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Unpacking academic professionalism and teacher well-being: The roles of leadership support, psychological capital, and digital literacy in higher education

Zhang Huiqing[1]
Mohd Mahzan Awang[2+]
Anuar Ahmad[3]

[1,2,3]*Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi Selangor, Malaysia.*
[1]*Email: P112852@siswa.ukm.edu.my*
[2]*Email: mahzan@ukm.edu.my*
[3]*Email: anuarmd@ukm.edu.my*

(+ Corresponding author)

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources Model and Conservation of Resources theory, this study investigates how leadership support and psychological capital influence academic professionalism and, in turn, affect university teachers' well-being. Moreover, the mediating effect of academic professionalism and the moderating effect of digital literacy are also discussed. A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining survey data from 382 Chinese university teachers and semi-structured interviews from 8 participants. Results from partial least squares structural equation modeling supported all six hypotheses. Leadership support and psychological capital significantly positively affected academic professionalism, which in turn predicted well-being. Mediation and moderation effects were also confirmed. Qualitative findings further revealed that intrinsic motivation, peer benchmarking, emotional support, and digital competence contributed to teachers' professional engagement and psychological satisfaction. These findings enrich the understanding of academic professionalism as a dynamic resource and highlight the importance of institutional, personal, and digital enablers of teacher well-being. Implications for policy, faculty development, and future research are discussed.

Contribution/ Originality: This study advances the understanding of academic professionalism by integrating the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory within a mixed-methods framework. It reveals how leadership support, psychological capital, and digital literacy interact to influence university teachers' well-being. The research provides novel empirical evidence from the underexplored context of Chinese higher education, contributing valuable insights to the field.

1. INTRODUCTION

Driven by the increasing complexity and uncertainty of global higher education, university faculty face multiple challenges, including increased teaching loads, heightened pressure for academic performance, and the accelerated digitalization of education [1]. These environmental changes have exacerbated faculty occupational stress and have sparked widespread attention regarding faculty well-being. Faculty well-being, as a positive psychological state, is associated with teaching quality, research creativity, and student development [2] and has become a key topic in higher education research.

Recently, the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) and the Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R) have provided important theoretical foundations for understanding individual well-being. COR theory emphasizes that individuals rely on key resources to maintain and enhance their psychological well-being in the face of environmental

stress [3]. Additionally, the JD-R Model further argues that job resources not only buffer the depleting effects of job demands but also stimulate work motivation and well-being [4]. As an external organizational resource, leadership support plays a crucial role in enhancing faculty well-being. Research indicates that university leaders can significantly improve teachers' sense of belonging and purpose through empowerment, trust, effective communication, and the provision of necessary resources. This, in turn, promotes their subjective well-being. Such support is reflected not only in management systems but also in daily interactions during teaching and research.

Meanwhile, teachers' psychological capital encompasses dimensions such as hope, confidence, optimism, and resilience, which can enhance their adaptability and resilience in the face of stress and challenges [5]. Previous research has shown that psychological capital is a crucial bridge for internalizing external resources into positive psychological states, effectively promoting teachers' well-being and professional effectiveness [6]. Furthermore, whether teachers can transform external and internal resources into a stable experience of professional well-being depends on the formation and practice of their academic professionalism. Academic professionalism is reflected in teachers' recognition and adherence to academic norms, their professional values, academic self-discipline, and their ability to develop continuously [7]. With a supportive environment and a positive psychological state, teachers are more likely to demonstrate high professional behavior and derive sustained professional satisfaction and well-being. However, as the digital transformation of education deepens, teachers' reliance on digital literacy in teaching, research, and management is increasing. Research has found that teachers with high digital literacy skills adapt more effectively to online education, manage data platforms, and use digital research tools, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy and teaching performance [8]. Conversely, a lack of digital skills can lead to anxiety and burnout, which, in turn, can affect well-being. Therefore, digital literacy is an emerging competency resource and potentially moderates the resource-well-being pathway.

Although existing research has validated the relevant roles of the variables mentioned above from various perspectives, several research gaps remain. First, there is a lack of empirical studies that incorporate leadership support and psychological capital as dual resources within theoretical models. Second, the mediating mechanism of academic professionalism in the resource-well-being pathway has not been thoroughly examined. Third, the potential moderating role of digital literacy in the process by which resources are transformed into well-being remains underexplored, especially within the context of Chinese higher education. Addressing these issues, this study aims to explore the following research questions.

1. How do leadership support and psychological capital influence university teachers' academic professionalism?
2. Does academic professionalism mediate the relationship between leadership support, psychological capital, and well-being?
3. Does digital literacy moderate the pathway between academic professionalism and well-being?

