

## Transforming Rural Communities Through Digital Innovation: Proactive Strategies for Development

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### ABSTRACT

Rural communities face unprecedented development challenges, but digital transformation offers a promising solution for sustainable growth and resilience. This study examines the impact of proactive strategies in rural development, grounded in the Sociotechnical Systems Theory, which highlights the interplay between social and technical development dimensions. Digital technologies enable rural areas to overcome traditional growth obstacles, such as limited access to information, markets, and services. This approach enhances efficiency and connectivity while empowering local communities through technological progress aligned with social needs and capacities. Innovative solutions combining digital tools with community-driven strategies unlock transformative impact in rural development, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future. Aligning digital transformation initiatives with Sociotechnical Systems Theory principles provides a comprehensive framework for promoting sustainable and inclusive rural development.

**KEYWORDS:** Digital, Transformation, Rural, Development, Proactive, Strategies

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### INTRODUCTION

Rural areas in developed countries have experienced profound transformations in recent decades, driven by technological innovation, policy reforms, and community engagement (1). These advancements aim to enhance living standards, economic prospects, and infrastructure in rural regions, demonstrating a commitment to addressing disparities and promoting sustainable development.

The integration of cutting-edge technologies in agriculture has been a pivotal development in rural transformation. Advanced techniques like precision farming, utilizing drones, GPS, and data analytics, have transformed agricultural practices. These innovations boost crop yields, optimize resource allocation, and minimize environmental impact. For instance, the United States has seen a significant increase in crop productivity and efficiency through precision agriculture, bolstering rural economies and improving farmers' livelihoods (2).

Developed countries have allocated significant resources to enhance rural infrastructure, including transportation networks, energy systems, and digital connectivity (3). Upgrades to road infrastructure, expanded broadband internet access, and improved public transportation have bridged rural-urban divides, unlocking economic opportunities. Australia's Rural Broadband Initiative, for instance, has dramatically improved internet access in remote areas, enhancing educational and economic prospects for rural residents.

Rural development strategies have prioritized economic diversification, promoting growth in non-agricultural sectors like tourism, renewable energy, and small-scale manufacturing (4). This diversification reduces dependence on traditional agriculture and stimulates local economies. Canada's rural communities, for example, have successfully harnessed their natural landscapes to develop eco-tourism ventures, generating novel revenue streams and employment opportunities.

Community-driven development initiatives have gained traction in rural areas, emphasizing local participation and empowerment (5). Collaborative projects between local governments, non-profits, and residents address specific needs and foster sustainable development. The UK's Big Lottery Fund's Community Assets program, for instance, has supported numerous projects revitalizing rural communities, including community center development and local enterprise initiatives.

Rural areas have seen a surge in sustainable land management practices, striking a balance between environmental conservation and economic growth (6). Practices like agroforestry, conservation tillage, and sustainable water management have gained traction. The European Union's Common Agricultural Policy has integrated environmental stewardship measures to promote eco-friendly agriculture and preserve rural landscapes.

Enhanced rural health services have been a vital component of rural development. Innovations like telemedicine, mobile health clinics, and upgraded healthcare infrastructure have broadened access to medical care in remote areas. Sweden's telemedicine initiatives, for instance, have significantly enhanced healthcare delivery for rural populations, reducing travel time and increasing access to specialist services (7).

### Education and Training Programs

Developed countries have made significant investments in education and training programs to drive rural development (8). By expanding educational opportunities and vocational training, these countries aim to equip rural residents with diverse employment skills. Germany's Rural Skills Program, for instance, provides tailored vocational training to meet the needs of rural economies, enabling individuals to acquire industry-relevant skills.

Rural areas have witnessed significant growth in renewable energy adoption, including wind, solar, and bioenergy (9). These initiatives contribute to environmental sustainability, create economic opportunities, and reduce energy costs. Denmark's wind energy projects, for example, have generated income and served as a model for sustainable rural development.

Developed countries have achieved substantial progress in rural development through technological advancements, infrastructure improvements, economic diversification, and community-led initiatives (10). These developments reflect a commitment to enhancing rural living standards and addressing unique community challenges. By leveraging innovations and engaging local stakeholders, these countries are driving sustainable and inclusive rural development.

