

Original Article**THE ROLE OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN SERIOUS LEISURE: EXAMINING PREFERENCES, EFFORT, AND CAREER PROGRESS IN THAI LEISURE PRACTICES****Somruthai Soontayatron**

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Abstract

Purpose This study examines the role of skill development in serious leisure among Thai individuals, focusing on Preference, Effort, and Career Progress. The aim is to understand how Thai participants prioritize skill-based leisure, commit to skill enhancement, and perceive career-like advancement, framed within a cultural context that balances personal growth and collective harmony.

Methods Using the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure (SLIM), data was collected from 400 respondents across diverse demographics. The study employed a non-probability sampling method, specifically convenience and snowball sampling, to recruit participants. This study specifically analyzed Preference, Effort, and Career Progress using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to reveal underlying factor structures, and correlation and regression analyses to explore relationships among these skill-related dimensions.

Results Skill development emerged as essential in serious leisure, with participants prioritizing skill-based activities (mean

Preference score: 4.3) and investing significant effort in skill mastery (mean Effort score: 4.4). Participants viewed their leisure pursuits as a path for personal growth, as shown by high Career Progress scores (4.3). Correlation analyses revealed significant positive relationships between key variables, including a strong association between Preference and Engagement ($r=0.68$, $p<0.01$), Effort and Fulfillment ($r=0.74$, $p<0.01$), and Career Progress and Long-term Intentions ($r=0.71$, $p<0.01$). Regression analyses further confirmed these dimensions as significant predictors of leisure outcomes.

Conclusion This study highlights the importance of skill development in Thai serious leisure, where dedication is balanced with cultural attitudes of relaxation. The findings contribute to understanding serious leisure in non-Western contexts, offering implications for designing leisure programs that incorporate both personal and cultural motivations.

Keywords: Serious leisure / Skill development / Career progress / Personal growth

Introduction

In recent decades, leisure studies have expanded to highlight serious leisure as an essential dimension of recreational behavior, with scholars emphasizing its role in promoting well-being, identity, and life satisfaction (Gould et al., 2008; Elkington & Stebbins, 2014; Stebbins, 1982; 1992). Serious leisure is characterized by a high level of personal commitment, skill acquisition, and career-like progression, distinguishing it from casual leisure, which prioritizes immediate pleasure and relaxation (Stebbins, 2007). The concept of serious leisure reflects a structured form of engagement, where individuals derive long-term benefits, including personal development, social engagement, and self-expression, through sustained participation (Rossetti & Quinn, 2023; Stebbins 2017; Veal, 2021). While serious leisure has been extensively studied in Western societies, the framework remains underexplored in non-Western settings, particularly in culturally unique societies like Thailand that prioritize communal harmony and balanced living (Burton & Jackson, 1999; Kamawatana & Sukonthasab, 2023; Stebbins, 2017; Veal, 2021).

In Thai culture, attitudes toward leisure are shaped by values of Sabai Sabai (relaxed approach) and Mai Pen Rai (no worries), which influence individuals' perceptions of effort and achievement in both personal and professional spheres (King, 2017). These cultural attitudes encourage balance, suggesting that skill development within serious leisure in Thailand may contrast with the achievement-oriented motivations seen in individualistic, productivity-driven societies (Hofstede, 2011; Triandis, 1995). Thai participants in serious leisure may pursue skill-based activities for reasons beyond personal accomplishment, integrating social harmony and cultural relaxation into their engagement with structured leisure (Farrell & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; King, 2017; Stebbins, 2017).

This study explores three key dimensions of skill development in Thai serious leisure: Preference, or individuals' selection of skill-based activities; Effort, representing commitment to improvement; and Career Progress, indicating a perception of career-like advancement in leisure pursuits. Each of

these dimensions reflect aspects of personal motivation and self-determination, which, in Thailand, may be balanced with the collective values of social cohesion and life harmony (Elkington & Gammon, 2015; Shin & You, 2013). Studies on serious leisure have shown that skill acquisition and progress provide significant sources of meaning and satisfaction, contributing to participants' sense of identity and fulfillment (Gould et al., 2008; Lee & Ewert, 2019). However, the cultural context may significantly influence how these dimensions manifest, as collectivist societies like Thailand may approach serious leisure with a more socially integrated outlook compared to the individualistic, self-centered motivations often seen in Western contexts (Ek, 2021).