This study employs a mixed methods design to systematically address these questions, combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This approach allows for testing the theoretical model through both quantitative analysis and qualitative insights. Through in-depth interviews with university teachers, we further understand how they perceive leadership support, activate psychological resources, and achieve a balance between professionalism and happiness under technological pressure.

This design not only helps to enhance the explanatory power of the results but also improves the theoretical and practical contributions of the research. This study integrates COR theory and the JD-R model, expanding the resource mechanism perspective of teacher happiness research. Secondly, this study introduces academic professionalism and digital literacy as mediating and moderating variables for the first time, revealing how resources are dynamically transformed into positive outcomes. Finally, this study provides targeted insights for university human resource management, teacher development, and digital transformation policies.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. Leadership Support, Psychological Capital, and Academic Professionalism

Leadership support is a crucial organizational resource in higher education. According to the JD-R model, supportive leadership reduces job stress and promotes employee motivation and professional engagement [9, 10]. University teachers are more likely to carry out their professional responsibilities independently when they believe their leaders are providing emotional support, autonomy, recognition, and feedback [11]. Supportive academic leadership can foster faculty members' professional development, identity formation, and ethical commitment, according to recent empirical research. Sultana and Wahıd [12] for instance, discovered that the growth of academic psychological capital, which improved their professional engagement, was directly predicted by faculty support. In a similar vein, Wahidi [13] highlighted how university administrators' genuine leadership can improve faculty members' professional identities and engagement by influencing their confidence and role perceptions. Within this framework, leadership support mechanisms may strengthen academic professionalism, which is reflected in faculty self-regulatory behaviors, ethical integrity, and the internalization of educational values.

Additionally, according to COR theory, psychological capital comprising hope, self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience is a crucial internal resource that helps individuals manage job demands and engage more fully in role-specific outcomes [14, 15]. Psychological capital is increasingly recognized in educational research as a significant factor influencing faculty creativity, perseverance, and identity formation within dynamic institutional settings. It predicts well-being, participation in professional learning communities, and the development of reflective practices each essential components of academic professionalism, as evidenced by a recent study by Cleary et al. [4], which provides both qualitative and quantitative data. Similarly, Chahar and Tripathi [16] found that doctoral students with higher psychological capital demonstrated greater innovation and clearer professional roles, influenced by academic leadership structures. These findings support the view that internal psychological resources can motivate individuals to adhere to professional norms and strive for excellence in developing their academic identity. Based on this analysis, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H_1: Leader support positively influences teachers' academic professionalism.

H_2: Psychological capital positively influences teachers' academic professionalism.

2.2. Academic Professionalism and Well-Being

Academic professionalism reflects university faculty's internalization of academic values, ethical standards, and role-based responsibilities within the academic community. According to self-determination theory, [17] individuals experience well-being when they engage in activities that satisfy their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Similarly, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model [18] explains that motivational resources, such as professional identity, can alleviate work stress and enhance psychological well-being.

Zhao [19] studied the role of faculty professional identity and found that it significantly enhances innovation, professional development, and classroom well-being. When faculty feel aligned with professional norms and academic values, they exhibit higher motivation levels and creative engagement, which are key indicators of well-being. Furthermore, Toubassi et al. [20] emphasize that forming professional identity provides psychological meaning to academic tasks, helping maintain well-being and motivation.

Si [21] reached similar conclusions, demonstrating that losing academic autonomy and professional norms under administrative pressure negatively impacts higher education faculty well-being. In other words, well-being is enhanced when professional identity is preserved.

Furthermore, Yue and Myeong [22] reported a significant positive correlation between perceived professionalism and subjective well-being. Therefore, this study proposes that academic professionalism can positively influence faculty well-being and proposes the following hypotheses.

H_3: Academic professionalism positively influences teachers' well-being.

H_5: Academic professionalism positively mediates the relationship between leadership support and teacher well-being.

H_5: Academic professionalism positively mediates the relationship between psychological capital and teacher well-being.

2.3. The Moderating Role of Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is the ability to confidently and critically navigate, evaluate, and create information using digital technologies [23]. In the post-pandemic higher education environment, digital literacy has become a core competency for university faculty to adapt to rapid digital transformation and serve as a crucial psychological resource. According to the JD-R Model, digital literacy can act as a contextual enhancer, amplifying the motivational effects of internal resources such as academic professional literacy on positive outcomes, including faculty well-being.