Rural development in developing countries is a critical focus area for global development efforts (11). Progress in this sector addresses poverty, enhances living standards, and promotes sustainable development. Recent advancements have utilized innovative approaches, international support, and community-driven initiatives to foster economic growth, improve infrastructure, and enhance social services in rural areas. This overview highlights key developments and showcases regional examples.

Agricultural innovation has driven rural development in developing countries, introducing advanced farming technologies like improved seed varieties, irrigation systems, and precision agriculture tools (12). These innovations have increased crop yields and resilience, substantially boosting agricultural productivity and improving smallholder farmers' livelihoods in countries like India.

Infrastructure development is crucial for enhancing rural connectivity and access to services. Investments in roads, electricity, and water supply have transformed rural communities, as seen in Kenya's Vision 2030 program, which includes significant infrastructure projects to enhance rural access to markets and services, driving economic growth and poverty reduction (13).

Community-based health programs have made significant strides in improving rural health outcomes through initiatives like mobile health clinics and community health worker programs (14). Nigeria's "Primary Health Care Under One Roof" program has successfully increased health service delivery in rural areas by integrating local health facilities and improving outreach services.

Educational advancements in rural areas have been facilitated by programs aimed at increasing school enrollment and improving educational quality (15). The "Educate a Child" initiative in Bangladesh has significantly increased access to education for children in remote and impoverished areas by building schools and providing scholarships.

Economic diversification in rural areas has been promoted through initiatives supporting non-agricultural activities like small-scale industries and tourism (16). The "Kabalikat sa Kabuhayan" program in the Philippines encourages rural entrepreneurship by providing training and resources to local businesses, leading to job creation and economic stability.

Renewable energy projects have improved energy access and sustainability in rural areas, with solar energy initiatives like the Solar Home Systems program in Tanzania providing reliable and clean energy to off-grid communities (17). This enhances their quality of life and economic opportunities.

Access to clean water and sanitation is crucial for rural development, significantly impacting health and quality of life (18). In Ethiopia, the "WaterAid" program has made strides in building wells and sanitation facilities, substantially improving rural communities' access to these essential services. This has led to a reduction in waterborne diseases and enhanced living standards.

Empowering youth and women is increasingly recognized as vital for rural development (19). Initiatives like Mozambique's "Young Women's Empowerment Network" provide skills training and entrepreneurial support, contributing to economic empowerment and community development.

Developing countries have achieved notable progress in rural development through diverse strategies, including agricultural innovation, infrastructure development, health programs, and educational improvements (20). These advancements have been instrumental in enhancing living standards, driving economic growth, and addressing rural populations' needs. By focusing on targeted initiatives and leveraging local and international support, these countries are advancing towards more sustainable and inclusive rural development.

### 2.1 Underpinning Theory

## **Transforming Rural Communities Through Digital Innovation: Proactive Strategies for Development**

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This review is grounded in Sociotechnical Systems Theory, developed by Eric Trist and his colleagues at the Tavistock Institute in London in the 1950s (21). The theory emphasizes that effective organizational functioning requires harmony between social and technical systems. It highlights the interdependence between technical aspects (tools, processes, and technologies) and social aspects (people, culture, and organizational structure) within an organization. The theory advocates for a balanced approach, where technological changes are accompanied by corresponding social system adjustments, ensuring optimal performance and employee well-being.

Sociotechnical Systems Theory can be applied to digital transformation in rural development by ensuring technological innovations align with rural communities' social and cultural dynamics (22). This involves local stakeholders in design and adoption, ensuring user-friendly, accessible tools that meet community needs. By balancing technical and social elements—training, local engagement, and cultural considerations—rural development initiatives can achieve more sustainable and impactful outcomes, enhancing technological adoption and community well-being.

### **2.2 Proactive Digital Transformation Strategies for Rural Development**

Rural development can be transformed through strategic digital technology implementation, addressing distinct rural community challenges (23). Proactive approaches enhance access to information, upgrade infrastructure, and stimulate economic growth through digital tools in agriculture, education, and healthcare. Embracing a forward-thinking mindset, rural areas overcome the digital divide and achieve sustainable development outcomes, ensuring even the most remote communities reap technological progress benefits.