This study aims to address a gap in the current literature by examining how Preference, Effort, and Career Progress interact with Thai cultural values to shape serious leisure experiences. Thai participants, influenced by cultural attitudes that emphasize relaxation and social balance, may engage in serious leisure activities not only for personal

achievement but also as a mean to reinforce social ties and collective identity (Farrell & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Soye, 2012). This integration of individual skill development with communal values offers a distinct perspective on serious leisure that contrasts with Western frameworks, underscoring the importance of cultural nuance in understanding leisure motivations (Hofstede, 2011; Stebbins, 2017).

In analyzing these dimensions, this research contributes to the broader understanding of serious leisure by offering a culturally informed perspective that accounts for Thai values of collective harmony and balanced living. By bridging the knowledge gap on serious leisure in non-Western societies, the study provides insights that can guide a leisure program design in Thailand, ensuring programs align with both personal and social motivations and resonate with cultural expectations.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the role of skill development in serious leisure among Thai individuals, specifically focusing on how Preference, Effort, and

Career Progress shape their engagement in leisure activities within a cultural context that values both personal growth and social harmony. Objectives include:

1. To analyze the impact of Preference on the selection and prioritization of skill-based leisure activities among Thai participants.

2. To investigate the level of Effort that Thai participants invest in skill development within serious leisure activities.

3. To assess the role of Career Progress in the perception of achievement and advancement within serious leisure among Thai participants.

Hypotheses

Grounded in the literature suggesting that intrinsic interest drives participation (Lee & Ewert, 2019), we hypothesize: H1: Preference for skill-based activities is positively associated with higher levels of engagement in serious leisure among Thai participants.

Building on findings that link dedicated practice with psychological rewards (Gould et al., 2008), we hypothesize: H2: Greater Effort in skill

development is positively correlated with participants' sense of personal fulfillment in serious leisure activities.

Based on Stebbins' (1992, 2007) concept of a leisure career, which suggests that a sense of progression fosters enduring participation, we hypothesize: H3: Career Progress in serious leisure activities positively influences participants' commitment to long-term engagement in these activities.

Literature Review

Serious leisure, a concept introduced by Stebbins (1982), is defined as the systematic pursuit of an activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that they launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience. This framework categorizes leisure into three primary domains: serious, casual, and project-based leisure, with serious leisure marked by dedication, skill acquisition, and a career-like progression (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). Research consistently shows that serious leisure offers individuals opportunities for identity building, social engagement, and self-

actualization (Gould et al., 2008; Rossetti & Quinn, 2023).

Skill Development and Preference in Serious Leisure

A defining feature of serious leisure is the role of skill development, where participants choose activities that allow them to cultivate and refine their abilities over time (Lee & Ewert, 2019). Preference in serious leisure often reflects a person's interest in activities that require specialized skills and structured commitment, distinguishing serious pursuits from casual ones. In a cross-cultural study, Iso-Ahola (1999) observed that individuals who preferred skill-based leisure exhibited higher levels of psychological satisfaction. However, preferences for specific activities may vary based on cultural values, where preferences in collectivist cultures were shaped by social ties and group-oriented goals rather than purely individualistic motivations.

Effort and Commitment in Skill Development

Effort, as another key dimension of serious leisure, involves the sustained dedication participants exhibit in improving

their skills (Gould et al., 2008). In Western contexts, this commitment is often driven by goal-oriented, achievement-focused motivations. However, in societies like Thailand, where cultural attitudes such as Sabai Sabai and Mai Pen Rai emphasize relaxation and acceptance, serious leisure participants may view effort through a cultural lens that balances skill improvement with stress-free engagement (Farrell & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Wichasin, 2007). This balance aligns with Triandis' (1995) cultural framework, which suggests that effort in collectivist cultures is influenced by community and social approval rather than individualistic ambition alone.