Scholars have found that digital literacy moderates the relationship between professional identity and psychological outcomes. For example, Chiu et al. [24] demonstrated that technology-based learning supports facilitate autonomous learning and enhance motivation and well-being through self-determination theory. Furthermore, Anwar et al. [25] found that digital competence moderated the relationship between academic engagement and emotional outcomes among university lecturers, which reinforces the hypothesis that digital skills can enhance the psychological benefits of academic role internalization. Together, these findings support the following hypotheses.

H_6: Digital literacy positively moderates the relationship between academic professionalism and teacher well-being.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the mechanisms influencing university teachers' well-being, focusing on the relationships among leadership support, psychological capital, academic expertise, and digital literacy. The quantitative component involved a cross-sectional questionnaire survey utilizing standardized scales. To validate the proposed model, the relationships between paths and the statistical significance of the latent variables were examined using structural equation modeling. The qualitative component included purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews with representative faculty members from different universities. The main topics of the interview questions addressed the construct of academic expertise, challenges of online teaching, disparities in perceptions of leadership support, and sources of well-being. By addressing the limitations of quantitative research in measuring variables, this mixed-methods design enhances the study's theoretical explanatory power and ecological validity [26].

3.2. Measure

With a total of 29 items, the questionnaire is divided into six sections: demographics, leadership support, psychological capital, academic professionalism, digital literacy, and well-being. A five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree," was used to rate each item, except for demographic data.

A four-item survey, adapted from Eisenberger et al. [27], was used to assess leadership support, with a focus on perceived instrumental and emotional support from institutional leaders. Respondents were asked to reflect on their daily academic work environment. For example, they were prompted with statements such as "Leaders provide adequate support for my teaching and research." A five-item test that was modified from Luthans et al. [28] was used to measure psychological capital.

It evaluates teachers' internal positive psychological resources, such as resilience, optimism, hope, and self-efficacy. "I believe I can find solutions to challenges in teaching or research" is an example item. A modified version of Sachs' [29] five-item scale serves as a measure of academic professionalism. Respondents assess their level of agreement with the ethical standards and professional mission of higher education teachers. One example item is: I

adhere to academic ethics and professional standards in my teaching and research. Five items from Ng [30] were modified to create the digital literacy measure, which assesses teachers' aptitude and readiness to incorporate digital tools into their instruction and research. One example item is: "I can effectively use digital platforms to enhance my teaching and research."

Five items from Diener et al. [31] were modified to develop the well-being measure. This scale reflects teachers' feelings of emotional fulfillment, job satisfaction, and purpose in their work. An example item is: "My work gives me a strong sense of meaning and value."

This study employed a translation technique to ensure the questionnaire's comprehensibility, and the translated version was reviewed by two experts in educational psychology and teacher development to validate its content. A pilot study involving 30 participants (not included in the main survey sample) confirmed the questionnaire's reliability and clarity. Semi-structured interviews served as a supplementary qualitative tool to gain a deeper understanding of university faculty's subjective perceptions and practical experiences concerning key concepts such as leadership support, psychological capital, academic professionalism, well-being, and digital literacy in their daily teaching and research activities.

All interviews were structured around open-ended questions, with researchers asking follow-up questions as appropriate based on the interviewees' responses, ensuring both structural consistency and flexibility while capturing in-depth insights. This interview design facilitated the collection of teachers' authentic experiences, values, and behavioral motivations related to core variables within a complex educational ecosystem, thereby enriching the explanatory power of the questionnaire data.

3.3. Data Collection

This study employed convenience sampling by distributing questionnaires to full-time university faculty across mainland China through the online platform "Wenjuxing." Invitations were disseminated via various channels, including online professional education communities, university faculty discussion groups, and forwarded by the Academic Affairs Office.

Participants completed the questionnaire anonymously and voluntarily. To ensure the quality of responses, the questionnaire incorporated logical verification questions and reversed items, and it excluded outliers such as respondents with short response times or overly consistent answers. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to identify representative full-time university faculty from diverse backgrounds and professional levels. The focus was on their in-depth experiences related to leadership support, digital literacy adaptation, and academic recognition in their career development.

Data collection was completed between June and August 2025. A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed, of which 420 were returned. After eliminating invalid responses due to short response times (less than 60 seconds), inconsistent logic, and duplicate submissions, 382 valid questionnaires remained, resulting in an effective response rate of 84.9%. Additionally, eight faculty members participated in semi-structured interviews, each lasting 30-45 minutes, conducted either online or offline. All interviews were kept anonymous, with informed consent obtained from the interviewees, and adhered to academic ethics and privacy protection standards.