### **ENHANCING AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY**

Digital tools like GPS, IoT sensors, and drones are revolutionizing farming through precision agriculture, enabling farmers to closely monitor soil conditions, manage crops more effectively, and optimize resource use with remarkable accuracy (24). This targeted approach allows for the precise application of water, fertilizers, and pesticides, significantly improving crop yields while reducing costs and environmental impact. Precision agriculture plays a critical role in enhancing agricultural productivity and sustainability. Farmers now rely on real-time data to inform their agricultural practices, accessing up-to-date information on weather conditions, pest activity, and soil health to make timely and informed decisions (25). This enables them to respond swiftly to changing conditions, ensuring better crop performance and reducing potential losses.

Robotic and automated farming equipment has transformed traditional farming methods, improving efficiency and reducing manual labor needs (26). These technologies perform essential tasks like planting, watering, and harvesting with precision and consistency, allowing farmers to manage larger areas more effectively. Automation increases productivity, minimizes human error, and reduces labor costs, contributing to more efficient farming operations.

Advanced data analytics provide farmers with valuable insights into trends and patterns affecting crop production (27). Analyzing data from sources like sensors, satellite imagery, and market information enables farmers to make data-driven decisions enhancing productivity and profitability. Data analytics helps identify optimal planting times, predict market trends, and improve resource management, making it an indispensable tool in modern agriculture.

### **IMPROVING ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE**

Telemedicine platforms have revolutionized rural healthcare access, enabling residents to consult healthcare professionals remotely and addressing the scarcity of medical facilities and specialists (28). Virtual consultations reduce travel needs, ensure timely medical advice, and facilitate management of chronic diseases, mental health support, and specialist consultations previously inaccessible to rural populations.

Rural residents are increasingly leveraging mobile health apps to bridge healthcare access gaps (29). These apps offer appointment scheduling, health monitoring, and medical information access, enhancing healthcare management. Patients can monitor health conditions, receive medication reminders, and access critical information, leading to improved health outcomes and proactive healthcare management.

Remote diagnostics are vital for improving rural healthcare accessibility, allowing healthcare providers to monitor and diagnose patients without physical visits (30). Digital tools like wearable devices and connected sensors enable continuous vital sign and chronic condition monitoring. This facilitates timely interventions, ongoing care management, and reduced healthcare system burden, ultimately improving patient outcomes.

Online platforms empower rural populations with educational resources and training on various health topics, enhancing health management (31). These platforms provide information on disease prevention, nutrition, maternal and child health, and other critical issues, enabling informed health decisions. Digital education enhances health literacy, improving overall health outcomes and reducing preventable disease prevalence in rural communities.

### **EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES**

## **Transforming Rural Communities Through Digital Innovation: Proactive Strategies for Development**

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E-learning platforms have become vital tools for bridging the rural-urban educational divide, providing access to quality resources and enabling remote learning for rural students (32). Interactive lessons, tutorials, and assessments on these platforms improve educational outcomes and offer opportunities previously inaccessible due to geographical constraints.

Digital technologies have made online courses and degree programs accessible to rural students and adults, enabling skill enhancement and qualification without relocation (33). This promotes lifelong learning, skill development, and better employment prospects, leading to economic empowerment for rural populations. Online education fosters educational equity and bridges the gap.

Virtual classrooms offer interactive learning experiences, connecting students and educators worldwide in real-time (34). These digital environments simulate traditional classrooms, facilitating discussions, group work, and live feedback. By connecting rural students with global educators and peers, virtual classrooms enhance education quality and broaden perspectives.

Digital libraries and educational materials have transformed rural learning landscapes, supporting self-directed learning and research (35). These resources offer a vast knowledge repository, including textbooks, research papers, and multimedia content, accessible anytime and anywhere. This supports independent learning, academic achievement, and addresses resource limitations in rural areas.

### **BOOSTING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES**

E-commerce platforms have revolutionized rural businesses by connecting them to broader markets, enabling global sales, and increasing revenue potential (36). This digital expansion helps rural enterprises compete on a larger scale, overcoming geographical limitations and driving economic growth.