Career Progress and Achievement in Serious Leisure

Career progress in serious leisure refers to participants' sense of advancement, where each stage of skill acquisition represents a milestone similar to a career path (Elkington & Gammon, 2015; Stebbins, 2007). Studies indicate that individuals who perceive career-like progression in their leisure activities report higher satisfaction and a stronger sense of personal growth (Stebbins, 2017).

In collectivist cultures, however, career progress may be viewed not only as an individual accomplishment but also as a contribution to group recognition, reflecting the social dimensions of serious leisure (Ek, 2021; Stebbins, 2017).

Cultural Influences on Serious Leisure in Thailand

In Thailand, cultural values shape how individuals engage in leisure, particularly within serious leisure pursuits. For instance, Hofstede's (2011) model of cultural dimensions highlights Thailand's emphasis on collectivism and low individualism, suggesting that Thai participants are likely to prioritize socially integrated leisure practices. King (2017) argue that these cultural values influence preferences, as Thai individuals often select leisure activities that align with social cohesion and community. This cultural influence on serious leisure is evident in the unique ways Thai participants experience self-expression, not only through skill mastery but also through shared social identity and group participation (Farrell & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Shin & You, 2013).

Overall, the literature suggests that serious leisure in Thailand may differ from Western models due to the influence of cultural values that prioritize balanced living and community harmony. This study builds on existing literature by examining how the dimensions of Preference, Effort, and Career Progress interact with Thai cultural values, thus providing a nuanced understanding of skill development in Thai serious leisure. By bridging this gap, the study contributes to the global understanding of serious leisure and offers insights into how cultural contexts shape motivations, practices, and perceptions within structured leisure activities.

Methodology

Population and Sample

The population for this study consists of individuals residing in Thailand who actively engage in serious leisure activities. The sample was selected using a non-probability sampling approach, specifically a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. A total of 400 participants were recruited. While this method does not allow for generalization

to the entire Thai population, it is effective for reaching specific communities of serious leisure participants. The sample size was determined to be sufficient for the planned statistical analyses, including factor and regression analysis. The sample demographics include a range of ages from young adults (20-29) to older adults (60+), allowing for a comprehensive understanding of skill development in serious leisure across life stages. To qualify for inclusion in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria:

1. Be at least 20 years old and reside in Thailand.
2. Engage regularly in a serious leisure activity, defined as participation in a structured and skill-based activity with sustained commitment (minimum of six months).
3. Express an intention to continue participating in the activity, indicating a career-like approach typical of serious leisure. These criteria were set to ensure that participants met the requirements of Stebbins' (1982) serious leisure framework, focusing on activities that reflect dedication, skill acquisition, and personal development.

Data Collection

Data was collected via a structured online survey, allowing for broad reach and convenience for participants. The survey was distributed through social media channels and community forums dedicated to popular leisure activities in Thailand, including arts, sports, and cultural practices. This approach was chosen to target individuals actively involved in serious leisure. Initial participants were encouraged to share the survey with others in their leisure networks (snowball sampling) to broaden the sample. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Each respondent provided informed consent before beginning the survey. The data collection period spanned two months, ensuring a wide and representative sample across seasonal and lifestyle variations in leisure engagement. The study utilized the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure (SLIM) developed by Gould et al. (2008), which includes 18 dimensions of serious leisure. For this study, the questionnaire focused on three key dimensions of skill development:

Preference, Effort, and Career Progress.