3.4. Data Analysis

This study's data analysis comprised both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative part utilized SmartPLS 4.0 software to perform structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis, which examined the relationships among variables, including mediating and moderating effects. SmartPLS provides advantages in managing complex models, handling non-normal data, and working with smaller sample sizes, making it particularly suitable for exploratory research in social sciences [32]. According to Hair et al. [33], structural equation modeling is divided into two stages.

The initial phase involved testing the measurement model, primarily evaluating the reliability and validity of the scale. This included examining indicator loadings, internal consistency, and convergent validity to ensure the scale's measurement quality was robust. The subsequent phase focused on structural model analysis, utilizing bootstrapping techniques to estimate path coefficients and assess the validity of the research hypotheses. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. After conducting the interviews, researchers transcribed the recorded content and employed thematic analysis to organize and code the texts. This process summarized the core themes that reflected teachers' real experiences and opinions, providing a more in-depth supplementary explanation for the quantitative research findings.

3.5. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the respondents. A total of 382 valid responses were collected and used for data analysis. Among the participants, 52.36% were male (n=200), and 47.64% were female (n=182). In terms of age, the majority were 30 years old or younger (52.88%), followed by those aged 31-45 years (26.18%), and 46 years or older (20.94%).

Regarding academic discipline, 58.64% of respondents were from the humanities and social sciences (n=224), while 41.36% were from science and engineering fields (n=158). Concerning teaching experience, 46.60% had less than or equal to 8 years of experience, 34.55% had between 8 and 15 years, and 18.85% had 16 years or more. Regarding professional titles, 37.96% held junior titles (n=145), 33.25% held intermediate titles (n=127), and 28.80% held senior titles (n=110).

Table 1. Demographic information of the respondents.

Variables	Characteristics	N	%
Gender	Male	200	52.36%
	Female	182	47.64%
Age	≤30	202	52.88%
	31-45	100	26.18%
	≥46	80	20.94%
Study field	Humanities and social sciences	224	58.64%
	Science and engineering	158	41.36%
Teaching experience	≤8 (Year)	178	46.60%
	8-15 (Year)	132	34.55%
	≥16 (Year)	72	18.85%
Job title	Junior professional title	145	37.96%
	Intermediate professional title	127	33.25%
	Senior professional title	110	28.80%
Total		382	100%

4. RESULT

4.1. Measurement Model

To assess the reliability and convergent validity of the constructs, composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha, and average variance extracted (AVE) were evaluated following Hair et al. [33]. As shown in Table 2, all outer loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.766 to 0.891, indicating strong indicator reliability. All constructs demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.845 to 0.889, and composite reliability (CR) values ranging from 0.859 to 0.891, all surpassing the 0.70 benchmark. Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.648 to 0.692, all above the acceptable cutoff of 0.50, supporting convergent validity [34]. These results confirm that the measurement model has adequate reliability and convergent validity for all latent constructs.

Table 2. Internal consistency and convergent validity.

Variables	Items	Outer loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Leadership support (LS)	LS 1	0.891	0.845	0.859	0.683
	LS 2	0.83			
	LS 3	0.793			
	LS 4	0.787			
Psychological capital (PC)	PC 1	0.779	0.864	0.872	0.648
	PC 2	0.870			
	PC 3	0.768			
	PC 4	0.809			
	PC 5	0.795			
Academic professionalism (AP)	AP 1	0.872	0.885	0.892	0.685
	AP 2	0.809			
	AP 3	0.844			
	AP 4	0.844			
	AP 5	0.766			
Digital literacy (DL)	DL 1	0.85	0.889	0.891	0.692
	DL 2	0.811			
	DL 3	0.826			
	DL 4	0.835			
	DL 5	0.837			
Well-being (WB)	WB 1	0.878	0.884	0.887	0.683
	WB 2	0.841			
	WB 3	0.827			
	WB 4	0.796			
	WB 5	0.787			

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio, as recommended by Hair et al. [33]. As shown in Table 3, for each construct, the square root of the AVE (displayed on the diagonal) was greater than its correlations with all other constructs, indicating that the constructs are empirically distinct. Further, the HTMT values for all pairs of constructs were below the conservative threshold of 0.85 [35], ranging from 0.04 to 0.716. This provides additional support for the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fornell–Larcker Criterion						
AP	0.828					
DL	0.344	0.832				
LS	0.545	0.231	0.826			
PC	0.574	0.235	0.485	0.805		
WB	0.636	0.358	0.453	0.511	0.826	0.636
HTMT Criterion						
AP						
DL	0.387					
LS	0.619	0.265				
PC	0.645	0.265	0.56			
WB	0.716	0.402	0.518	0.583		
DL*AP	0.182	0.074	0.253	0.206	0.04	

