

From Life to Its Online School: An Analysis of Alain de Botton's 'The School of Life' as Strategy and Tactic

Yaşamın Çevrimiçi Okulu: Alain de Botton'un 'The School of Life' Oluşumunun Strateji ve Taktik Olarak Analizi

Gökçen KARANFİL* 
A. Özgür GÜRSOY** 

Abstract

Through a critical engagement with the literature on the conceptualizations of culture, this article focuses on the possibilities for empowerment and social agency that may be found in manifestations of everyday popular culture and the critiques of this approach that voice their oppressive nature. The article draws on Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics, as qualified by Michel Foucault's use of the same conceptual pair, in order to develop a conceptual grid that emphasizes their imbrication or mutual conditioning. The key advantage offered by this grid is that it makes visible the inherently ambivalent nature of cultural products and the way in which constraining strategies and liberating tactical reversals are both made possible on the same shared site. It thus argues that popular cultural works may subvert the manipulative imperatives of the culture industry only from within a strategically structured social field. It thereby becomes possible to acknowledge the insights of the culture industry perspective of critical theory, while providing a more nuanced interpretation and evaluation of certain works of popular culture. The conceptual analysis is then applied to *The School of Life* (an online educational organization initiated by the popular author, philosopher, and entrepreneur Alain de Botton) both to offer an examination of this cultural artifact and to test the assumptions the theoretical framework developed.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Strategy, Tactic, The School of Life

* Assoc. Prof. Dr, Izmir University of Economics, Department of New Media and Communication, İzmir, Turkey.
E-Mail: gokcen.karanfil@ieu.edu.tr

** Assist. Prof. Dr., Izmir University of Economics, Department of New Media and Communication, İzmir, Turkey.
E-Mail: ozgur.gursoy@ieu.edu.tr

Öz

Bu çalışma genel olarak popüler kültürün iktidar, direniş ve öznellik gibi olgulara olanak tanıyan bir alan yaratma potansiyelini ve bu potansiyelin varlığına dair eleştirel yaklaşımları tartışmaya açmaktadır. Çalışmada, Michel de Certeau ve Michel Foucault'nun "strateji" ve "taktik" kavramlarını birbirlerine yakın ama farklı şekilde tanımlamalarından faydalanılarak, popüler kültüre dair iki temel yaklaşımın örtüşme noktaları tespit edilmeye çalışılmıştır. Makale, bu iki kavramın popüler kültür çalışmalarında analitik bir araç olarak kullanımının, yani strateji ve taktiklerin birbirini karşılıklı koşullayışının, şu durumu görünür kıldığı ileri sürmektedir: Kültürel ürünlerin esasen çift-değerli oluşları ve sınırlayıcı stratejiler ile özgürleştirici tersine dönüşlerin aynı zemini paylaştıklarını. Öyleyse popüler kültürel ürünlerin kültür endüstrisinin baskısına karşı kullanımını ancak stratejilerin yapılandığı bir mekânın içinden mümkün olacaktır. Çalışmanın ampirik boyutunu bir popüler kültür figürü olan Alain de Botton'un kurduğu *The School of Life* isimli kişisel gelişim oluşumunun analizi oluşturmaktadır. Makale söz konusu organizasyonun özellikle YouTube kanalını ve çevrimiçi satış mecrasını, belirtilen kuramsal çerçevede içinde inceleyerek, *The School of Life*'in (ve benzer kişisel gelişim organizasyonlarının) bir analizini sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Popüler Kültür, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Strateji, Taktik, *The School of Life*

Introduction: On Popular Culture and Resistance

Since its inception as an area of academic interest in the early 20th century culture has held its place as a prominent field of research among a wide range of disciplines in social sciences. There have been a multitude of variants among the approaches that have attempted to explain notions of culture and society within this context (Strinati, 2004). 'Culture of the masses' in particular has been a phenomenon that has received much attention and has been subject to competing theorizations. 'Mass culture', 'consumer culture', 'popular culture', 'culture industry', and 'everyday culture' have all been labels, with their nuances, used to explain the intricate dynamics of the cultural practices and cultural products within modern and industrialized Western societies (Featherstone, 2007). Among these diverse approaches, what may be referred to as critical cultural analysis, with its inferences from Marxist thought, have perhaps offered the most fruitful inquiries, directing its focus on power relations within societies (Berger, 2004). There have been two overarching, lasting and influential paradigms in cultural analysis, through the clash of which some of the most productive discussions in the field have occurred. The presence of this dichotomy has been evident even within critical cultural analysis, despite the consolidating effect of the Marxist influence in critical theory (Held, 1990).

