

Digital Social Support and Chinese Young Employees' Digital Well-being: The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy From a Social Cognitive Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory, this study investigates the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between digital social support and digital well-being among Chinese young employees, aiming to fill the research gap in understanding the psychological mechanisms through which organizational resources translate into digital well-being. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 177 young employees from Guangzhou, China, and structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized mediation model. Results indicate that digital social support significantly predicts both self-efficacy and digital well-being, and self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between digital social support and digital well-being, suggesting that environmental resources operate through cognitive appraisal mechanisms to enhance digital well-being. This study integrates Conservation of Resources theory and Social Cognitive Theory to provide a mechanism-oriented explanation for digital well-being, focusing on Chinese young employees, and offers strategic insights for organizations to build sustainable digital human capital by strengthening employees' self-efficacy.

Keywords: Digital Well-Being; Social Support; Self-Efficacy; Chinese Young Employees; Social Cognitive Theory; Digital Management; Mediation

1 INTRODUCTION

Digitalization is no longer an auxiliary organizational function but a structural condition of contemporary management systems. Remote collaboration platforms, algorithmic monitoring, digital communication networks, and hybrid work arrangements have redefined employee experience. While digital transformation enhances efficiency and flexibility, it also intensifies cognitive load, constant connectivity pressure, and blurred work–life boundaries (Wang et al., 2023).

Recent management scholarship has increasingly conceptualized employee well-being as a strategic resource for building happy and competitive organizations rather than merely an outcome variable (Chen et al, 2018). However, most studies focus on burnout, engagement,

or job satisfaction, leaving the construct of digital well-being theoretically underdeveloped in organizational contexts.

For Chinese young employees—who are simultaneously digital natives and high-expectation performers—the digital environment may amplify both opportunity and psychological vulnerability. The central question therefore becomes:

Through what psychological mechanism does organizational support translate into digital well-being?

This study establishes a clear theoretical pathway: social support enhances individuals' self-efficacy, which in turn improves their digital well-being.

Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), we posit that digital social support serves as a critical environmental catalyst that enhances employees' efficacy beliefs. This internalized cognitive resource, in turn, strengthens their capacity to navigate digital demands and sustain psychological equilibrium. The present study advances the existing literature in three primary ways. First, it extends the boundary conditions of Social Cognitive Theory into digital management contexts, elucidating the psychological pathways through which environmental resources translate into adaptive outcomes. Second, by integrating resource-based and cognitive appraisal perspectives, it offers a mechanism-oriented explanation for digital well-being, moving beyond traditional deficit-driven models. Finally, it provides strategic implications for sustainable digital human resource management, offering actionable insights for organizations to cultivate resilient digital human capital.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital Well-Being in Organizational Contexts

Digital transformation has fundamentally altered the nature of work, reshaping communication patterns, performance evaluation systems, and work–life boundaries. Within this evolving landscape, digital well-being has emerged as a critical construct for understanding employees' psychological functioning in technology-mediated environments.

Digital well-being refers to individuals' capacity to maintain psychological balance, positive functioning, and adaptive performance in digitally intensive work systems (Vanden Abeele, 2021). Unlike traditional well-being constructs—such as job satisfaction or subjective well-being—digital well-being explicitly incorporates factors such as information overload, constant connectivity, algorithmic monitoring, and digital boundary management. It therefore reflects not only affective states but also adaptive capabilities in technologically complex contexts.

Much of the existing research has examined digital work from a stress-oriented perspective. Technostress literature demonstrates that excessive ICT demands, role ambiguity created by digital platforms, and uninterrupted communication expectations can impair emotional stability and reduce productivity (Tarafdar et al., 2019). Similarly, studies on remote work have shown that digital hyperconnectivity may increase cognitive fatigue and emotional exhaustion (Wang et al., 2023).

However, recent research suggests that digital environments do not uniformly produce negative outcomes. Supportive digital climates—often reflected in perceived organisational support and collaborative norms—may buffer technological strain and foster adaptive functioning (Harunavamwe & Ward, 2022). From a resource-based perspective, employees actively mobilize personal and contextual resources to cope with digital demands rather than passively experiencing stress.

First, prior research has predominantly focused on direct effects between digital demands and well-being outcomes. Less attention has been paid to the psychological mechanisms that

translate environmental resources into digital well-being. Without clarifying the mediating cognitive processes, explanations remain incomplete.

Second, empirical evidence is largely drawn from Western contexts and mixed-age samples. Young employees represent a distinct workforce segment: although often labeled as digital natives, they face heightened performance pressure, accelerated skill turnover, and intensified digital evaluation. Understanding digital well-being among young employees in emerging economies is therefore both theoretically and practically significant.

