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Barriers and Facilitators of Branding in Iranian Medical Libraries and Information Centers (MLICs)

Abstract

Introduction: Library branding is a strategy that creates a positive and long-standing image towards the provided services in the minds of users. The present study aimed to explore the barriers and facilitators of branding in libraries and medical information centers in Iran.

Design/materials: This is a qualitative study with the deductive approach conducted using semi-structured interviews with some managers in libraries and medical information centers. Purposeful sampling was employed to gather data. Content analysis was also performed using Maxqada software version 2018 to format the data.

Findings: The obtained results revealed that in order to materialize the branding in libraries, four key structures, including librarians, services, physical equipment and infrastructures, and technology, along with their sub-components, must be improved.

Conclusion: This study offers insights to help libraries survive in competitive environments and, at least, maintain their users by providing innovative and distinguished services. In this regard, the mentioned four key structures need to undergo significant changes.

Keywords: Iranian medical libraries and information centers, branding, branding facilitators, branding barriers.

Introduction

Nowadays, given the advances in technology, access to information has become technically diverse and extended, and the globe in which libraries act as information centers is rapidly changing. The level of competition to attract more customers and resources has dramatically elevated as well. Since such evolutions can jeopardize libraries' existence, they have to gain competitive advantages to survive and succeed. In this regard, as an effective strategy, branding could provide a unique competitive advantage that can satisfy users.

Branding is a process that focuses on the differentiation of an organization, person, product, or any kind of service compared to other competitors. The provision of high-quality services and products using brand power has advantages leading to customer loyalty. From another perspective, increasing information competition could be both an opportunity and a serious threat for medical libraries that deal with health information. On the one hand, they are forced to pursue unique strategies such as branding and finally increased quality

of services. On the other hand, considering the role of information giants such as Google and Amazon, they may lose their reputation as a selected information center.

Moreover, branding can create a positive and permanent image in users' minds and make a library's roles and capabilities more visible (1-7).

Accordingly, branding is a necessity for libraries especially medical libraries dealing with providing health information. They need to be dynamic and improve their position in the competitive world. There is no doubt that to achieve such a goal, we need a roadmap for our medical libraries. Although branding has a long history, and many researchers have dealt with it, they have mostly focused on the necessity of branding public libraries, while medical libraries have been less considered.

It seems that the low attention to the branding subject can be rooted in the existence of a series of severe obstacles and also facilitators that need to be comprehensively taken into consideration. As mentioned earlier, although research on the necessity of branding for libraries, either public or medical, is not new, research-oriented information specifically dealing with the barriers and facilitators of branding in medical libraries has not been found. In Iran, since 1977, a number of medical sciences universities have been training medical librarians. As many medical librarians annually graduate in undergraduate and post graduate levels. It has been believed that through employing these graduates in the medical libraries, the quality of service delivery will improve and this advantage will lead to the creation of a brand in medical libraries. However, it seems that there have been obstacles and constraints in achieving this excellent goal. Therefore, addressing them systematically could be an important step in fulfilling that goal. Additionally, given this principle that barriers and facilitators of branding could be different in each context, the present study aimed at exploring the barriers and facilitators of branding in libraries and medical information centers in Iran

Theoretical foundations and research background

Branding and commercialization of services are among the new approaches of LICs in the current era. By applying marketing principles and strategies, academic libraries can better identify their goals, intended users, and needs and develop their products and services based on this knowledge. In such an approach, libraries are considered customer-oriented organizations. All their services, including collecting, organizing, storing, retrieving, and providing information, must meet users' needs, attract new users, and fulfill their new requests. Branding leads to the customer loyalty, popularity and identity for organization and totally positive effect on customer's mind. can be said that as a marketing strategy, branding plays an important role in credibility, introducing the capabilities, function, and

attractiveness of a product or service to customers (8). Accordingly, one of the main reasons for the branding of libraries is to make them more visible (9). Various studies have been conducted in this field, some of which are mentioned in the following.

It should be noted that the purpose of this study is to identify the drivers and barriers in branding of MLICs in Iran. The studies conducted so far have not mentioned the barriers and facilitators of the branding of libraries. On the contrary, they have generally focused on the necessity of branding or introducing influential components and structures in it.