On the one hand, it is possible to allude to a pejorative, degrading approach to mass culture, that which emphasizes the manipulative aspect of it and points at the ways in which the culture of the masses is low rather than high, top-down rather than grassroots, manufactured rather than genuine, and oppressive rather than empowering. The members of society are depicted as passive, apathetic, indifferent, powerless and prone to manipulation with no potential for resistance. In this line of theorization, culture is seen as a component of capitalistic consumerism. Put concisely, the argument is that the processes of cultural production and consumption have been colonized by profit seeking imperatives and that culture has been turned into a commodity, a depoliticizing

process through which the reproduction of capitalism is secured and the pulverization of resistance and change is ensured. Along with figures such as Dwight Macdonald (1957) and Henri Lefebvre (1991), the most renowned voices of this paradigm are the Frankfurt School thinkers, specifically Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1972) with their “culture industry” thesis.

These earlier theorizations focus exclusively on structures of domination and constraint, neglecting (or at best downplaying) any possibility of agency and/or resistance within and against these hegemonic structures. It was mainly the seminal works of Michel Foucault (1977; 1978; 1980) on knowledge and power and later James Scott (1985; 1989; 1990) on ‘everyday forms of resistance’ that paved the way towards focusing on issues of agency and autonomy within everyday culture, hence making ‘resistance’ a fundamental issue in debates on popular culture. Similarly, “Bourdieu’s *Outline of a theory of practice* (1977) presented a means of explaining the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call ‘the system,’ on the other” (Mitchell, 2007, p. 91). This new optic has shifted the focus from the question of ‘how culture manipulates people’ to that of how ‘people manipulate culture.’ According to Jon P. Mitchell (2007), “together, the Foucault and Scott positions opened up the possibility – indeed the necessity – of seeing the operation of power in everyday practice, thereby ‘democratising’ resistance, rather than reserving it for explicit political or resistance movements” (p. 90).

Popular culture could then be approached as a total of cultural practices and products in which meaning is fluid and not predetermined. This perspective was in many ways an integral expansion of a scrutiny into the everydayness of politics and power. In this sense, culture was now seen as consumed (and even produced) by individuals in ways that would enable them to express their creativities. The previous emphasis on processes of production shifted to the processes of consumption. Consequently, micro relations embedded in cultural practices started becoming seen as the arena in which politics and relations of power played themselves out. Within this context, the superficiality of everyday culture was challenged and pop culture was now seen as meaningful, as embodying a potential for resistance. As Angela McRobbie has put it,

to opt for the superficial can be a deliberate political strategy. Only by ...paying closer attention to the social practices of consuming culture, can we get a better understanding of how the tinsel and the glitter can produce meaning, in a different but no less significant kind of way than the great deep works of modernism (1994, p. 4).

Michel de Certeau’s ‘Strategies’ and ‘Tactics’ as Analytical Tools

Among others, one highly influential thinker who articulated this shift from ‘production’ to ‘consumption’ and who eloquently brought to forefront the place of resistance in popular culture was Michel de Certeau (1984). As Mitchell (2007) puts it, “Michel de Certeau, whose work, particularly as summarized and exemplified in *The practice of everyday life* (1984), concerns precisely the relationship between ‘the system’ and human action – or between strategy and tactics” (pp. 90-91). According to de Certeau,

To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds *another* production, called “consumption.” The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order (1984, pp. xii-xiii).

What de Certeau offers with his theorizations on everyday life and popular culture is a redeeming/reconciling line of thought built on an understanding that the above mentioned two approaches to cultural analysis do not negate each other. Through an analysis of Alain de Botton’s *The School of Life* (TSoL) project, this article attempts to show how Michel de Certeau’s concepts of “strategies” and “tactics” offer themselves as effective analytical tools to help cultural analysts better understand the dialectic between hegemonic structures and subjective agencies; shedding light on the ways in which popular culture may manifest itself as a subversive intrusion into the oppressive and manipulative nature of the culture industry. However, this study also argues that contrasting de Certeau’s use of this conceptual pair with Foucault’s articulation of the same terms indicates and remedies a potential problem with the former, namely, de Certeau’s somewhat too sanguine evaluation of tactics. Appeal to Foucault’s discussion of strategies and tactics serves as a reminder of their mutual dependence and co-extensive nature. Through this analytic framework, this article offers an interpretation of the project of TSoL as inherently double-edged and ambivalent with respect to its emancipatory potential. Finally, such an analysis of TSoL as a case study suggests directions for empirical research that may be pursued for a better evaluation of similar digital learning projects.