Addressing these gaps requires integrating resource-based perspectives with cognitive mechanisms, which forms the foundation of the present study.

2.2 Social Support as an Environmental Resource

Social support refers to emotional encouragement, informational guidance, and instrumental assistance provided by supervisors and colleagues within organizational settings. In digital workplaces, social support may manifest through online mentoring, collaborative troubleshooting, knowledge-sharing via digital platforms, and reassurance during technological transitions.

From the perspective of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), social support constitutes a contextual resource that protects individuals from resource loss and facilitates resource gain. In environments characterized by rapid technological change, employees may experience resource depletion in the form of cognitive overload or skill obsolescence. Supportive interactions can compensate for such losses by providing knowledge, emotional reassurance, and practical assistance.

Similarly, the Job Demands – Resources (JD-R) model posits that job resources enhance motivation and buffer the adverse effects of job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In digitally intensive contexts, social support may operate as a critical job resource that mitigates technostress (Khedhaouria & Montani, 2024) and strengthens adaptive capacity.

Empirical studies increasingly confirm that workplace social support predicts employee engagement and well-being in digitalized work contexts, such as telework environments (Kakkar & Kuril, 2024). However, whether social support directly enhances digital well-being or operates through internal cognitive processes remains insufficiently examined.

Accordingly, we propose:

H1: Social support positively influences digital well-being.

2.3 Self-Efficacy as Cognitive Mechanism

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their capacity to organize and execute actions required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1997). Within Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy functions as a central mechanism linking environmental inputs to behavioral and psychological outcomes.

In digital workplaces, self-efficacy reflects confidence in mastering technological tools, adapting to system upgrades, learning new digital skills, and regulating emotional responses under technological pressure. Employees with high self-efficacy are more likely to interpret digital challenges as manageable tasks rather than overwhelming threats (Yen, 2022; Nadeem et al., 2024).

According to Social Cognitive Theory, environmental resources—such as social support— influence outcomes primarily through cognitive appraisal processes. Supportive feedback, collaborative problem-solving, and verbal encouragement strengthen individuals' mastery experiences and reinforce efficacy beliefs (Yen, 2022). In turn, strengthened efficacy beliefs

enhance coping capacity and psychological stability (Yolwas & Tian, 2024), particularly in digital contexts.

Thus, social support may enhance digital well-being indirectly by strengthening self-efficacy.

H2: Social support positively influences self-efficacy.

H3: Self-efficacy positively influences digital well-being.

H4: Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between social support and digital well-being.

2.4 Research Gap and Theoretical Contributions

Although prior studies have examined technostress and digital transformation in organizational contexts, the literature remains fragmented in three key respects.

First, much of the digital well-being literature adopts a deficit-oriented lens, focusing primarily on stressors such as information overload, constant connectivity, and digital surveillance (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023). While these studies clarify the detrimental effects of digital demands, they provide limited insight into the psychological mechanisms that enable employees to maintain positive functioning under digital conditions.

Second, although social support has been identified as a protective resource in organizational research, its role in digitally mediated environments has not been sufficiently theorized. Recent findings indicate that emotional social support buffers the negative effects of technostress on strain and work satisfaction in remote work contexts (Khedhaouria & Montani, 2024). Similarly, in virtual work environments, job resources such as work-based learning and digital leadership capability have been shown to buffer the negative impact of technostress on employee well-being by reducing work exhaustion (Alkhayyal & Bajaba, 2024). Yet few studies explicitly integrate Conservation of Resources theory with Social Cognitive Theory to explain how environmental resources translate into cognitive strength and subsequently into digital well-being.

Third, empirical research on digital well-being remains concentrated in Western settings and heterogeneous age samples. Young employees in emerging economies experience digital transformation under distinct structural conditions, including rapid technological adoption, high performance expectations, and intensified career competition. Recent evidence from Chinese employees shows that technostress significantly undermines well-being and that contextual inhibitors can buffer this relationship, highlighting the need to understand how such resources operate in non-Western digital contexts (Hang et al., 2022). Similarly, studies of Chinese academics indicate that technology-induced strain negatively affects psychological well-being, suggesting that the pathways linking digital conditions to well-being may differ from those identified in Western samples (Wang & Yao, 2025). Understanding the psychological pathways through which contextual support shapes their digital well-being is therefore theoretically and practically important.