Digital marketing tools are essential for rural entrepreneurs to effectively promote products and services (37). Social media advertising, SEO, and email marketing increase business visibility, enhance customer engagement, and drive sales. By leveraging digital marketing strategies, rural entrepreneurs attract and retain customers, improve brand recognition, and boost sales.

Online business services like accounting software, CRM systems, and project management tools streamline rural enterprise operations (38). These digital solutions enhance financial management, facilitate better customer service, and reduce costs. As a result, rural businesses operate more effectively, scale operations, and improve overall efficiency.

Digital transformation has unlocked remote work opportunities, allowing rural individuals to participate in the global workforce without relocating (39). Remote work options provide access to diverse job opportunities, enhance income potential, and support local economic development by retaining talent within rural communities.

### **STRENGTHENING CONNECTIVITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

Investing in broadband infrastructure is vital for enhancing rural internet connectivity, supporting digital applications, and driving economic growth (40). Expanded broadband networks bring higher-speed internet, fostering remote work, e-commerce, online education, and telemedicine, ultimately enhancing rural quality of life.

Integrating digital technologies into infrastructure development creates smart infrastructure, such as smart grids and advanced transportation systems (41). These technologies optimize resource management, reduce operational costs, and enhance service delivery in rural areas, improving functionality and sustainability.

Internet of Things (IoT) applications optimize rural resource management, using connected sensors and devices to monitor water and energy usage (42). Real-time data enables efficient resource use, reduces waste, and improves sustainability, supporting rural systems' long-term viability.

Local community networks and Wi-Fi hotspots bridge digital access gaps in rural areas, providing internet access where traditional infrastructure is lacking (43). These networks facilitate digital inclusion, support local businesses, and improve access to information and services, enhancing rural connectivity and opportunities.

### **PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Digital tools are vital for efficient natural resource management, including water usage, soil health, and energy consumption (44). Advanced technologies like sensors, data analytics, and management software enable precise monitoring and control, optimizing resource use and reducing waste. This enhances environmental sustainability and supports long-term ecological balance.

Remote sensing and satellite imagery technologies play a crucial role in environmental monitoring (45). They provide comprehensive, real-time data on environmental factors like land use, deforestation, and water quality, enabling detailed observation and informed decision-making. This supports effective conservation management and timely interventions.

Digital solutions promote sustainable agriculture by enabling precision irrigation, monitoring soil health, and supporting organic farming techniques (46). These technologies help farmers reduce environmental impact by optimizing water and fertilizer use, minimizing chemical runoff, and improving soil management. This contributes to more environmentally friendly farming practices and sustainable agricultural development.

Digital technologies are essential for climate adaptation strategies, providing valuable data and tools to assess and respond to climate-related challenges (47). Climate modeling, predictive analytics, and GIS offer insights into potential climate impacts,

supporting adaptive measures and climate resilience planning. These technologies help manage risks and implement effective adaptation strategies.

### **ENHANCING DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE**

Digital technologies have transformed early warning systems for natural disasters, providing rural communities with timely alerts and critical information (48). Sensors, satellite data, and predictive algorithms detect and forecast hazards like storms, floods, and earthquakes, enabling communities to prepare and evacuate, reducing disaster impact and saving lives.

Digital platforms streamline emergency response efforts by facilitating communication and information sharing among response teams and local authorities (49). Incident management systems and communication networks enhance disaster response efficiency through real-time updates, resource allocation, and collaboration, ensuring a more organized and rapid response.

Data analytics are vital for disaster preparedness and response planning, offering insights into risk factors and vulnerability assessments (50). By analyzing historical data, geographic information, and real-time information, data-driven approaches identify potential hazards, assess community vulnerabilities, and develop targeted strategies for disaster mitigation and response, enhancing disaster planning and resource management effectiveness.

Digital tools foster community resilience by facilitating communication and resource sharing during and after disasters (51). Social media platforms, mobile apps, and community networks enable residents to stay informed, coordinate aid efforts, and access support services, enhancing connectivity and information flow, and helping communities recover more quickly and strengthen their ability to withstand future disasters.