Some of the published works have dealt with the role, influence, knowledge, and attitude of library managers and other staff related to the branding of libraries. Hood and Henderson claimed that librarians could greatly affect branding and retain users in libraries (10). Likewise, some researchers such as Walton, Grant, Gall, Baharuddin and Kasim, and Kalbande have pointed to the role of staff, including librarians and library managers, in creating and developing the brand (7, 9, 11-13). They believe that librarians should be at the core of service delivery if libraries are willing to differentiate services compared to the rival organizations.

Rowley emphasizes that libraries need to change their functional identity to be appropriate for the users' mindsets, and hence, as an important marketing tool, branding can be effective in highlighting services and changing the image and identity of libraries (4, 14). Bhatt believes that libraries must change their services in order to maintain their position in the world (15). Some researchers (Tomcik; Singh & Ovsak) mentioned that the location of the library building, equipment, and facilities as effective factors in library branding (16, 17). Mwanzu and Wendo defined libraries as organizations that must respond to environmental changes to survive (18). Another effective structure in library branding is the use of technology in service provision. Tomcik and Kalbande emphasized the application of technology as a new approach in branding, through which a library can increase the scope and quality of services (7, 16). In similar studies conducted by Kalbande, Albert, and Singh & Trinchetta, the role of library websites in marketing and generating revenue was considered important (7, 19, 20).

In short, the literature reviewed showed that in order for MLICs to materialize branding, they should focus on four crucial structures, including librarians, building and equipment, services, and technology.

Method

This article is a qualitative study with a deductive approach to explore the facilitators and barriers of branding in Iran's medical libraries. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews. A literature review was done to extract the main themes. The research

population included all library managers of Iran's universities of medical sciences. The data collection continued until theoretical saturation. A total of 14 participants from 14 different central medical libraries were purposefully selected as samples. The interview questions were developed based on the literature review and experiences of the research team. Fourteen face-to-face interviews were conducted in 2020; each lasted on average 60 minutes. They were transcribed, and in order to ensure the quality of research, Lincoln and Guba's evaluative criteria were used (...), including credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The deductive content analysis method (DCAM) was employed to analyze the text data, which were coded using the software MAXQDA 2018. Eventually, the codes were conceptually categorized into patterning and homogenous items.

Findings

The coding process began at the same time as the transcription of the interviews. A total of 109 codes were extracted from the interview texts. The codes were conceptually categorized, patterned, and turned into 51 final codes and 18 sub-themes. Given that the coding method was deductive, the main themes were predefined, and in this stage, each sub-theme was assigned to its main related theme. During the process of categorizing and assigning the codes, the researchers' experiences and literature review were used.

Finding concerning the first purpose of the study: what are the crucial facilitators of branding in libraries?

In order to answer this question, some interviews were conducted with the managers of MLICs in Iran. The results are listed in Table 1. Based on the findings of this study, four main themes, nine sub-themes, and 24 final codes were identified related to facilitators of branding in MLICs.

Table 1. Facilitators of branding in Iran's MLICs

Main themes	Sub-themes	Final code
Librarians	Plan-orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Having purposeful plans for branding ○ Hiring medical librarians ○ Human resource management
	Continuous training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Holding workshops ○ Holding in-service training courses ○ Visiting famous libraries
	Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Participative management ○ Equitable payment system ○ Creative promotion system
Services	Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Health policy and planning department ○ Research and knowledge translation department ○ Public relations department
	Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Existence of a 24-hour health information center ○ Revenue generation ○ Advertising ○ High-quality services
Physical infra-structures	User-friendly design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interior and exterior architecture ○ Equipment ergonomics ○ Pleasant exterior environment
Information technology	Information technology infrastructures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Appropriate software and hardware ○ Comprehensive access to databases
	Employing information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Full-time access to IT specialists

Table 1. Facilitators of branding in Iran's MLICs

Librarians: Based on the findings of this structure, three crucial facilitators were identified: "plan-orientation" with three final codes, "continuous education" with three final

codes, and "motivation" with four final codes. As articulated in Table 1, "having systematic thinking on branding," "employing medical librarians," and "human resources management" were crucial components identified in line with this main theme. Accordingly, interviewee 13 said:

"I believe that the director of a library should pursue a managerial approach, strengthen strategic thinking in the library, formulate a strategic plan, and put the users at the center of library planning."