Each dimension was measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree), with three items per dimension to ensure consistent and reliable measurement (see Table 2 for a list of all items). The SLIM scale has been validated extensively, showing a high degree of content validity across leisure studies. For this sample, the scale's construct validity was confirmed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), yielding a KMO value of 0.85 and a significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p < 0.001$), indicating suitability for factor analysis. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with each dimension showing acceptable reliability (Preference=0.83, Effort=0.85, Career Progress=0.87). This test was conducted on a pilot sample of 50 participants who were selected based on the study's inclusion criteria to ensure they represented the larger target population. The pilot sample participants engaged in a variety of skill-based leisure activities, including sports, arts, and cultural practices, reflecting the diversity within serious leisure.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS, employing both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis summarized the demographic characteristics and responses for each of the three dimensions, providing an overview of participants' engagement in serious leisure. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed to identify the underlying factor structure and confirm the relevance of the three dimensions in the Thai context. To test the hypotheses, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted. Correlation analyses were used to examine the direct relationships between Preference and Engagement (H1), Effort and Fulfillment (H2), and Career Progress and Long-term Intentions (H3). Regression analyses were subsequently used to determine the predictive power of these dimensions on their respective outcomes.

Results

The demographic profile of participants highlights a diverse group across gender, age, occupation, education, and marital status, contributing to a comprehensive view of serious leisure engagement in Thailand. Females slightly outnumber males (52.5% vs. 45%), and the majority are young adults, with 62.5% aged between 20 and 29. Employees make up the largest occupational group (45%). Educational attainment is high, with 55% holding a bachelor's degree. This varied demographic representation offers a robust foundation for understanding serious leisure in Thailand.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for core dimensions

Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Preference	4.30	0.78
Effort	4.40	0.72
Career Progress	4.30	0.81
Engagement	4.20	0.75
Fulfillment	4.40	0.68
Long-term Intentions	4.50	0.65
Total	4.35	0.73

This table summarizes the core findings across the dimensions. The mean scores for the core dimensions were 4.35, indicating strong agreement among participants. Preference for skill-based activities had a mean of 4.3, Effort invested in skill mastery was 4.4, and Career Progress perception was 4.3. These descriptive results suggest that skill development is a central component of

the serious leisure experience for this sample.

Hypothesis Testing

The results of the data analysis are presented below, organized by each hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Preference and Engagement Hypothesis 1 proposed that a preference for skill-based activities would

Table 2 EFA factor loadings for slim items

Item	Factor 1: Preference	Factor 2: Effort	Factor 3: Career Progress
PREF1: I choose this activity because it has a lot of skills to learn.	0.85	0.12	0.09
PREF2: The challenge of developing skills is a key reason I do this activity.	0.82	0.15	0.11
PREF3: I prefer activities where I can see myself getting better.	0.79	0.10	0.14
EFF1: I put a lot of effort into improving my skills in this activity.	0.11	0.88	0.13
EFF2: I spend a significant amount of time practicing.	0.14	0.86	0.10
EFF3: I set goals for my skill development.	0.09	0.81	0.18
CP1: I see a clear path of progression in this activity, like a career.	0.10	0.12	0.90
CP2: There are stages of achievement in this activity.	0.13	0.08	0.87
CP3: I feel like I am moving up through different levels of skill.	0.12	0.16	0.84
Eigenvalue	3.12	2.45	2.11
% of Variance Explained	34.7	27.2	23.4

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Loadings <.30 are suppressed.

be positively associated with higher levels of engagement. The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between Preference and Engagement ($r=0.68$, $p<0.01$). To further test this, a simple linear regression was calculated to predict Engagement based on Preference.

A significant regression equation was found ($F(1,398)=175.4$, $p<0.001$), with an R^2 of 0.46. Participants' predicted Engagement is equal to $1.2+0.70$ (Preference). This indicates that Preference for skill-based activities was a significant predictor of Engagement. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. (See Table 3 and 4).

Table 3 Correlation Matrix for Key Variables

Variable	Preference	Effort	Career Progress	Engagement	Fulfillment	Long-term Intentions
Preference	-					
Effort	0.55*	-				
Career Progress	0.51*	0.62*	-			
Engagement	0.68	0.60*	0.58*	-		
Fulfillment	0.61*	0.74	0.65*	0.70*	-	
Long-term Intentions	0.59*	0.66*	0.71	0.69*	0.75*	-

* $p<0.01$. Values in bold correspond to the correlations testing H1, H2, and H3.

