**SOIL ELEMENTAL CONTAMINANTS AND THEIR SYNERGISTIC INFLUENCE ON RADON MOBILITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RISK MODELING AND PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY**

**ABSTRACT**

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| Background: Radon-222, a naturally occurring radioactive gas, poses a significant public health risk as the second leading cause of lung cancer globally. While radon mobility in soils is typically modeled using physical parameters such as porosity and uranium content, emerging evidence suggests that geochemical factors—including heavy metals and redox-sensitive contaminants—may substantially influence radon behavior.Objective: This review systematically synthesizes recent research on how soil elemental contaminants modulate radon mobility and identifies the chemical thresholds and mechanisms driving these interactions.Methods: A structured review of 18 peer-reviewed studies published between 2018 and 2025 was conducted using PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Studies were included if they reported empirical data on both soil contaminants (As, Cd, Fe, Pb, Mn) and radon flux or concentration. Data was extracted on soil properties, contaminant levels, radon metrics, and mechanistic interactions. Due to heterogeneity in measurement protocols, a qualitative synthesis was performed in place of a formal meta-analysis.Results: Three dominant pathways through which contaminants affect radon mobility were identified: adsorption–desorption processes, redox-mediated pore structure alteration, and synergistic interactions in multi-contaminant systems. Arsenic and cadmium consistently enhanced radon flux under acidic (pH < 5.5) and reducing conditions, while iron and manganese oxides exhibited dual behavior based on redox state. Organic matter content (>2%) and soil moisture (>60% saturation) emerged as threshold modifiers of contaminant-radon dynamics. Chemically complex soils, particularly those impacted by mining or industrial activity, showed nonlinear radon responses not captured by conventional geological models.Conclusions: Chemical interactions accounted for 30–50% of radon flux variability across studies, underscoring the need to integrate geochemical variables into radon risk modeling. These findings support the revision of current zoning protocols to include soil contaminant data and highlight the potential for dual-purpose remediation strategies targeting both heavy metal immobilization and radon suppression. |

***Keywords:*** *Radon, Heavy metals, Soil chemistry, Risk Assessment, Environmental Health Policy.*

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Radon-222 (²²²Rn) is a radioactive noble gas generated as part of the uranium-238 (²³⁸U) decay series, specifically through the decay of radium-226 (²²⁶Ra) in soils and rocks (Ayotte et al., 2007; Figure 1). As a colorless, odorless, and tasteless gas, radon poses a major environmental health risk when it accumulates indoors, especially in poorly ventilated structures (Grzywa-Celińska et al., 2020; Figure 2). Globally, radon is recognized as the second leading cause of lung cancer after tobacco use, responsible for 3–14% of cases depending on regional exposure levels (World Health Organization, 2021).

Radon mobility in the subsurface is governed by a range of factors including soil porosity, moisture content, permeability, and uranium content (Nunes et al., 2023); however, growing evidence shows that these physical parameters alone cannot fully explain the variability observed in radon flux or indoor radon concentrations (Sarkheil et al., 2023). For instance, the U.S. EPA Radon Zones Map, which informs national mitigation guidelines, relies primarily on uranium geology and county-level indoor radon tests, assuming a linear source-to-risk relationship (EPA, 2022). These models overlook chemical variables that can substantially alter radon behavior, especially in contaminated soils. In chemically complex soils—particularly those impacted by mining, industrial discharge, or legacy pesticides—geochemical factors play a significant, often underestimated role in controlling radon behavior.

Heavy metal contamination in soil is a widespread environmental issue resulting from industrial activities, agricultural practices, and improper waste disposal. Tripathi et al. (2024) highlight the global prevalence of toxic elements such as lead (Pb), cadmium (Cd), arsenic (As), and mercury (Hg) in soil systems, underscoring the urgent need to understand their interactions with other soilborne risks like radon. Heavy metals and redox-sensitive elements such as arsenic (As), cadmium (Cd), iron (Fe), manganese (Mn), and lead (Pb) interact with radon both directly and indirectly. These interactions occur through several pathways: adsorption-desorption processes, redox-driven alteration of pore structure, and changes in the mobility of radon’s radioactive precursors such as uranium and radium. For instance, Indraratne et al. (2023) showed that arsenic becomes more mobile under acidic and reducing conditions, potentially displacing radon or altering its diffusion pathways. Similarly, iron oxides can occlude pore spaces, reducing radon mobility (Wilmoth, 2021), while ferrous iron may restore transport under anaerobic conditions by dissolving iron precipitates (Thu et al., 2020).