Other findings of the research which could be effective in branding encompassed "specialized training of librarians," which includes: holding "knowledge enhancement workshops," "in-service training," and "benchmarking through visiting famous libraries." According to interviewee 10:

"Searching and retrieval skills in medical databases and familiarity with medical terms are pivotal for medical librarians. So, we should try to employ librarians who are proficient in specialized skills in this area."

Furthermore, paying respect to the motivation components was another sub-theme which is needed to be considered by libraries' managers. Participative management in which decisions are adopted by teams, as well as equitable payment methods like "payment for performance system" and "creative promotion system," have considerable effects on the increased motive of librarians and, in turn, distinguished services provided by them. In this regard, interviewee 4 believed

"If libraries want to differentiate their services, they must distinguish between librarians through establishing organizational equitable payment system and embedding opinions of librarians in formulating strategies." In addition, in a part of his remarks, interviewee 13 pointed out that "creative and innovative ideas that create added value for libraries must be taken into account in the promotion process."

Services: Based on the information collected from the interviewees, two sub-themes, including organizing and marketing of this structure, were obtained.

The establishment of a "research and knowledge translator unit" in MLICs for the meeting of library communication with stakeholders was identified as an influential factor in branding. In this regard, interviewee 6 said: "A lot of studies are stored and archived in libraries. They should operationalize arrangements that can pave the way for more communications with related organizations thereby applying the results of studies especially in industry."

Another factor that was emphasized as a facilitator in the branding of Iranian MLICs was the "public relations" that can use communication technologies for advertising library services, sending news and events, library updates, the introduction of library sections, or even motivational and welcoming sentences to users. In this regard, interviewee 3 stated:

"Having an independent unit in a library for public relations is a necessity for branding. It should be noted that the dissemination of news and introduction of services outside the library should be based on professional principles; so, events, news, resources, workshops, or any new services in the library must be reflected on the library website and social media ."

Another identified sub-theme regarding the services was "library marketing unit" with the aim of introducing services, generating revenue, and thereby, expanding the library's services which encompass "setting up a 24-hour health information center," "identifying valuable monetary services," and "generating revenue by renting libraries' spaces."

In this sense, interviewee 13 stated:

"The first step is to identify services as a product that can be supplied such as workshops and categorized health information. These are properties of a library and could generate added value for it."

Interviewee 12 stated as well:

"Due to their access to information and professional users, medical science libraries can set up a health information center which undoubtedly plays a unique role in branding. Since the physical spaces of libraries are less used, paying attention to them is of considerable importance in branding, and they could be rented for meetings and workshops."

Building and equipment: Based on the findings of this section, a sub-theme named "user-friendly design" with three final codes of "building architecture," "equipment ergonomics," and "pleasant exterior environment" were identified as facilitators of branding in the field of building and equipment. As shown in Table 1, the architecture of the library based on culture and a climatic symbol can help the branding. Regarding this subject, interviewee 4 stated:

"Unfortunately, librarians are not consulted in the design of a library building. Using climate-related architecture schools and inspiration of culture and civilization in the architecture of the library building would be a great move towards branding. A good example of this refers to my recent trip to Germany, where an architecture school called the Bauhaus

had been used in the state architecture library. This school was very old and had been branded in entire Germany's libraries."

The next finding was attention to "library equipment ergonomics," which indicates that the use of equipment and facilities based on scientific standards could boost branding in a library. Concerning this code, participant 1 said:

"One of our problems at the library is convincing senior managers to pay attention to the standard equipment because when it comes to purchasing library equipment, it is very crucial to follow the principles of ergonomics. In other words, equipment like chairs and tables is of considerable role, helping users feel comfortable in the library, thereby, become more satisfied and spend more time there."

