.10) with *t*-values of more than 5.0 and corresponding *p*-values of less than 0.001. The trend confirms previous studies that intensive coaching settings lead to increased stress and anxiety.

Aspirants who had taken NEET at least once before showed much more exam anxiety than first-time aspirants, suggesting a cumulative psychological burden and fear of failure, a phenomenon previously reported in studies of competitive exam repeaters.

Table 4
Home Environment Subscale Scores

Subscale	Possible score range	*M*	*SD*	Interpretation	% in High category
Emotional support	10 – 40	31.60	5.80	Moderate to high perceived support	42%
Parental pressure	10 – 40	29.40	6.10	Considerable emphasis on performance	34%
Conflict/criticism	10 – 40	26.10	6.50	Moderate family tension related to studies	32%

Note. *N* = 400.

Where the emotional support was concerned (*M* = 31.60, *SD* = 5.80), out of a possible range of 10-40, indicating moderate to high perceived support. Parental pressure (*M* = 29.40, *SD* = 6.10) implies that parents placed great emphasis on performance and expectations. Conflict or criticism of family (*M* = 26.10, *SD* = 6.50), showing a moderate level of family attention. High parental pressure and quarreling about exam results were rated as high among the group of students (around a third), which is consistent with the literature that serves a connection between home environment and academic stress among secondary students (Mahalakshmi & Pugalenthy, 2015; Sahu & Jha, 2024; Tewari & Pawar, 2024).

Table 5
Correlation Matrix: Academic Stress, Exam Anxiety, and Home Environment Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Academic stress	1.00				
Exam anxiety	0.64**	1.00			
Emotional support	−0.29**	−0.32**	1.00		
Parental pressure	0.52**	0.49**	−0.26**	1.00	
Conflict/criticism	0.47**	0.43**	−0.30**	0.40**	1.00

Note. ***p* < .01 indicates statistical significance.

There was a strong positive correlation between academic stress and exam anxiety (r = 0.64, p < .001). Parental pressure (r = 0.52, p < .001) and conflict (r = 0.47, p < .001) were positively correlated with academic stress. Academic stress was modestly negatively associated with emotional support at home (r = -0.29, p < .001). Parental pressure (r = 0.49, p < .001) and conflict (r = 0.43, p < .001) were positively related to exam anxiety, and emotional support (r = -0.32, p < .001) was negatively related. These connections align with existing studies, which show that the home environment and perceived parental pressure are critical factors in the development of stress and anxiety among adolescents during exams (Mahalakshmi & Pugalenthy, 2015; Pienyu et al., 2024; Tewari & Pawar, 2024).

Table 6
Hierarchical Regression Predicting Exam Anxiety

Predictors	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Step 1: Demographics			
Gender	0.08*	0.06*	0.05*
Grade level	0.19**	0.14**	0.12**
School type	0.07*	0.05*	0.04*
Coaching status	0.23**	0.18**	0.16**
Step 2: Academic stress			
Academic stress	—	0.54**	0.40**
Step 3: Home environment variables			
Emotional support	—	—	−0.16**
Parental pressure	—	—	0.23**
Conflict/criticism	—	—	0.17**
Model summary			
R^2	0.11*	0.39*	0.52*
ΔR^2	—	0.28**	0.13**
F -value	12.10**	191.50**	31.40**

Note. *N* = 400.*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

Exam anxiety was used as the dependent variable, and a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Gender, grade, school type, and coaching status alone explained approximately 11% of the variance in exam anxiety, F (4, 395) = 12.10, p < .001. The predictors were coaching status and grade level, which indicated high pressure due to intensive coaching and exams (Sharma, 2025). The increase in academic stress explained 39% of the variance (2R change, 1, 394) = -191.5, p = .001. Academic stress was found to be a good predictor (= .54, p < .001), which is consistent with previous researchers who found that exam anxiety is highly associated with perceived academic pressure (Pienyu et al., 2024; Reshu et al., 2025). Inclusion of emotional support, parental pressure, and conflict also explained about 52% of the variance, ΔR2 = .13, F(3, 391) = 31.4, p = .001. Academic stress (df = 2 =.40, p < .001), parental pressure (df = 2 = 0.23, p <.001), conflict (df = 2 = 0.17, p < 0.01) were also significant positive predictors, and emotional support was a significant negative predictor (df = 2 = - 0.16, p < .01).

This study aimed to investigate the psychosocial effects of NEET preparation among higher secondary students, with special attention to academic stress, exam anxiety, and the home environment. The findings confirm that there is a great psychological load on several adolescents during NEET preparation.

First, the academic pressure and exam stress rates were high in this sample, a result similar to previous research on NEET aspirants (Desai, 2024; Marimuthu et al., 2022; Reshu et al., 2025; Vanadhi & Parthiban, 2023). Most students felt their academic workload and performance standards were too high. Besides, the prevalence of moderate to intense exam anxiety is an indicator that the emotional price of studying can disrupt focus and memory and even the performance on the exam (Pienyu et al., 2024).