To address these gaps, the present study integrates Conservation of Resources theory and Social Cognitive Theory to construct a resource – cognition – well-being framework. Specifically, we conceptualize social support as an environmental resource, self-efficacy as a cognitive mechanism, and digital well-being as an adaptive outcome. Recent COR-based research in digital contexts has shown that digital leadership enhances work engagement via digital self-efficacy, with technostress moderating this process (Li et al., 2026), illustrating how environmental resources can be translated into adaptive outcomes through efficacy beliefs. Moreover, theoretical work comparing COR and JD-R theories underscores the importance of integrating resource-based and cognitive appraisal perspectives to explain employee well-being and job design (Demerouti, 2025), supporting the rationale for our resource–cognition–well-being framework.

This study makes three primary contributions to the existing literature. First, it advances digital well-being research by shifting the paradigm from a stress-dominant perspective to a mechanism-oriented explanation. Second, theoretically, it integrates Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and Social Cognitive Theory to elucidate the intricate pathways through which contextual resources are transformed into internal cognitive strength. Finally, empirically, it draws upon data from Chinese young employees to extend the contextual boundaries of digital well-being research to a non-Western, high-growth economy profoundly shaped by collectivist cultural norms and accelerated digital adoption.

2.5 Conceptual Framework Description

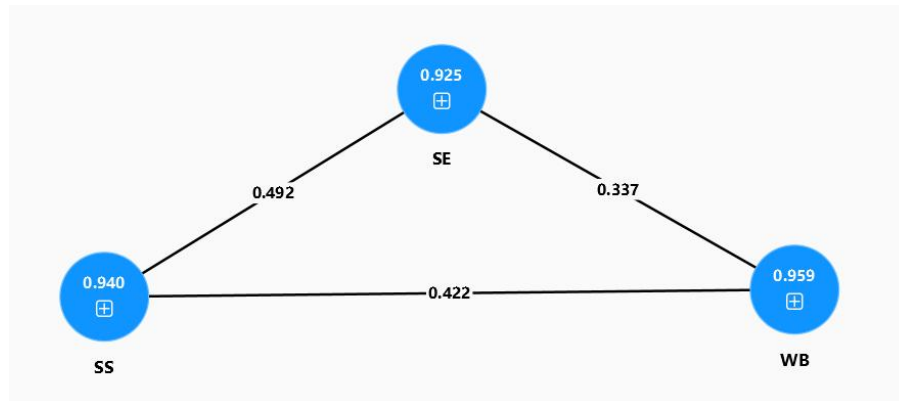


Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework. Drawing upon Conservation of Resources theory, social support is conceptualized as an environmental resource that mitigates resource depletion in digitally intensive environments. Guided by Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy is positioned as the central cognitive mechanism through which environmental support enhances adaptive functioning. Digital well-being represents the outcome reflecting employees' ability to maintain psychological stability and positive functioning in technology-mediated work contexts.

The model proposes both a direct pathway from social support to digital well-being and an indirect pathway through self-efficacy.

3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Sample and Procedure

Data were collected from 177 Chinese young employees (aged 21–35) working in China of Guangzhou organizations across technology, education, finance, and service sectors.

Data were collected through an online structured questionnaire administered via Wenjuanxing, a widely used professional survey platform in China. A stratified sampling strategy was adopted to ensure representation across different industries and organizational types. Specifically, participants were grouped according to sector (technology, education, finance, and service), and proportional sampling was applied within each stratum to enhance sample heterogeneity and external validity.

Prior to formal distribution, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 20 respondents to ensure clarity and relevance of the items. Minor wording adjustments were made based on feedback. Participation was entirely voluntary. Respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the study and assured that their responses would be used solely for research purposes. No personally identifiable information was collected. To guarantee anonymity, IP tracking was

disabled, and responses were recorded without name or contact details. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

A total of 205 questionnaires were returned. After excluding incomplete and invalid responses (e.g., patterned answering and excessive missing data), 177 valid responses were retained for analysis, yielding an effective response rate of 86.3%.

To mitigate potential common method bias, several procedural remedies were implemented. These included assuring respondents of anonymity, randomizing item order, and separating predictor and criterion variables within the questionnaire layout.