Similar to class struggle in the Marxist analysis of society, de Certeau’s conception of social life entails two competing groups. He defines these groups as the producers and the consumers (he prefers the word “users”) of culture. He goes on to suggest that the ways in which these groups interact with culture can respectively be defined through the concepts “strategies” and “tactics”. According to de Certeau, strategies are accessible only to those who are in control of the established power structures, thus cultural producers. Strategies are the tools of the powerful in their acts of constructing and regulating social reality and relations of power. As de Certeau states, “a strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as a proper (*propre*) and thus serve as a basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, “clienteles,” “targets,” or “objects of research)” (1984, p. xix).

On the other hand, he defines tactics as the purview of the weak. He claims that tactics offer those who are devoid of power opportunities to adapt to the societal structure created by those in power through their use of strategies. Although de Certeau associates tactics with those who are objects of power, in his analysis the common public or the ‘ordinary’ members of society are not completely powerless or passive. It is at this point that de Certeau (1984) emphasizes the importance of popular culture and consumption by arguing that via the deployment of “tactics”, ordinary people reproduce and reinvent meanings through their processes of consumption. As he claims, this consumption does not refer to mere passive *consumption*, but rather to a form of reproduction. He suggests that everyday popular culture and practices manifest themselves

as forms of everyday resistance. Furthermore, he emphasizes how this resistance becomes deconstructive of the dominant structures in a society and subverts established power relations when he says, “the tactics of consumption” are “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong” (1984, p. xvii). De Certeau reminds us that the meanings behind ideas, ideologies, knowledge (and of course cultural forms, practices and products) offered by *producers* are subverted by *consumers* through their altered forms of consumption. Referring to these altered forms of (use) consumption as tactics, he argues that they become new forms of production within which potentials for creativity and resistance lie. In de Certeau's words (1984), a tactic “must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse” (p. 37).

The two concepts de Certeau offers, and his emphasis on the idea that culture needs to be understood as the ways in which people interact with the social structure and cultural products, rather than just the products and the system itself, becomes extremely valuable in an attempt to understand enterprises such as TSoL. De Certeau's approach to everyday life serves as an expedient analytical tool in unravelling how ‘grass roots’ or ‘user generated initiatives may become important nodes of resistance, and how they “poach” on the hegemonic infrastructures of the cultural industries – particularly when they are complemented by the use of digital technologies and the internet. It is possible to deploy de Certeau's concepts as an analytical framework to discuss the potentials of popular cultural manifestations such as TSoL that claim to foster ‘self-help’, ‘self-emancipation’ and ‘self – awareness’. In other words, it is possible to interpret such initiatives as TSoL as “tactics” that work towards thwarting the hegemonic “strategies” that are acutely prevalent in modern societies. From such a perspective, a digital learning environment such as TSoL becomes a site where mass culture is individualized, but in such a way that it enables creative and subversive re-use of the product-culture, when for example, a viewer is incited to adopt a critical attitude towards a particular aspect of one's own life or even towards the very medium through which this incitement occurs (viz., in this case, YouTube).

However, even though de Certeau's concrete description of particular “arts of doing” (de Certeau 1984, p. 90) evince the complex interaction of strategies and tactics, there is a tendency, in his analytic pairing of these two concepts, toward a simple opposition. It is almost as if, on this side we have strategies linked to institutions and structures of power—hierarchical, global, unified, repressive; and on the other side we have tactics linked to creative reappropriation of the social field structured by strategies—individual, subversive, local, transient and expressive. This tendency at times occludes de Certeau's otherwise invaluable recasting of our understanding of the conditions that determine us and the ways in which we make them our own in everyday situations. For example, his well-known discussion of the walker at the street level in a city (de Certeau 1984, pp. 91-111), contrasts the tactical movements of the walker, who takes short-cuts and whose view is local, with the city strategically generated by municipal governments, corporations, etc., whose panoptic view is inscribed in the fully organized grids of maps. Such a description risks too sharp (and therefore false) a contrast between strategy and tactic when

one recalls the experience of walking today that depends ever more frequently on google maps uploaded on our mobile devices. It is at this point that attention to the articulation of the same conceptual pair in Foucault—a figure who is not unrelated to de Certeau's own project (see, for example, *age*. Part II, section IV—serves as a useful reminder and corrective.