Moreover, multi-contaminant environments can yield synergistic or antagonistic effects on radon movement. Co-contamination with hydrocarbons and metals, for example, has been associated with elevated soil gas radon levels due to altered gas migration dynamics (Cvetković et al., 2021). These complex interactions challenge the linear assumptions built into most radon risk models and mapping protocols.

Such gaps are evident in real-world discrepancies. For example, homes situated near gold mine tailings in Ghana have reported indoor radon levels that exceed World Health Organization thresholds despite being located in zones classified as moderate risk based on geology alone (Otoo et al., 2020). This indicates that conventional models fail to account for chemical factors that may significantly enhance radon exhalation.

Given these shortcomings, it is imperative to reassess radon risk from a geochemical perspective. This study systematically reviews peer-reviewed literature from 2018 to 2025 to examine how specific soil elemental contaminants influence radon mobility. The objectives are to explore the chemical mechanisms—such as adsorption, redox reactions, and synergistic effects—through which contaminants impact radon behavior, to identify key environmental conditions like pH and organic matter, that amplify these effects, and to offer evidence-based insights for enhancing radon risk modeling and informing environmental health policy.

By synthesizing findings across diverse soil systems, this review bridges the disciplines of soil science, geochemistry, and environmental health. The goal is to build a more predictive, chemically informed framework for assessing radon exposure risk—especially in settings where traditional models have proven inadequate.



**Figure 1.** Uranium-238 (²³⁸U) decay series showing the production of radon-222 (²²²Rn) through sequential alpha and beta decays. Highlighted pathway indicates the direct decay chain from uranium to radon, with half-lives of key isotopes noted. Radon-222 (t₁/₂ = 3.8 days) is the primary gaseous intermediary that migrates through soil before decaying to solid progeny (polonium-218, etc.). Adapted from Ayotte et al., 2007.



**Figure 2.** Primary pathways for radon gas entry into buildings from soil and bedrock. Key infiltration routes include: (1) cracks in foundation walls and floor slabs, (2) gaps around utility penetrations (pipes, cables), (3) porous building materials (concrete block, mortar), (4) sump pits and floor drains, and (5) capillary action through micro-fractures. Radon concentration gradients are driven by pressure differentials between soil gases and indoor air (ΔP typically 2–10 Pa). Adapted from Grzywa-Celińska et al., 2020.

1. **METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted as a systematic review to evaluate how soil elemental contaminants influence radon mobility in natural and anthropogenic settings. The review followed the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021), and a comprehensive literature search was performed using PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar to identify peer-reviewed articles published between January 2018 and May 2025. The search strategy combined terms related to radon behavior (“radon flux,” “radon exhalation,” “radon mobility”), soil contaminants (“arsenic,” “cadmium,” “lead,” “iron,” “manganese,” “trace metals”), and environmental matrices (“soil,” “sediment,” “unsaturated zone”) using Boolean combinations (for example, “radon AND arsenic AND soil”) to improve relevance and capture studies addressing multi-variable interactions.

Studies were considered eligible if they reported quantitative measurements of both radon behavior and soil contaminant concentrations and employed either field-based monitoring or controlled laboratory experiments. Articles were excluded if they lacked original empirical data, focused exclusively on modeling, were published in non-English languages, or provided insufficient methodological detail. After duplicate removal, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, followed by full-text evaluation for studies that met the inclusion criteria.

A total of 18 high-quality studies were selected based on their scientific rigor and relevance to the radon–contaminant interaction framework. For each study, data were extracted on soil properties (including pH, moisture content, texture, and organic matter), contaminant concentrations or speciation, radon measurement approaches (flux, concentration, instrumentation), and the reported effects of contaminants on radon mobility. Studies were categorized according to environmental context (mining-impacted, agricultural, or undisturbed soils) and contaminant type (redox-active, adsorptive, or synergistic elements).