The next identified code was "pleasant environment." In other words, paying attention to the green space, using colors based on scientific principles, and adapting colors to user needs would be definitely effective in branding. Accordingly, some participants stated, "Making a library beautiful using flowers and plants, installing sculptures and statues of famous or influential people in the medical community, and making artistic works using light and water, along with keeping beautiful wildlife species such as deer and birds could attract users' attention."

Technology: Based on the findings of this section, the sub-theme of "IT infrastructure" with two sub-codes, i.e., appropriate software and hardware and comprehensive access to databases, as well as the subtheme of "employing information technology specialists" with one sub-code, namely "full-time access to IT specialists," were identified.

Nowadays, IT is considered a pillar in improving any services, and libraries as service organizations are expected to be excellent. In this regard, interviewee 5 stated:

"Undoubtedly, nowhere in a university is similar to a library in terms of dependency on IT and the expansion of IT-based services such as holding virtual and educational workshops and videoconferencing. Therefore, the expansion of IT-based services is an inevitable necessity."

In addition to boosting software and hardware infrastructures, full-time access to IT specialists to avoid any kind of disruption in delivering services is pivotal. According to interviewee 5,

"Employing an IT specialist, along with trained librarians, has helped us a lot in developing technology-based services."

Finding concerning the second purpose of the study: What are the crucial branding barriers in Iran's libraries?

In order to answer this question, a part of the interviews was allocated to the main barriers of branding in libraries. Based on the findings of this study, four main themes, ten sub-themes, and 32 final codes related to the barriers of branding in MLICs were identified.

Table 2. Barriers of branding in Iran's MLICs

Main themes	Sub-themes	Final codes
<p>Librarians</p>	<p>Motivational barriers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Nature of job ○ Low motivation ○ Workplace conditions and performance appraisal ○ Discrimination and injustice
	<p>Job barriers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Weakness of communication skills to hold in-service training courses ○ Lack of creativity and innovation ○ Low commitment and responsibility ○ Insufficient knowledge and experience
	<p>Management barriers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Management anomalies ○ Weak professional knowledge of managers ○ Unhealthy process ○ Lack of supervision of managers' performance in the creative promotion system
<p>Services</p>	<p>Economic barriers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lack of independent budget line ○ Currency problems ○ High cost of subscription for access to information resources ○ Establishment of research and knowledge translation department ○ Establishment Public relations department

Main themes	Sub-themes	Final codes
	Human barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Shortage of human resources ○ Insufficient experience and knowledge of librarians ○ Librarians' poor interactions with users
Physical infra-structures	Management barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The inappropriate architecture of the library ○ Lack of a comprehensive plan for expansion of services ○ Equipment ergonomics ○ Pleasant exterior environment
	Technical barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Non-standard building and equipment ○ Ignorance of ergonomics of environment and equipment ○ Old building equipment
Information technology	Infrastructure barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Inadequate technical infrastructures ○ Weak internet and bandwidth
	Human barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Not employing information technology professionals ○ Librarian's weak technical skills ○ Poor management
	Financial barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Insufficient budget ○ Costly technology-based services

Librarians: Based on the findings of the interviews, the concepts of "motivational barriers" with four codes, i.e., "nature of the job," "low motivation," "workplace conditions and performance appraisal," and "discrimination and injustice;" "job barriers" with four codes,

i.e., "weakness of communication skills," "lack of creativity and innovation," "low commitment and responsibility," and "insufficient knowledge and experience;" and "management barriers" with four codes, i.e., "management anomalies," "weak professional knowledge of managers," "unhealthy process," and "lack of supervision of managers' performance" were identified as the barriers of branding in the libraries of Iranian medical universities, as listed in Table 3.

In this regard, interviewee 7 said:

"There is no justice in the payment system as librarians have the lowest payment. How are librarians expected to have the highest motivation to improve the condition of a library? Unfortunately, there is extensive discrimination and injustice that discourage them." In addition, interviewee 14 said:

"Our librarians do not have the required experience and knowledge and only deal with daily works and do not seek creative ideas."

Managerial barriers are of undeniable importance as well. In this respect, interviewee 3 stated:

"Management changes and the use of non-specialist managers who are not familiar with the libraries' affairs cause challenges. For example, hiring non-specialist staff can halt the branding process. This is what I have encountered during the last two years. Do you think branding can be achieved with these established arrangements?"