4.2. Structural Model

The variance inflation factors of all constructs were less than 5, indicating that multicollinearity did not affect this study. As shown in Table 4, all six hypotheses were statistically supported. First, LS was found to have a significant positive effect on AP (β = 0.349, t = 8.443***), supporting H1. Similarly, PC positively predicted AP (β = 0.405, t = 9.813***), supporting H2. In line with H3, AP was significantly associated with higher levels of WB (β = 0.431, t = 8.911***). Regarding the mediation hypotheses, AP significantly mediated the effect of LS on WB (β =

0.150, t = 5.660***), supporting H4. Likewise, the indirect effect of PC on WB through AP was also significant (β = 0.175, t = 5.677***), supporting H5.

Moreover, the moderating effect of DL on the relationship between AP and WB was supported (β = 0.194, t = 4.648***). Thus, H6 was also confirmed. The results revealed that the proposed model has acceptable explanatory power, accounting for 42.3% of the variance in AP and 49.1% in WB. Figure 1 shows the structural model in SmartPLS 4.

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing.

Hypothesis		Beta	STDEV	t-value	p-value	LL	UL	Result
H1	LS->AP	0.349***	0.041	8.443	0.000	0.278	0.451	Supported
H2	PC-> AP	0.405***	0.040	9.813	0.000	0.330	0.468	Supported
H3	AP ->WB	0.431***	0.048	8.911	0.000	0.351	0.509	Supported
H4	LS->AP->WB	0.150***	0.026	5.660	0.000	0.109	0.194	Supported
H5	PC->AP->WB	0.175***	0.025	5.677	0.000	0.135	0.222	Supported
H6	AP* DL -> WB	0.194***	0.040	4.648	0.000	0.125	0.260	Supported