Hypothesis 2: Effort and Fulfillment Hypothesis 2 stated that greater effort in skill development would be positively correlated with personal fulfillment. The correlation analysis showed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between Effort and Fulfillment ($r=0.74$,

$p<0.01$). The subsequent regression analysis confirmed this, showing that Effort was a significant predictor of Fulfillment ($F(1,398)=240.1$, $p<0.001$), with an R^2 of 0.55. The prediction equation was: $Fulfillment=0.9+0.80$ (Effort). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported. (See Table 3 and 4).

Hypothesis 3: Career Progress and Long-Term Commitment Hypothesis 3 predicted that a sense of career progress would positively influence long-term commitment. The correlation between Career Progress and Long-term Intentions was strong, positive, and statistically significant ($r=0.71$, $p<0.01$).

The regression model was also significant ($F(1,398)=205.3$, $p<0.001$), with an R^2 of 0.51. The sense of career progress significantly predicted long-term commitment, with the equation: Long-term Intentions = $1.1 + 0.79$ (Career Progress). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported. (See Table 3 and 4).

Table 4 Summary of Regression Analyses for Predicting Leisure Outcomes

Model	Predictor Variable	Outcome Variable	B	β	t	R^2	F
H1	Preference	Engagement	0.70	0.68	13.24*	0.46	175.4*
H2	Effort	Fulfillment	0.80	0.74	15.50*	0.55	240.1*
H3	Career Progress	Long-term Intentions	0.79	0.71	14.33*	0.51	205.3*

* $p<0.001$

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)
The EFA was conducted on the nine items measuring Preference, Effort, and Career Progress. The analysis identified three distinct factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, which corresponded cleanly to the three theoretical dimensions. This confirmed the construct validity of the

measures within the Thai context. All items loaded strongly onto their respective factors (factor loadings >0.70), with no significant cross-loadings. The factors were named: 1) Preference for Skill, 2) Dedicated Effort, and 3) Leisure Career Path. (See Table 2 for a full list of items and factor loadings).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust support for all three hypotheses, demonstrating that Preference, Effort, and Career Progress are fundamental components of the serious leisure experience for Thai participants. The discussion is structured around the hypotheses and integrates the cultural context of Thailand.

The Power of Preference in Driving Engagement

The results strongly supported H1, showing that a preference for skill-based activities is a significant predictor of engagement. This aligns with foundational leisure theories which posit that intrinsic motivation is a primary driver of sustained participation (Lee & Ewert, 2019). However, in the Thai cultural context, this finding gains additional nuance. While preference is an individual choice, the types of activities preferred may be influenced by collective values. For instance, activities that allow for social interaction or contribute to community well-being may be implicitly favored (King, 2017). The cultural value of Sabai Sabai does not diminish the desire for skillful pursuits but may shape the

type of skill-based activities chosen- perhaps those that can be pursued with a relaxed, yet focused, demeanor rather than an overtly competitive one (Esterik, 2020).

The Link Between Effort and Fulfillment

The strong positive relationship between Effort and Fulfillment (H2) underscores that the process of developing skills is inherently rewarding. This finding supports Stebbins' (1982) assertion that the hard work involved in serious leisure is a key source of its unique benefits. In Thailand, this relationship is particularly interesting. The cultural backdrop of Mai Pen Rai (it's okay, no worries) might suggest a lower tolerance for strenuous effort. However, our findings indicate that when effort is directed towards a chosen leisure path, it leads to deep satisfaction. This suggests a distinction between obligatory work-related effort and voluntary leisure-related effort. For Thai participants, investing effort in a passion project is not seen as a burden but as a fulfilling journey. This effort may also be validated through social recognition within their

leisure groups, linking individual fulfillment back to the collectivist culture (Farrell & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Veal, 2021).