Services: Based on the findings of the interviews, the concept of "economic barriers" with three codes, including "lack of independent budget line," "currency problems," and "high cost of subscription for access to information resources," and the sub-theme of "human barriers" with three codes, i.e., "shortage of human resources," "insufficient experience and knowledge of librarians," and "librarians' poor interactions with users" were identified. In most interviews, financial problems were mentioned as the most important obstacle to provide user-friendly services among libraries. Accordingly, interviewee 9 stated:

"We had many plans to develop the library's services, but they were mostly canceled due to the budget constraints. For example, subscribing to databases and medical information resources, which are mostly purchased in foreign currency, or developing information systems were not possible due to the rising dollar rates." Furthermore, the lack of specialized and experienced staff was identified as another important factor responsible for not providing novel library services. In this regard, interviewee 12 stated:

"One of the obstacles that prevent us from providing quality services is the lack of experienced librarians, which is caused by the employment regulations that lead to the employment of unskilled staff to deliver services in libraries."

Building and equipment: According to the findings of the interviews, the concepts of "management barriers" with two codes, i.e., "inappropriate architecture of library" and

"lack of a comprehensive plan for expansion of services," and the concept of "technical barriers" with three codes comprising "non-standard building and equipment," "ignorance of ergonomics of environment and equipment," and "old building equipment" were extracted. Accordingly, interviewee 9 mentioned:

"We see that the library building does not meet the required standards. That is why our users are not satisfied with our services".

Old equipment such as air conditioners, heating systems, benches, and chairs needs to be renewed. In a part of his interview, participant 3 said:

"Wooden chairs in our library are not suitable for eight-hour sitting." Therefore, considering ergonomics can lead to mental health and the physical comfort of users.

Technology: Another important structure in the branding of MLICs of Iran is the use of technology in libraries. Based on the research findings, the three concepts of "infrastructure barriers" with two codes, including "inadequate technical infrastructure," and "weak internet and bandwidth;" "human barriers" with three codes, including "not employing information technology professionals," "librarian's weak technical skills," and "poor management;" and "financial barriers" with two codes, i.e., "lack of enough budget" and "costly technology-based services" were identified as the most crucial obstacles to branding in MLICs.

In this regard, interviewee 14 said:

"Nowadays, our library users need more digital content. Meanwhile, we have not been able to provide the necessary infrastructure, mostly due to financial constraints. These shortcomings are tough barriers to branding in libraries."

Discussion

Medical libraries as centers for providing and disseminating specialized information for their stakeholders are of special importance. In this line Iran's Universities of medical sciences have been teaching medical librarians students since 1977. graduates learn to use information technology and knowledge management for knowledge acquisition, organization and dissemination in academic health settings, including schools, hospital libraries and health information centers.

It has been expected by employing these graduates libraries can provide excellent and distinguished services and they pave the way for branding of libraries. however it seems this process has encountered with a series of impediments.

The present study aimed to identify facilitators and barriers of branding in libraries and medical information centers of Iran. For this purpose, the deductive research method was selected, and the main components of the study were extracted from the literature review, while the other components were obtained from semi-structured interviews.

Based on the findings of this study, one of the most important facilitators of branding for librarians was considering the concept of "planning-orientation," which points to the managers' systemic thought, having a comprehensive development plan, proper organizing, and employing required human resources. This finding is in line with the results reported by Grant, Shaffer, and Kenneway, who emphasized plan-orientation (2, 11, 21).

The next concept that could help to brand was "continuous education," which could empower librarians. This finding is consistent with the results of studies by Olorunfemi & Ipadeola and Booth, in which the role of education of librarians was considered pivotal (22, 23).

Paying much attention to librarians' motivation and satisfaction through equitable payment systems and collaborative management was another crucial issue in the creation and maintenance of branding mentioned by most interviewees. Paying attention to the motivation issues of librarians was suggested by Olorunfemi and Ipadeola (22).