### **SUPPORTING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Digital inclusion initiatives bridge the digital divide by promoting digital literacy and improving technology access for marginalized communities (52). These programs provide training, resources, and infrastructure, enabling individuals to effectively use digital tools and participate in the digital economy. Enhanced digital skills and access integrate marginalized groups into broader societal activities, improving social inclusion.

Digital technologies preserve local cultural heritage by documenting and sharing cultural practices, languages, and artifacts (53). Digital archiving, online databases, and multimedia platforms maintain cultural identity and enable future generations to access and learn about their heritage, sustaining cultural traditions.

Social media and online communication platforms connect rural residents with broader communities, overcoming geographical barriers (54). These platforms facilitate social interaction, cultural exchange, and community engagement, enabling rural individuals to stay connected, share experiences, and participate in cultural and social activities.

Digital tools foster civic engagement in rural areas by enabling residents to participate in local governance and community activities (55). Online platforms and mobile apps provide access to information about local government services, facilitate public consultations, and support community decision-making processes. This digital engagement strengthens civic participation and the democratic process in rural areas.

### **FOSTERING INNOVATION AND RESEARCH**

Digital platforms facilitate collaboration among researchers, universities, and rural communities, driving innovation and knowledge sharing (56). Online tools, research networks, and virtual meeting spaces enable stakeholders to work together on projects, share data, and develop solutions tailored to rural needs, accelerating research progress and ensuring innovations benefit rural populations. Digital transformation supports the development of rural innovation hubs and incubators, providing resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities for entrepreneurs and innovators (57). These centers leverage digital technologies to offer virtual support, access to expertise, and connections to funding sources, fostering entrepreneurship and technological advancements in rural regions. Digital tools provide access to research databases, journals, and academic resources, crucial for supporting scientific research and innovation in rural settings (58). Online access allows researchers in remote areas to stay updated with the latest scientific developments, collaborate with peers, and contribute to the global knowledge base, bridging the gap between rural and urban research capabilities.

Digital technologies facilitate the transfer of innovative solutions and best practices from urban to rural areas (59). Digital platforms share knowledge, case studies, and technological advancements, enabling rural communities to adopt and implement successful urban innovations. This technology transfer promotes the dissemination of effective solutions, supporting rural economic and infrastructure development.

### **CASE STUDIES OF SUCCESSFUL DIGITAL INITIATIVES**

In India, innovative digital platforms like e-Choupal and Kisan Suvidha have revolutionized agricultural productivity. These platforms empower farmers with vital information on weather forecasts, market prices, and expert advice, enabling informed decision-making. e-Choupal's internet-enabled kiosks connect farmers directly with experts and market data, while Kisan Suvidha's

mobile apps provide real-time updates and guidance. Consequently, farmers have seen increased crop yields and reduced operational costs.

The Philippines has pioneered telemedicine initiatives, expanding healthcare access to remote and underserved areas. By leveraging telemedicine technologies, healthcare providers deliver consultations, diagnoses, and treatments remotely, bridging geographical gaps and addressing medical facility shortages. This has significantly enhanced access to medical care and health information, leading to improved health outcomes in rural communities.

Kenya's Digital Literacy Programme stands out as a successful example of e-learning initiatives enhancing educational opportunities in rural areas. By providing digital classrooms, online resources, and educational technology, the program narrows the gap between urban and rural education levels. Through the strategic integration of digital tools, Kenya has achieved improved educational outcomes and increased access to quality education for remote region students.

Brazil has launched ambitious broadband expansion projects to boost internet access in rural areas, tackling the digital divide head-on. These initiatives aim to promote digital inclusion by enhancing connectivity and supporting economic growth. As a result, rural areas have seen increased access to online services, the emergence of e-commerce, and a significant contribution to digital inclusion nationwide.

### **CHALLENGES POSED BY DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

The digital divide persists as a major obstacle in rural areas, where inadequate access to digital infrastructure and technology widens the gap between rural and urban regions (64). This disparity hinders rural communities from harnessing the benefits of digital advancements, leading to unequal access to information, services, and opportunities.