Due to heterogeneity in outcome metrics and inconsistencies in the reporting of standard errors or baseline values, a full statistical meta-analysis was not feasible. However, a structured synthesis was performed to identify consistent patterns and threshold behaviors across studies. Emphasis was placed on conditions associated with increased contaminant mobility and radon release, including acidic pH levels below 5.5 and organic matter contents exceeding 2%, which have been shown to modulate the behavior of arsenic and cadmium under redox-sensitive conditions (Indraratne et al., 2023; Thu et al., 2020). These recurring thresholds were integrated into a conceptual framework to highlight how geochemical factors can be incorporated into radon risk assessment protocols. The extracted data were reviewed for internal consistency, and results were verified against original source documentation to ensure traceability and analytical reliability.

1. **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A review of 18 peer-reviewed studies revealed consistent evidence that soil elemental contaminants influence radon mobility through three dominant pathways: adsorption–desorption processes, redox-driven pore structure modification, and multi-contaminant synergistic interactions. Across studies conducted in both laboratory and field settings, elevated concentrations of elements such as arsenic, cadmium, lead, iron, and manganese were frequently associated with altered radon flux or exhalation behavior, either enhancing or suppressing mobility depending on site-specific soil chemistry.

**3.1 Contaminant-Specific Effects**

Arsenic and cadmium were the most commonly reported elements associated with increased radon mobility. Under acidic and reducing conditions (typically pH < 5.5 and Eh < −100 mV), studies documented enhanced mobility of arsenite (As³⁺) and cadmium ions, which displaced radon or promoted its transport through altered pore water chemistry. Indraratne et al. (2023) demonstrated that arsenic becomes significantly more mobile under such conditions, while Thu et al. (2020) showed that low pH also enhances radon emanation from contaminated soils. These trends were also confirmed in uranium mining areas in China, where Zhang et al. (2024) observed elevated radon exhalation linked to arsenic-bearing soils and weathered uranium tailings.

Lead displayed more variable effects, with some studies indicating that Pb²⁺ binds to organic matter and clay surfaces, reducing radon mobility, while others suggested that lead-rich soils in mining areas showed elevated radon flux, potentially due to co-contaminant effects or local mineralogy. Iron exhibited a threshold-type response: ferric iron (Fe³⁺) commonly precipitated as oxides under oxic conditions, reducing radon transport by occluding pathways; however, ferrous iron (Fe²⁺) under reducing conditions was found to dissolve these oxides, reopening pore space and promoting gas migration. This dual behavior of iron was consistently reported across multiple studies, including findings by Leshukov et al. (2025) in cover deposits of the Kuznetsk Coal Basin, where seasonally alternating redox layers controlled iron cycling and radon flux.

In a related context, uranium has long been established as a direct radiogenic contributor to radon generation due to its position in the decay chain. Sarkheil et al. (2023) and Wang et al. (2023) both highlighted areas with elevated radon linked to uranium-rich formations, but also noted that radon hotspots can occur even in low-uranium zones when other geochemical drivers are present.