Note: R^2(AP):0.423 R^2(WB):0.491 ***p < 0.001

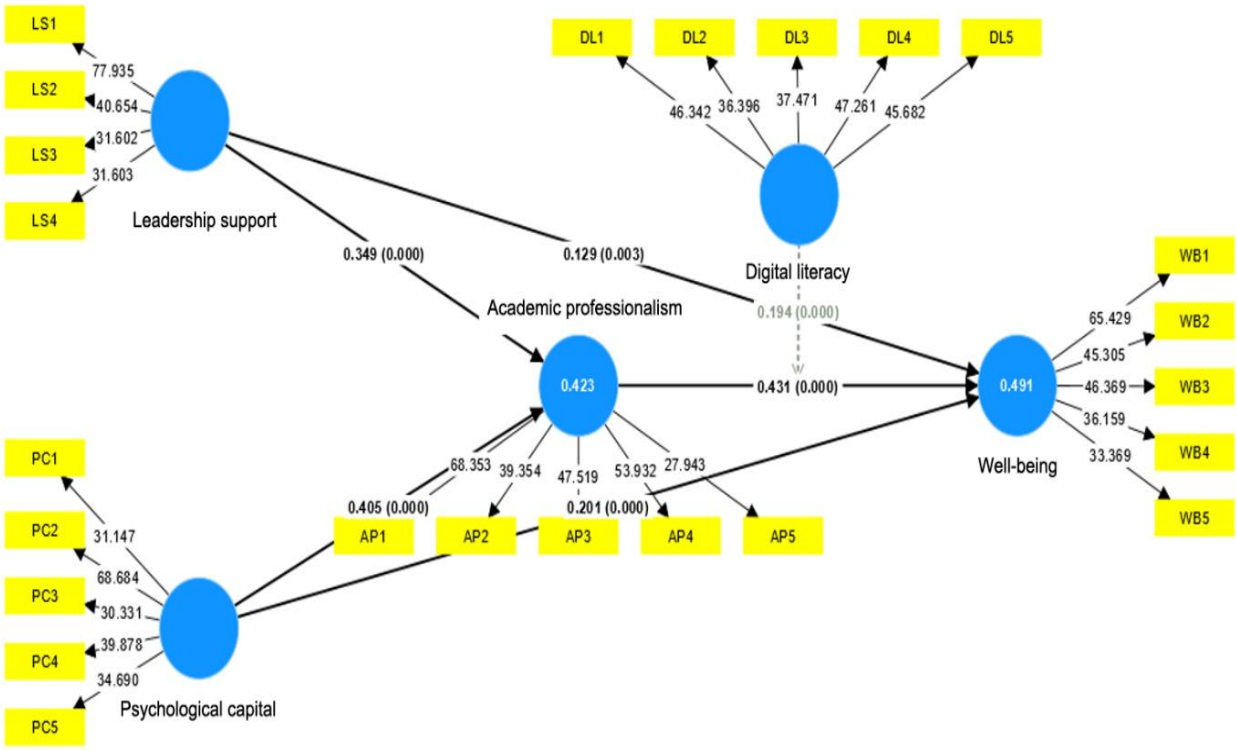

Figure 1. Structural models in SmartPLS 4

Figure 2 illustrates that DL moderates the relationship between AP and WB. When teachers possess high DL, the positive effect of AP on WB is more pronounced. Conversely, for teachers with low DL, the increase in WB is less significant even when AP is high. This suggests that DL enhances the impact of AP on WB. Teachers with high levels of professionalism and strong digital skills report the highest levels of well-being.

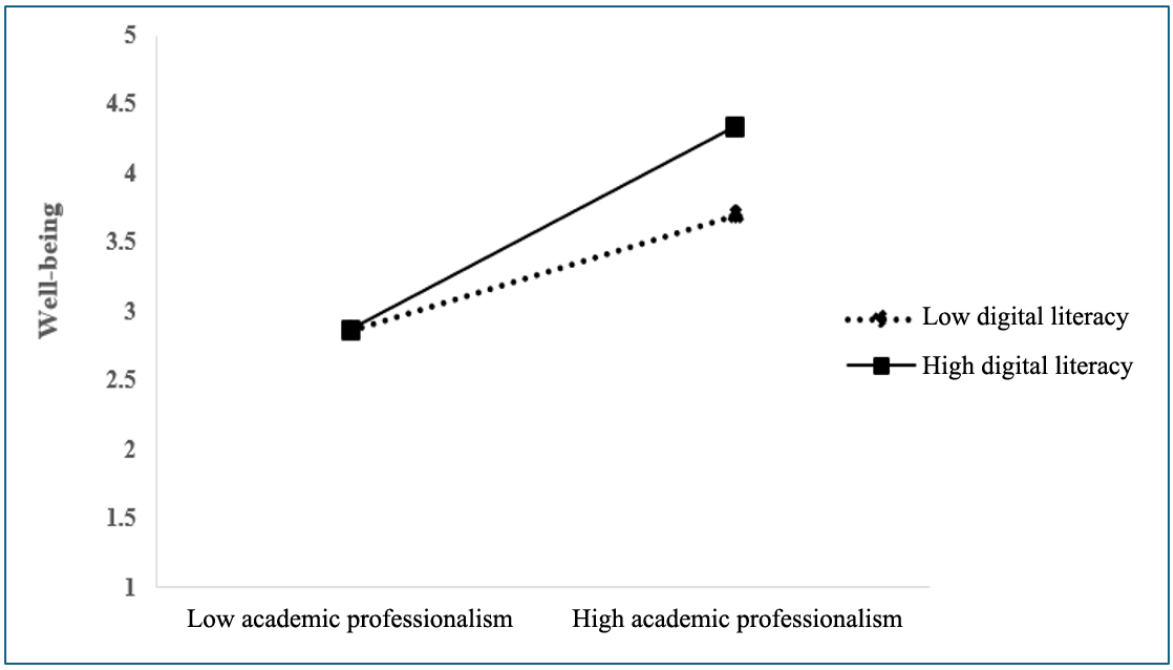

Figure 2. Moderating effect of digital literacy.

4.3. Qualitative Analysis Results

The thematic analysis of the eight semi-structured interviews revealed five key themes surrounding the construction of academic professionalism and related psychosocial factors among university teachers. Each theme consisted of two subthemes, supported by multiple illustrative statements drawn directly from participants. Academic professionalism emerged as an internally driven process. Some participants described a strong self-driven pursuit of excellence, characterized by intrinsic standards and a commitment to quality regardless of extrinsic rewards. Others emphasized peer benchmarking, noting that observing colleagues' achievements stimulated professional reflection and motivation.

Regarding leadership support, two distinct patterns were identified. First, participants noted emotional recognition and trust from department heads, which enhanced their sense of value and autonomy. Second, instrumental support, such as reduced teaching loads, research funding, or administrative facilitation, was considered critical for sustaining academic engagement. Psychological capital was manifested through both confidence and self-efficacy, as well as hope and optimism.