Inadequate digital literacy poses a significant barrier to the effective adoption and utilization of digital tools in rural areas (65). Without proper training and support, individuals may struggle to leverage digital technologies, limiting their potential benefits. Enhancing digital literacy is vital to ensure rural populations can fully harness digital resources.

The development and maintenance of digital infrastructure in remote and rural areas entail substantial costs, which can be a significant deterrent (66). The high expenses associated with installing broadband networks, maintaining equipment, and providing technical support can discourage investment and slow the implementation of digital solutions.

Resistance to change and adherence to traditional practices can impede the adoption of new technologies in rural communities (67). Cultural factors, unfamiliarity with digital tools, and skepticism about their benefits can hinder the transition to digital solutions. Addressing these concerns through education and community engagement is crucial to overcome resistance and promote technological adoption.

### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Government policies and strategic investments in digital infrastructure hold immense potential for bridging the digital divide and fostering rural development (68). By allocating resources and implementing supportive regulations, governments can enhance connectivity, improve access to digital services, and stimulate economic growth in rural regions. Effective policy frameworks and targeted financial incentives can drive substantial progress in digital transformation.

Public-private partnerships offer a powerful approach to driving innovation and overcoming challenges in rural digital transformation (69). Collaborative efforts between the public and private sectors can combine resources, expertise, and technology to develop and deploy digital solutions tailored to rural needs. These partnerships facilitate the creation of effective digital infrastructure and services, ultimately fostering sustainable development.

Active engagement with local communities is crucial for ensuring digital initiatives meet their unique needs (70). Involving rural residents in planning and implementation phases ensures that technologies are user-friendly, culturally relevant, and effectively address local challenges. Community engagement builds trust and encourages greater adoption of digital tools.

Emerging technologies present new opportunities for enhancing rural development and addressing long-standing challenges (71). Innovations such as advanced broadband technologies, satellite internet, and smart agriculture tools can transform rural areas by improving connectivity, optimizing resource management, and supporting economic activities. Leveraging these advancements can significantly enhance rural living standards and infrastructure.

### **Conclusion**

Digital transformation presents both significant challenges and promising opportunities for rural development, as issues like the digital divide, low digital literacy, high infrastructure costs, and resistance to change can hinder progress. However, proactive strategies such as government policy support, public-private partnerships, community engagement, and leveraging emerging technologies offer substantial potential for positive impact. By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on opportunities, rural areas can enhance agricultural productivity, improve healthcare access, expand educational opportunities, boost economic growth, and strengthen connectivity. Successful digital initiatives in countries like India, the Philippines, Kenya, and Brazil demonstrate that with the right approach, digital transformation can be a powerful catalyst for sustainable and inclusive rural development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments should prioritize investments in digital infrastructure and create supportive policies to bridge the digital divide in rural areas. Allocating funds for broadband expansion, subsidizing technology costs, and implementing regulations that encourage digital innovation can facilitate greater connectivity and access to digital services. This will help create a conducive environment for digital transformation and ensure that rural communities benefit from technological advancements.

Encouraging collaboration between public and private sectors can drive innovation and address the unique challenges of rural digital transformation. Partnerships can leverage the expertise, resources, and technology of both sectors to develop and deploy tailored digital solutions. By combining efforts, stakeholders can overcome barriers such as high infrastructure costs and limited local expertise, leading to more effective and sustainable digital initiatives in rural areas.

Involving rural residents in the planning and implementation of digital projects ensures that solutions are relevant and address specific local needs. Community engagement fosters trust, increases adoption rates, and enhances the effectiveness of digital tools. Programs should include digital literacy training and involve community members in decision-making processes to ensure that technology aligns with local cultures and practices, thus maximizing its impact on rural development.

Embracing and integrating emerging technologies can significantly enhance rural development efforts. Innovations such as advanced broadband technologies, satellite internet, and smart agriculture tools offer new opportunities for improving connectivity, optimizing resource management, and supporting economic activities. By staying abreast of technological advancements and incorporating them into rural development strategies, stakeholders can drive substantial improvements in living standards and infrastructure in rural regions.

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