3.2 Measures and Analytical Strategy

All constructs were measured using established and validated scales adapted to the workplace context. Social support was assessed using items adapted from House (1988), capturing emotional, informational, and instrumental support provided by supervisors and colleagues. Self-efficacy was measured using the General Self-Efficacy Scale developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995), reflecting employees' confidence in managing work-related challenges. Digital well-being was operationalized based on Vanden Abeele's (2021) conceptualization, focusing on individuals' ability to maintain psychological balance and positive functioning in digitally mediated work environments. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Reliability analysis indicated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 ($\alpha_{\text{social support}} = 0.940$; $\alpha_{\text{self-efficacy}} = 0.925$; $\alpha_{\text{digital well-being}} = 0.959$). Composite reliability (CR, denoted as ρ_c) values were all above 0.95 ($\rho_{c \text{ social support}} = 0.948$; $\rho_{c \text{ self-efficacy}} = 0.937$; $\rho_{c \text{ digital well-being}} = 0.963$), and average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50 (AVE_{social support} = 0.605; AVE_{self-efficacy} = 0.597; AVE_{digital well-being} = 0.590), confirming convergent validity. Discriminant validity was established as the square roots of AVE (SE = 0.773; SS = 0.778; WB = 0.768) were greater than inter-construct correlations (SE-SS = 0.492; SE-WB = 0.544; SS-WB = 0.587).

To test the hypothesized mediation model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS. Model fit was evaluated based on multiple indices, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Mediation effects were assessed using bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals. Control variables, including age, gender, and tenure, were incorporated to minimize potential confounding effects.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Measurement Model Assessment

Before conducting confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the validity of the three-factor measurement model, we first assessed the suitability of the data for factor analysis using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The KMO value was .952, indicating excellent sampling adequacy (Kaiser, 1974), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 4946.527$, $df = 780$, $p < .001$), suggesting that the variables were sufficiently correlated to proceed with factor analysis.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the validity of the three-factor measurement model, including social support, self-efficacy, and digital well-being. The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory goodness-of-fit indices (CFI = 0.94; TLI =

0.92; RMSEA = 0.06; SRMR = 0.05), all of which met recommended thresholds (Hair et al., 2022).

All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and exceeded 0.70, indicating strong item reliability. Composite reliability (CR, ρ_c) values ranged from 0.937 to 0.963, surpassing the 0.70 criterion. Average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged between 0.597 and 0.605, exceeding the 0.50 benchmark, confirming convergent validity. Discriminant validity was established as the square roots of AVE (SE = 0.773; SS = 0.778; WB = 0.768) were greater than inter-construct correlations (SE-SS = 0.492; SE-WB = 0.544; SS-WB = 0.587).

These results suggest that the measurement model provides a reliable and valid representation of the latent constructs.

4.2 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesized structural model also demonstrated acceptable fit (CFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.06; SRMR = 0.06).

Path analysis revealed:

Social support significantly predicted self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.492$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2.

Self-efficacy significantly predicted digital well-being ($\beta = 0.337$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3.

Social support significantly predicted digital well-being ($\beta = 0.422$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1.

To test the mediation effect, bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was conducted. The indirect effect of social support on digital well-being through self-efficacy was significant ($\beta = 0.166$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.34]). Since the direct path remained significant, partial mediation was confirmed, supporting H4.

The model explained 43.1% of the variance in digital well-being ($R^2 = 0.431$) and 24.2% of the variance in self-efficacy ($R^2 = 0.242$), indicating moderate explanatory power in behavioral research contexts.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Reframing Digital Well-Being Through a Cognitive Mechanism

Most digital workplace research conceptualizes well-being as an outcome directly influenced by stressors or resources (Tarafdar et al., 2019). However, such linear models overlook the interpretive role of individual cognition. Our findings demonstrate that social support does not merely exert a direct affective influence; instead, it shapes employees' efficacy beliefs, which subsequently determine their psychological adaptation to digital environments.

This insight advances digital management research by repositioning well-being as a cognitively mediated outcome rather than a purely resource-driven state.

In digitally intensive contexts, technological complexity may threaten perceived competence. Social support functions as a competence-validation mechanism, reinforcing employees' sense of capability and thereby stabilizing psychological equilibrium.

5.2 Theoretical Advancement Beyond Direct-Effect Models

While prior research grounded in JD-R theory emphasizes job resources as direct predictors of engagement and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), our results suggest a more nuanced mechanism. Social support enhances well-being primarily by strengthening self-

efficacy, indicating that personal cognitive resources are the proximal determinants of digital adaptation.

This finding bridges Social Cognitive Theory and resource-based frameworks, suggesting that job resources influence well-being not merely through direct provision, but through the internalization of personal resources. Specifically, cognitive appraisal processes act as a critical mediating conduit, translating environmental inputs into adaptive psychological outcomes. Furthermore, the ongoing digital transformation significantly intensifies the importance of these efficacy beliefs, as employees must constantly navigate evolving technological demands. Thus, by integrating environmental and cognitive perspectives into a unified explanatory model, we contribute to theory by demonstrating that digital adaptation is fundamentally a cognitively mediated process.