Respondents spoke of resilience in the face of academic setbacks, a sense of agency in problem-solving, and a belief in long-term professional growth. Given that participants expressed emotional fulfillment from appreciation, growth outcomes, and interpersonal connections, well-being was frequently based on acknowledgment and student feedback. Furthermore, a deeper sense of purpose and intrinsic reward in both teaching and research was reflected in the subthemes of autonomy and meaningful work. Finally, teachers' experiences of job satisfaction and change adaptation were influenced by their digital literacy.

Teaching innovation and satisfaction, the first subtheme, focused on how digital tools improved efficiency and engagement. The second, dealing with change and having a growth mindset, encapsulated how embracing technology boosted self-esteem and strengthened one's professional identity. These results demonstrate the complex relationship between academic well-being and professionalism, which is based on individual agency as well as institutional and digital ecosystems. Table 5 presents detailed information.

Table 5. Selected codes, subthemes, and illustrative quotes from participants.

Themes	Subthemes	Selected statements
Academic Professionalism and Motivation	Self-driven pursuit of excellence	"I just want to do things well, it's my own standard, not others'." (T3)
		"Even without rewards, I still aim to deliver the best class I can." (T7)
		"Publishing is not for promotion but for academic integrity." (T4)
		"I feel guilty if I do not revise my syllabus each term." (T2)
	Peer benchmarking and internal comparison	"I saw my colleague's project got funded, it motivated me to apply too." (T5)
		"Everyone in our team works hard, I don't want to fall behind." (T1)
		"There's a sense of silent competition in publishing." (T8)
		"I reflect more when I see others get teaching awards." (T6)
Leadership support perception	Emotional recognition and trust	"My dean often says, 'I trust your judgment,' which means a lot." (T2)
		"A word of encouragement from my head makes me keep going." (T6)
		"Leaders' understanding gives me space to explore." (T5)
		"They care about our mental stress, not just output." (T3)
	Instrumental and policy-level support	"They approved my reduced teaching load when I had a big grant." (T1)
		"We received funding for research software; that is real help." (T4)
		"The dean helped me get ethics clearance faster." (T7)
		"I was allowed to attend an international conference with departmental support." (T8)
Psychological capital	Confidence and self-efficacy	"I'm confident in organizing large classes now, I wasn't like this before." (T1)
		"I know I can find solutions even under pressure." (T4)
		"I believe my students benefit from my methods." (T6)
		"I am usually the one others turn to when problems arise." (T3)
	Hope and optimism	"Even when things go wrong, I still feel things will turn out okay." (T2)
		"I have a long-term goal for my academic career." (T8)
		"There's always another chance to revise and submit." (T5)
		"I think education is where real change happens, that keeps me going." (T7)
Teacher well-being sources	Recognition and student feedback	"When students thank me after class, I feel truly fulfilled." (T2)
		"A student once said my course changed their way of thinking, it touched me." (T6)
		"The biggest joy is seeing them grow over time." (T1)
		"Appreciation emails mean more than bonuses." (T5)
	Autonomy and meaningful work	"I enjoy the freedom to design my own curriculum." (T3)
		"Research gives me a sense of purpose." (T4)

		"Being able to balance teaching and research is my ideal life." (T8)
		"It's not just a job; it's a vocation." (T7)
Digital literacy & adaptation	Teaching innovation and satisfaction	"Using interactive software made my classes more fun and students loved it." (T3)
		"Digital tools help me teach more efficiently." (T5)
		"I finally enjoy online teaching now that I'm more skilled." (T7)
		"With data analytics, I understand student progress better." (T1)
	Coping with change and growth mindset	"Learning to use new platforms made me feel younger." (T2)
		"At first I was resistant, now I enjoy exploring new tech." (T8)
		"Being forced to adapt actually boosted my confidence." (T6)
		"I don't fear tech anymore; it empowers me." (T4)