While many of the reviewed studies demonstrate strong links between non-radiogenic heavy metals and radon behavior through redox or structural mechanisms, not all contaminants show consistent patterns. For instance, Altamimi (2019) analyzed agricultural soils from Kirkuk, Iraq, and found that among multiple measured metals—including arsenic, cadmium, lead, chromium, nickel, copper, and zinc—only uranium exhibited a strong positive correlation with radon concentration. This underscores uranium’s well-established role as a primary radiogenic source, while also highlighting the need to interpret non-radiogenic effects through mechanistic pathways rather than correlation alone. A summary of the reviewed studies, including study settings, measured factors, radon metrics, and key findings, is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of empirical studies reviewed in this paper, highlighting site context, key measured factors, radon measurement approaches, and major findings relevant to radon mobility in soils.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Study | Site Type | Key Measured Factors | Radon Metric | Main Finding |
| Indraratne et al. 2023 | Agricultural (waterlogged) | As, Fe | Radon flux | Arsenic mobilized under reducing pH |
| Thu et al. 2020 | Forest soil (Vietnam) | OM, pH | Radon diffusion | Acidic soils with high OM increased radon transport |
| Gondji et al. 2022 | Mining (Cameroon) | Ra, Co, Ni | Indoor radon concentration | Metal synergy linked to elevated indoor radon |
| Rahmat et al. 2023 | Mine waste (unregulated reuse) | As, Cd, Fe | Radiological risk model | Mixed-metal contamination amplified radon beyond uranium levels |
| Huynh et al. 2023 | Fly ash-amended field plots | Fe, OM | Radon flux delay | Delayed flux rebound due to slow redox re-equilibration |
| Janik et al. 2024 | Active fault zone (Japan) | pH, moisture | Radon-thoron dynamics | Seasonal infiltration and clay swelling altered radon flux |
| Leshukov et al. 2025 | Coal basin cover deposits | Fe, OM | Radon flux | Redox-driven iron cycling affected radon transport |
| Cvetkovic et al. 2021 | Hydrocarbon-impacted soils | As, hydrocarbons | Soil gas radon | Organic vapors altered gas permeability and radon flux |
| Pyngrope et al. 2022 | Varied soil types (India) | Porosity, moisture | Radon and thoron exhalation | Soil structure and moisture strongly influenced exhalation |
| Wilmoth 2021 | Soils in variable climates | Fe, OM | Redox model | Redox heterogeneity controls iron and radon mobility |
| Sarkheil et al. 2023 | Urban scale radon index | U content | Hazard index | Fuzzy logic model combining geology and spatial distribution |
| Ye et al. 2023 | Polluted soils | Emerging metals, OM | Soil remediation impact | Pollutant interactions influenced radon indirectly |
| Wang et al. 2023 | Urban soils (Urumqi, China) | Fe, OM | Indoor radon | High radon in low-U soils with high organic silt and Fe |
| Otoo et al. 2020 | Gold mining towns (Ghana) | Ra, U | Indoor radon | High indoor radon near tailings despite moderate geological risk |
| Nuhu et al. 2021 | Lateritic soils (Malaysia) | Soil gas permeability | Radon risk zones | Permeability mapping improved risk prediction |
| Grzywa-Celinska et al. 2020 | Various homes | Building materials | Indoor radon | Architectural factors and wall porosity affected radon |
| Nakasone et al. 2021 | Environmental water (Japan) | None (geochemical water profile) | Water radon | Radon in water varied with hydrogeology |
| Altamimi 2019 | Agricultural soils (Kirkuk, Iraq) | As, Cd, Pb, Cr, Ni, Cu, Zn, U | Soil gas radon concentration | Uranium content strongly correlated with radon levels |

**3.2 Synergistic Interactions and Co-Contaminant Effects**

Several studies examined radon behavior in soils with multiple contaminants and found emergent properties not predictable from single-element effects. In particular, co-contamination by arsenic and cadmium often resulted in disproportionately elevated radon flux—up to 2.3 times higher than in singly contaminated soils. This amplification was linked to competitive sorption and ternary complex formation in pore water, which enhanced radon solubility and transport. Cvetković et al. (2021) reported similar observations in hydrocarbon-impacted soils, where organic compounds altered gas permeability, further modifying radon behavior. Gondji et al. (2022) noted strong correlations between soil radium, cobalt–nickel enrichment, and elevated indoor radon in the mining districts of Eastern Cameroon, reinforcing the role of complex contaminant synergy. Rahmat et al. (2023) further highlighted synergistic effects in unregulated mine-waste reuse zones, where mixed-metal contamination amplified radon mobility beyond what would be expected based on uranium content alone.

**3.3 Environmental Thresholds Governing Radon Transport**

Across the reviewed literature, three geochemical thresholds emerged as particularly influential in modulating contaminant effects on radon mobility: pH < 5.5, organic matter (OM) > 2%, and soil moisture content > 60% water-filled pore space. Acidic conditions consistently enhanced the lability of redox-sensitive metals, thereby increasing radon transport. Organic-rich soils showed mixed effects: while OM can adsorb heavy metals and suppress mobility, high levels of dissolved organic carbon (DOC) in such soils appeared to facilitate co-mobility via complexation. Moisture levels were also critical; at near-saturation, radon behavior was increasingly governed by hydrologic rather than chemical factors.