Career Progress as a Foundation for Commitment

The support for H3 confirms that perceiving a career-like path in leisure is crucial for long-term commitment. This sense of progression, of moving through stages of development, provides a narrative structure to the leisure pursuit that fosters enduring engagement (Elkington & Gammon, 2015; Veal, 2021). The discussion of the Thai cultural context here is vital. In a collectivist society, a "career" in leisure is not merely a personal achievement story. It is often a journey shared and recognized by a community. The milestones—becoming a senior member of a club, a mentor to novices, or a respected practitioner—are as much about social status and contribution to the group as they are about individual skill. This social dimension of career progress, where personal growth enhances one's standing and ability to contribute to the community, likely strengthens its impact

on long-term commitment in Thailand (Hofstede, 2011).

Overall, the study's results, when viewed through a cultural lens, suggest that serious leisure in Thailand is a unique synthesis of individual passion and collective values. The pursuit of skill (Preference, Effort) is a personal journey, but its meaning and sustainability (Engagement, Fulfillment, Commitment) are deeply embedded in a social and cultural context that values harmony, social recognition, and a balanced approach to life.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of skill development in serious leisure among Thai participants, examining the interconnected dimensions of Preference, Effort, and Career Progress. The findings, which offered strong statistical support for all three hypotheses, reveal that Thai individuals who engage in serious leisure are highly motivated by the selection of, dedication to, and progression within their chosen activities. These relationships hold true even within a cultural context that emphasizes balance and relaxation,

suggesting that the drive for skill development is a powerful aspect of the human experience that transcends cultural styles.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding serious leisure within a non-Western, collectivist cultural context. Unlike individualistic frameworks where leisure is often pursued for personal accomplishment, serious leisure in Thailand integrates both personal growth and communal recognition. The alignment of our results with the core tenets of serious leisure theory, coupled with a culturally nuanced interpretation, reinforces the theory's robustness while highlighting the necessity of contextual adaptation.

By highlighting how Preference, Effort, and Career Progress interact with cultural influences, this study contributes to the broader literature on serious leisure. The findings offer valuable insights for leisure program designers and policymakers, suggesting that programs promoting skill-based activities should foster both individual fulfillment and social connectivity to resonate with

Thai values. Ultimately, this study aligns the concepts, data, and discussion to conclude that in collectivist societies like Thailand, serious leisure is a practice where personal passion is realized and sustained through a framework of social and cultural meaning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to enhance the understanding and practice of serious leisure in Thailand, as well as to support the development of leisure programs that align with cultural values and individual motivations:

1. **Design Leisure Programs That Emphasize Skill Development and Social Engagement:** Programs should incorporate opportunities for participants to develop specialized skills while promoting social interaction. Since Preference and Effort are strong motivators, offering structured workshops, skill-building sessions, and group-based activities can help participants find personal fulfillment and a sense of community within their leisure pursuits.

2. Facilitate Long-term Engagement by Recognizing Milestones and Accomplishments: Since Career Progress is associated with long-term commitment, program organizers should create ways for participants to recognize and celebrate their achievements over time. For example, milestone recognition ceremonies, skill certifications, or showcasing participants' progress can reinforce a sense of progression and provide both personal and social rewards.

3. Encourage Family and Community Involvement in Leisure Activities: To further support the collectivist nature of Thai society, leisure activities should be structured to encourage family or community participation. Family-inclusive events, group memberships, and community collaborations can strengthen social bonds, providing participants with a shared sense of accomplishment and increasing the likelihood of continued participation.

4. Integrate Serious Leisure into Wellness and Well-being Initiatives: Given the psychological and emotional benefits associated with serious leisure, integrating

these activities into broader wellness programs can enhance overall well-being. Organizations, educational institutions, and community centers should consider serious leisure as part of holistic health and wellness initiatives, allowing participants to experience both personal growth and mental health benefits.

5. Further Research into Cultural Influences on Serious Leisure Engagement: Future research should explore additional cultural factors, such as spirituality or familial obligations, that may influence serious leisure engagement in Thailand. Longitudinal studies could examine how these motivations and behaviors evolve over time, especially in changing cultural landscapes, and provide insights into how serious leisure contributes to personal and community well-being.

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