The findings of this study also highlighted "services" as a unique structure in branding not only in libraries but also in every business. Accordingly, planning and policy-making departments should be developed in libraries to lead the delivery of quality services on the one hand and generate revenue for expansion of services and lessen the reliance on public budgets by focusing on marketing on the other hand. This part of the results corresponds with the findings of Hood & Henderson, Rowley, and Olorunfemi & Ipadeola that connect branding with the creation of a policy-making department in libraries (10, 14, 22).

The architecture of the building, the ergonomics and arrangement of equipment, and making a pleasant environment are factors that could play an effective role in library branding. Manifesting history and civilization in the architecture of a library building can be attractive for users. Sahli & Esmaili Givi, Rowley, Bhatt, Tomcik, Singh & Ovsak, and Mwanuzi & Wendo have also concluded that library architecture is an outstanding factor in library branding (1, 14-18).

The technological revolution has spread across borders, and there are almost no services that have not been affected by technology. Libraries are no exception in this regard. The importance of technology in a library is so great that it can be undoubtedly said that in the current age, without the help of technology, branding of libraries is not possible. Employing technology professionals, along with expert librarians, can enhance the quality of services. This finding agrees with the results of Madhusudhan, Tomcik, Kalbande, and Olorunfemi & Ipadeola (7, 16, 22, 24).

The barriers to branding were another issue examined in this study. "Low motivation" and "poor job skills" were two of the most effective impediments associated with the librarians as the main driver of branding. Motivation plays a dual role by both fulfilling and retarding aims. In most cases, low motivation could result from payment systems or managers' per-

spectives towards the library profession. Other studies such as Hood and Henderson, Baharuddin & Kassim, and Gall have recognized low motivation as a significant obstacle in this sense (10, 12, 13).

"Job barriers," such as poor communication skills, lack of creativity and innovation, low commitment and responsibility, and lack of experience, can hinder branding, requiring various processes from education to employment to be modified. Olorunfemi & Ipadeola and Świgoń have concluded that removing job barriers can facilitate branding (22, 25).

The services provided by libraries can pave the way to attract users, strengthening the branding. However, they may also be a strong barrier to branding. Low-quality services could be rooted in the lack of enough budget or the weak performance of human resources. Undoubtedly poor interactions with users and ignorance of revenue policies could lead to a decline in service quality, thereby hindering the branding. Rowley, Walton, Olorunfemi & Ipadeola, and Świgoń have emphasized that poor services are totally against branding in libraries (3, 22, 25-27).

Defects in equipment and physical infrastructure were another major obstacle identified in the way of library branding. What is worth noting in this regard is that the impossibility of implementing development projects in libraries is a hurdle that makes it difficult to meet the needs of users. Moreover, the equipment used in a library should be well proportionate to the needs of users, and all services must be provided at the highest level. Frequent disruptions in utility systems and insufficient facilities, along with unpleasant interior and exterior designs, are obstacles that impede branding in libraries. Tomcik, Mwanzu & Wendo, Bhatt, Singh & Trinchetta have considered the importance of equipment and physical infrastructure in the branding of libraries (15, 16, 18, 20).

The structure of "technology" and related issues was a major barrier identified in the present study. In this regard, Iran's MLICs face various problems, including the shortage of IT professionals, lack of digitization facilities, weak Internet and bandwidth, as well as weak management and weak technical skills of librarians. Nevertheless, most of them are rooted in financial resources, and branding without advanced IT-oriented services would be impossible. The weakness in IT infrastructure as a considerable restriction in library branding has been discussed by Shaffer, Madhusudhan, Tomcik, Kalbande, Booth, and Olorunfemi & Ipadeola (7, 16, 21-24).

To sum up, MLICs need to adopt novel and creative approaches to survive in the competitive world. Based on the findings of this study, branding is one of these approaches that could fulfill the abovementioned aim, thereby developing and promoting library services. Accordingly, managers of MLICs should identify their relative advantages and operate them in branding. They also need to focus on eliminating the barriers and paving the path

for branding. Otherwise, libraries cannot maintain their position and proceed in a competitive world.

Limitation: due to the fact that the participants in the research were senior managers of the medical libraries, it was not easy to access and interview them face to face. This limitation was solved by coordinating and using the communication capacity and perseverance of the research team

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