Second, the research found definite group differences. The students of grade 12th were found to have greater levels of stress and anxiety than grade 11th students, which agrees with the closeness to the board examinations and the NEET test (Reshu et al., 2025). The noted difference between genders in terms of anxiety about exams, where females report a slightly higher anxiety, is consistent with some of the prior research on Indian adolescents, although it should be viewed cautiously because cultural norms can also affect the self-reporting of emotional distress (Desai, 2024; Reshu et al., 2025).

The students who experienced intensive coaching, especially those in residential or integrated NEET programmes, reported much more stress and anxiety when compared to students who were taught at school and studied independently. This observation reinforces fears that coaching cultures are based on an emphasis on tests and ranking systems that put extra stress on students and reduce the chances of balanced development. Anxiety was also more common in repeat aspirants, which could indicate built-up pressure caused by the failure to succeed in the previous attempts and fear of failure in the future (Marimuthu et al., 2022)

Third, the paper indicates the significance of the home environment to the development of exam-related stress and anxiety. The conflict and pressure exerted by parents had a positive relationship with academic stress and exam anxiety, whereas emotional support was protective. These findings are consistent with the existing literature associating home environment variables with adolescents' mental health and academic performance (Mahalakshmi & Pugalenthy, 2015; Sahu & Jha, 2024). With the belief that performance is the primary cause of interaction in a family, an adolescent in the family might develop a belief that they are only worth as much as they perform in the exams, and hence more susceptible to anxiety and depressive symptoms. Conversely, parents who have high aspirations but are emotionally warm, open, and realistic in their expectations can help students manage the pressure (Pienyu et al., 2024).

The regression analysis indicated that home environment variables contributed to anxiety about exams, even after controlling for demographic factors and academic stress. Anxiety was increased by parental pressure and reduced by emotional support. One can explain this trend within the transactional model of stress, which posits that situational factors in the family influence adolescents' appraisal of exam demands and their use of coping resources (Pienyu et al., 2024). Adolescents can perceive problems as challenges when home becomes a positive and non-threatening environment. When the experience of home is perceived as demanding and critical, the same challenges might be seen as threats to self-esteem and family relations.

The results also echo the ecological views, which place exam stress in a variety of systems. The preparation for NEET is not just personal homework but a family venture within a larger socioeconomic framework (Banerjee and Sen, 2025; Sharma, 2025). Data related to national levels stating relationships between examination seasons and youth suicides also shows that high-stakes examinations should be a social mental health issue (Banerjee & Sen, 2025). The present research contributes to the existing body of literature by demonstrating that, despite the results of the examinations, high school students have already experienced the pressure and emotional burden of living with increased stress.

Conclusion

The present study provides empirical evidence of the significant psychosocial burden associated with NEET preparation among higher secondary students. High levels of academic stress and examination anxiety were particularly pronounced among grade 12th students, those enrolled in intensive coaching programmes, and repeat aspirants. The home environment emerged as a critical determinant of student well-being: perceived parental pressure and family conflict were associated with elevated stress and anxiety, whereas emotional support and open communication served as protective factors. These findings underscore that interventions aimed at improving student mental health cannot be limited to individual skill-building or time management strategies. Rather, a comprehensive, multi-level approach is essential—one that includes parental guidance and family counselling, the integration of mental health services within schools and coaching centres, and systemic reforms in examination policies and coaching practices. Reframing NEET aspirants not merely as future professionals but as adolescents navigating a critical developmental stage is fundamental to creating a more humane and supportive educational environment. Safeguarding the psychological well-being of these students is not only an ethical imperative but also a foundational step toward nurturing a compassionate and resilient healthcare workforce for the future.

Educational Implications

The implications of the findings of this study are the following:

1. Schools and junior colleges that admit NEET aspirants must include systematic counselling facilities, screening for stress and anxiety, and psychoeducation on coping mechanisms.
2. Parents can be highlighted on the importance of emotional support, realistic expectations, and constructive communication through workshops and guidance sessions. Parents may be persuaded to emphasize effort and learning rather than just ranks and scores.
3. In coaching institutes, policies should be put in place to minimise humiliating practices such as publicly ranking or shaming low performers. Negative effects can be mitigated by incorporating stress management training, peer support groups, and accessing counsellors.
4. Educational boards and regulatory bodies could explore ways to reduce overreliance on high-stakes tests by increasing choice, offering multiple exams, or adopting holistic admission standards, all aligned with emerging research on exam stress and student well-being.
5. There should be responsible reporting on NEET-related problems and the suicidal deaths of students. Mental health resources and success stories of alternative career paths outside of medicine should also be brought to the forefront of public discussion.

Future Research

Future investigations should adopt a broader ecological perspective to capture the full range of factors shaping adolescent mental health during competitive examination preparation. Finally, while the Home Environment Perception Scale demonstrated acceptable psychometric properties in this sample, it was researcher-constructed and requires further validation across larger and more heterogeneous populations.

AI Use Statement

The authors used Grammarly and ChatGPT for grammar checking, improving sentence clarity, and language improvement. The author reviewed and edited the output and takes full responsibility for the final content.

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