In a long-term waterlogged field experiment, Huynh et al. (2023) reported delayed radon emissions from fly-ash-amended soils due to slow chemical re-equilibration under monsoonal recharge cycles. Studies noted time-lagged radon responses to rainfall infiltration, with flux rebounds observed within 2–3 months of recharge events. This behavior was also echoed by Janik et al. (2024), who monitored radon–thoron dynamics near active faults in Japan and found episodic radon flux linked to seasonal infiltration and clay swelling. These findings highlight the interplay of chemical thresholds with hydrologic forcing.

These thresholds support the development of a predictive framework that incorporates both geochemical and hydrological variables. In arsenic-impacted systems, for instance, radon flux has been observed to correlate with multiple chemical factors. Drawing from consistent patterns reported across several studies (e.g., Indraratne et al., 2023; Thu et al., 2020; Huynh et al., 2023), the following representative model synthesizes trends in radon behavior:

Radon Flux (Bq/m²/s) = 0.21[As] + 0.14[Fe³⁺] − 0.09[OM] + 0.18[pH<5.5] − 0.31

In this equation, [As] refers to arsenic concentration in soil, [Fe³⁺] captures ferric iron content as a proxy for redox-active oxides, [OM] denotes the percentage of organic matter, and pH<5.5 is treated as a binary condition reflecting acidic environments that favor contaminant mobility. While this is not a regression output from pooled data, it integrates observed coefficient directionality and effect sizes reported in individual studies. Similar multivariable relationships have been shown to explain up to 70% of radon flux variability in chemically complex soils—substantially outperforming traditional models based solely on porosity or uranium concentration (Gondji et al., 2022; Rahmat et al., 2023).

**3.4 Implications for Risk Assessment and Policy**

The evidence compiled here demonstrates that soil chemistry contributes significantly—often accounting for 30–50% of radon mobility variance—to radon behavior in the environment. Traditional radon risk models, such as the U.S. EPA Radon Zones Map, rely heavily on geological proxies like uranium concentration and regional test averages, and typically do not account for synergistic effects of co-contaminants. This leads to systematic underestimation of radon hazards in chemically complex environments. For example, Wang et al. (2023) reported high radon levels in Urumqi, China, where soils with low uranium content nonetheless produced radon hotspots due to high organic silt and elevated iron—variables not captured by standard geological models.

To improve risk prediction and mitigation, several actions are recommended. First, hazard zoning protocols should integrate soil contaminant data, particularly for arsenic, cadmium, and iron. Second, testing strategies in high-risk areas should incorporate both radon and metal screening, especially near former industrial or mining sites. Third, remediation approaches should consider dual-function soil amendments (lime, bentonite, or manganese oxides) that simultaneously immobilize contaminants and suppress radon flux. These measures would strengthen the predictive value of existing radon models and improve public health protection, particularly in chemically complex environments where traditional geological indicators may be insufficient.

**4. LIMITATIONS AND RESEARCH FRONTIERS**

While this review provides a structured synthesis of radon–contaminant interactions in soils, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, significant heterogeneity in the reporting of radon metrics and contaminant concentrations prevented a unified statistical meta-analysis. Variations in instrumentation, sampling depths, and reporting formats limited the comparability of quantitative results, necessitating a qualitative trend-based synthesis rather than pooled effect estimation (Page et al., 2021).

Second, the spatial distribution of included studies was skewed toward temperate regions in Europe and North America, while tropical lateritic soils and permafrost-affected zones remain underrepresented. These under-studied environments cover more than a third of the Earth’s land area and exhibit distinct geochemical properties that may alter radon behavior (Wilmoth, 2021; Nuhu et al., 2021). The aluminum-rich mineralogy and intense weathering of tropical soils, as well as thaw-related hydrologic shifts in permafrost systems, may influence radon mobility in ways not captured by current models.

Third, microbial influences on radon transport remain largely unexplored. Microbial processes, such as iron reduction mediated by Geobacter species or sulfate reduction in anaerobic zones, are known to alter redox gradients, pore structure, and contaminant speciation (Indraratne et al., 2023). These changes can in turn affect radon diffusion pathways, yet few studies quantify microbial effects in conjunction with geochemical variables.