5. DISCUSSION

First, the result confirming H1 indicates that leadership support positively predicts academic professionalism. This finding aligns with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, where leadership functions as a key job resource that enhances professional motivation [9, 10]. As shown in previous studies, emotionally supportive leadership fosters teachers' well-being and encourages engagement in meaningful academic work [11]. This relationship was reinforced by our qualitative findings, where participants emphasized how both emotional encouragement ("I trust your judgment") and instrumental support (e.g., conference funding) from leaders enhanced their commitment to academic rigor. Regarding H2, the positive effect of psychological capital on academic professionalism was also supported. Consistent with COR theory, teachers with higher hope, resilience, and self-efficacy are more equipped to invest in resource-building behaviors such as sustained academic engagement [15, 16]. The interview data echoed this finding: participants frequently referenced their ability to "solve problems creatively" or "stay optimistic despite setbacks" as key drivers of their professional persistence. Academic professionalism was found to be a significant predictor of teacher well-being, supporting H3. It also supports earlier research indicating that academic work with a purpose can serve as a powerful source of intrinsic fulfillment, especially when combined with experiences of autonomy and mastery [19, 20, 22]. The qualitative insights shed more light on this connection: teachers stated that "doing things well" and "watching students grow" were two of the most rewarding parts of their jobs, indicating that professionalism serves as a source of purpose. Additionally, H4 and H5 supported the mediating function of academic professionalism. These findings support the JD-R model's claim that organizational and personal resources promote motivational processes, which in turn improve well-being [36-38]. The interviews emphasized the role of academic professionalism as a resource mediator, highlighting that psychological capital or support alone is insufficient unless it is directed toward professional action. Finally, the findings support H6, which states that digital literacy has a moderating effect on the relationship between academic professionalism and well-being. When their academic professionalism was high, teachers who were more digitally literate expressed much higher levels of well-being. The idea that digital competency serves as a buffer and enabler is consistent with more recent extensions of the JD-R model in digital education contexts [25, 39]. This interpretation was enhanced by qualitative data, as participants stated that digital tools increased their sense of growth and satisfaction and allowed for more creative teaching.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Theoretical Implications

In three significant ways, this study contributes to the existing body of scholarship. First, it enhances university instructors' theoretical understanding of academic professionalism by recognizing it as both a mechanism and an

outcome. It is viewed as a mediating construct influenced by psychological capital and leadership, and as a driver of well-being. This research integrates the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model and Conservation of Resources (COR) frameworks to explain how job resources, such as leadership support, and personal resources, like psychological capital, foster professionalism. In turn, this professionalism sustains teacher well-being. Previous studies primarily focused on professional identity or commitment. Second, the study provides empirical support for the bridging function of academic professionalism by confirming its mediating role between leadership and psychological capital with well-being. This demonstrates how resource conversion (from support to practice) explains well-being outcomes and builds on the motivational pathway proposed in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model. Third, the study addresses the need for the JD-R Model to be contextually adjusted for the digital era. Contextual competencies influence the effectiveness of professional engagement, as evidenced by the identification of digital literacy as a significant moderator in the professionalism-well-being pathway. This aligns with recent research suggesting that digital skills are a contemporary job resource, especially in post-pandemic educational settings.

6.2. Practical Implications

This study presents significant implications for university administrators, faculty developers, and policymakers seeking to enhance academic professionalism and well-being among higher education educators.

First, institutional leaders should prioritize establishing formalized structures for leadership support. These might include mentoring programs in each department, open-door policies for academic assistance, awards for excellent teaching, and clear decision-making processes. Such programs can help faculty members feel a sense of belonging, foster trust among colleagues, and enhance motivation, thereby strengthening their sense of professional purpose.

Second, psychological capital should be deliberately cultivated as an essential element of faculty development. Positive psychology training, strengths-based coaching, and reflective practice groups are examples of programs that can help teachers feel more confident, hopeful, and resilient. These programs can help teachers avoid burnout and become more engaged in their work. Institutions should integrate these psychological competencies into induction programs and continuous professional development frameworks.

Third, universities should incorporate academic professionalism as a permanent component of performance appraisal systems and career advancement pathways. To achieve this, teachers can be evaluated based on criteria such as adherence to rules, discipline in managing students, commitment to student learning, and honesty in their work. Aligning institutional rewards with these values will promote sustained professionalism among staff members over the long term.

Fourth, improving digital literacy should be regarded as a long-term investment rather than a one-time project. Universities should provide continuous, needs-based digital competency training, complemented by peer-led communities of practice to facilitate knowledge sharing. Enhancing digital fluency can not only improve teaching quality but also foster a sense of professional independence and satisfaction among teachers as digital demands increase.

Finally, structural and psychological supports must be used to promote an institutional culture that focuses on well-being. Some of these include flexible workload policies, accessible counseling services, opportunities for teaching relief during busy research periods, and mechanisms for faculty to have their voices heard. These systemic efforts demonstrate that taking care of teachers' health is not solely their responsibility but is also a priority for the organization.

These implications collectively underscore the importance of a multi-level, integrative strategy to foster an environment where academic professionalism and faculty well-being mutually reinforce each other.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation. Future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental approaches to better understand how academic professionalism and well-being evolve over time. Second, all quantitative data were collected through self-reported questionnaires, which may introduce bias. Future studies could incorporate multi-source data, such as peer assessments, to enhance validity. Third, the study focused exclusively on Chinese university teachers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could compare teachers across different disciplines, regions, or countries to test the model in diverse contexts.

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