5.3 Contribution to Chinese Digital Management

Empirical evidence from Chinese young employees enriches the literature by extending digital well-being research beyond Western contexts. Although the current study focuses on Chinese young employees, future research may examine whether the proposed mechanism operates similarly in other emerging economies such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam—characterized by multiculturalism, collectivist cultural norms, and religious influences—to test the generalizability of the model. For instance, in Malaysia’s collectivist culture, social support (e.g., team-based mentoring, religious community assistance) may amplify cognitive effects, reinforcing self-efficacy more strongly than in individualistic settings (e.g., Western contexts). Future research should test whether cultural factors (e.g., Hofstede’s collectivism index) moderate the mediation effect, enhancing the global applicability of Social Cognitive Theory in digital management.

For Chinese young employees — shaped by China’s rapid digital transformation and collectivist culture—the digital environment intensifies both opportunity (e.g., remote work flexibility) and vulnerability (e.g., algorithmic surveillance), making the study of their digital well-being particularly relevant.

5.4 Strategic Repositioning of Digital Well-Being for Chinese organizations

The strategic implications for Chinese organizations are particularly salient, wherein digital well-being must transcend a generic HR initiative to become a context-specific competitiveness strategy. To operationalize this, organizations should deploy culturally resonant interventions that align with indigenous work dynamics. Specifically, implementing relational digital mentoring programs can leverage the cultural fabric of relationship to foster interpersonal trust and competence validation. Concurrently, integrating festival-aware design into technological infrastructure — such as automated “do not disturb” modes during traditional events like the Spring Festival—can effectively mitigate digital boundary stress. Ultimately, these culturally attuned adjustments cultivate stronger self-efficacy among Chinese employees, translating environmental support into sustained digital well-being and organizational performance resilience.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships among social support, self-efficacy, and digital well-being.

Although the proposed model is theoretically grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, future studies should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to provide stronger evidence of causality.

Second, the sample was restricted to young employees from Guangzhou, China. While Guangzhou is a leading technology and business hub in China, future research should expand to other regions (e.g., Shanghai, Shenzhen) to enhance the generalizability of findings. Future research should conduct cross-cultural comparisons to examine whether the proposed relationships remain stable across different institutional environments.

Third, all variables were measured using self-reported questionnaires, which may introduce common method variance and social desirability bias. Although procedural remedies were implemented and statistical assessments indicated no severe common method bias, future studies may benefit from incorporating multi-source data, supervisor evaluations, or objective indicators of digital well-being. Given the cross-sectional design and the reliance on self-reported social support and digital well-being, causal and buffering effects should be further tested using longitudinal or experimental designs.

Finally, the present study focused exclusively on the mediating role of self-efficacy. Other psychological mechanisms, such as hope, resilience, psychological capital, and sense of community, may also explain how organizational resources influence digital well-being. Future research should explore more complex moderated mediation and serial mediation models to advance theoretical understanding of employee digital well-being.

5.6 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between social support, self-efficacy, and digital well-being among Chinese young employees within increasingly digitalized work environments. Drawing upon Conservation of Resources Theory and Social Cognitive Theory, this study proposed and tested a mediation model in which self-efficacy serves as a psychological mechanism linking social support to digital well-being.

The findings demonstrate that social support significantly enhances both self-efficacy and digital well-being. Moreover, self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between social support and digital well-being, indicating that organizational resources contribute to employees' digital well-being not only directly but also indirectly through strengthening individuals' beliefs in their ability to manage digital work demands. These findings provide empirical support for the argument that environmental resources and cognitive processes jointly shape employees' adaptation to technology-mediated workplaces.

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it extends digital well-being research beyond the dominant technostress perspective by adopting a positive resource-based approach. Second, it integrates Conservation of Resources Theory and Social Cognitive Theory into a unified framework, offering a more comprehensive explanation of how contextual resources are translated into positive psychological outcomes. Third, by focusing on Chinese young employees, the study enriches the growing body of digital well-being research in emerging economies and provides evidence from a non-Western organizational context.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organizations should view digital well-being as a strategic human resource outcome rather than merely an individual concern. Managers can foster employees' digital well-being by creating supportive work environments, encouraging collaborative interactions, and implementing initiatives that strengthen employees' self-efficacy in dealing with technological challenges. Such efforts may enhance not only employee well-being but also long-term organizational sustainability in the digital era.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of social support and self-efficacy in promoting digital well-being among young employees. As digital transformation continues to reshape contemporary workplaces, understanding the psychological mechanisms through which organizational resources influence employee well-being will remain a critical priority for both scholars and practitioners.

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