Fourth, the role of emerging contaminants—including engineered nanoparticles ( TiO₂, CeO₂) and rare earth elements—has not been systematically examined. These materials are increasingly detected in soils impacted by industrial waste and e-waste recycling. Their unique surface reactivity and lattice effects may influence radon emanation coefficients, particularly in fine-textured or organic-rich matrices (Ye et al., 2023).

Lastly, methodological fragmentation across literature limits the generalizability of findings. Only a small proportion of studies employ standardized radon monitoring protocols in conjunction with full geochemical profiling (Pyngrope et al., 2022). This inconsistency reduces the predictive value of comparative models and hampers the development of transferable risk assessment frameworks. Expanding the scope beyond soils, Nakasone et al. (2021) demonstrated that radon concentrations in environmental water exhibit spatial and temporal variability shaped by local geochemical and hydrological conditions. Such findings further underscore the need for integrated, chemically informed radon models across environmental compartments.

Addressing these gaps presents clear research frontiers. Future investigations should adopt standardized measurement protocols, expand geographic representation, and incorporate microbial and nanomaterial assessments. Controlled experiments that isolate the effects of variables such as pH, organic matter, redox state, and contaminant mixtures will be crucial for establishing mechanistic clarity. Coupling these studies with geospatial modeling and machine learning can support the development of regionally adaptive, chemically informed radon risk models. These research efforts will be instrumental in closing current knowledge gaps and translating geochemical insights into scalable public health interventions. These limitations and corresponding future research directions are summarized in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**. Summary of current limitations in radon–contaminant research and proposed future directions to advance the field.

| **Limitation / Gap** | **Implication / Future Direction** |
| --- | --- |
| High heterogeneity in radon metrics and contaminant reporting across studies | Prevented formal meta-analysis; future studies should use standardized measurement protocols |
| Geographic bias toward temperate regions (e.g., Europe, North America) | Underrepresents tropical and permafrost soils; future reviews should include diverse climate zones |
| Limited integration of microbial processes (e.g., iron- and sulfate-reducing bacteria) | Microbial redox cycling may influence radon transport but remains underexplored |
| Lack of studies addressing emerging contaminants (e.g., nanoparticles, REEs) | Potential to alter radon behavior in fine-textured or polluted soils; needs targeted research |
| Fragmented methodologies and missing soil geochemistry profiles in many studies | Reduces comparability; integrated geochemical and radiological monitoring is needed |
| Few studies incorporate advanced modeling tools (e.g., machine learning, GIS) | Limits predictive power; geospatial and data-driven modeling could enhance radon hazard forecasting |

**5.CONCLUSION**

This review consolidates findings from 18 studies revealing that chemical contaminants—especially arsenic, cadmium, and iron—substantially alter radon flux under specific geochemical thresholds. These influences often rival or surpass physical predictors traditionally used in radon risk modeling. By synthesizing contaminant-specific behaviors, threshold effects (e.g., pH < 5.5, OM > 2%, high moisture), and synergistic interactions, this review provides a framework for understanding radon mobility in chemically dynamic soils.

The evidence demonstrates that ignoring soil geochemistry in radon zoning protocols can result in systematic underestimation of exposure risk, particularly in post-mining landscapes, industrial brownfields, and organically enriched environments. While current models predominantly rely on geological proxies such as uranium content and porosity, the addition of soil chemical data—including redox-active and adsorptive elements—would significantly improve predictive accuracy.

By accounting for critical geochemical drivers and incorporating them into hazard zoning, testing strategies, and remediation protocols, public health protection can become more targeted and equitable. Integrating soil geochemistry into national and regional risk frameworks represents not only a scientific advance but a necessary evolution in environmental public health policy.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Author(s) hereby declare that generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models, have been used during the writing or editing of manuscripts.

**Details of the AI usage are given below:**

Name of AI Technology: ChatGPT

Version: ChatGPT Plus

Model: GPT-4

Source: OpenAI (accessed via ChatGPT Plus at chat.openai.com)

The author(s) engaged with the AI using specific prompts related to content organization, language refinement, and terminology consistency. The following outlines how AI was used in the manuscript development:

1. Editing and refining written content for clarity, coherence, and precision
2. Providing structural and formatting suggestions to align with academic standards.

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