The strategy-tactic conceptual pair permeates Foucault's work from the 1970s onward and is linked with his concept of power (Foucault, 1978, pp. 92-102). Since his analysis of power relations is explicit in seeing power not as a substance or institution, the language of strategies and tactics aims to both reflect and displace the abstract/concrete and general/particular oppositions. To understand power in terms of practices is to understand them in terms of a multiplicity of force relations, as one set of actions modifies another set of actions. Moreover, to understand power relations as arising from ground-up and local is to understand the object of analysis of power as consisting of singular force relations. What this amounts to, in terms of an analytic of power, is that the object of analysis is the way certain actions are made possible and coordinated with certain other actions to form an apparatus. As a first approximation, tactics correspond to local force relations, whereas strategies correspond to the coordination of these local relations. In other words, far from being opposed to one another as the terms of a dichotomy—for example, good/bad, free/determined—strategies and tactics are mutually supporting and coextensive. There are tactics only to the extent that they are coordinated and thereby relatively integrated by a global strategy; and there are strategies only to the extent that they find local points of support. So, for example, disciplinary power, which is one strategy of modern power relations in Foucault's genealogies of modern society, could not be effective if it did not find local support in the tactical relations between, say, a particular teacher and a student, or a particular doctor and a patient. The flip side of this same situation is that, the tactical relation between particular student and teacher, or doctor and patient, could not occur, unless it were coordinated with other tactics (say, between husband and wife, or employer and employee). The upshot of this mutual conditioning is that tactics and strategies do not precede one another in time or logically; rather, strategies provide particular force relations (tactics) with their relative stability and tactics provide global coordinated force relations with their concrete points of support.

The re-conception of power as consisting of singular force relations implies that, even though tactics are used by individuals at a local level, the process of coordination of tactics that *is* strategy is impersonal. No individual person creates or is responsible for the strategy that envelops his or her particular "uses" (to use de Certeau's term of choice). Moreover, the strategy that coordinates these uses may be opposed to the intentions of the (particular) users who *are* capable of invention at the tactical level. In other words, Foucault attempts to avoid the dichotomy between autonomous and creative agents and a determinist global system by making strategies and tactics immanent to one another, *while at the same time* allowing for the possibility of redistribution of relations within the social field structured by strategies. This is because the tactical dimension of power relations is inherently contingent and unstable. Therefore, the tactical dimension is the site where certain kinds of subject are made (disciplined, normalized, etc.) *and* such determining strategies may be contested and resisted through counter-practices. In other words, tactical reversal in

power relations is always possible in ways that are neither a priori nor predictable. Opposition to dominating effects of strategies happens, when it happens at all, not from a place outside these strategies but from the immanence of their field of support. So, one might say, as de Certeau does, that “tactic is an art of the weak” (de Certeau 1984, p. 37); but one must remember, as Foucault does, that “where there is power, there is resistance... [but] this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power” (Foucault 1978, p. 95). For the analysis of a cultural artifact like TSoL, this implies that any potential tactical reversals that may be located therein must be understood in relation to strategies that envelop it. In more concrete terms, the implication is that a critical examination of such an artifact must attempt to describe both the general strategies that make it possible and the inconsistency, instability and ambivalence that pertain to its use and re-use—both at the level of its producers and that of its user-viewers.

Rethinking *The School of Life*

In order to ground its theoretical discussion, this article analyses *The School of Life* initiative as both a cultural phenomenon and as an institution. This requires both studying the content of videos and products available on the YouTube channel and the online shop of the initiative, but also studying its institutional structure including its mission and vision statements, its history, and its political and economic philosophy.

However, before delving into the analysis of *The School of Life*, a brief note on the epistemological approach and the methodology of the study will prove beneficial. From an epistemological perspective, the present study positions itself within a qualitative research paradigm. Singletary claims, “qualitative research relies more on observation, intuition, and personal insight” (1994, p.13). According to Strauss and Corbin, “qualitative research is any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures, or other means of quantification” (1990, p. 22). The choice of an appropriate research method should be dictated by the nature of the problem under investigation. In an attempt at making sense of phenomena such as cultural forms and practices, one needs primarily to formulate a theoretical framework and carry out a conceptual analysis. In this respect, this particular study draws on grounded theory as its primary methodology. The aim here is to move beyond a descriptive analysis and develop a theoretical understanding of the research issue at hand. The study evaluates *The School of Life* initiative as a case study in terms of de Certeau’s strategy/tactic distinction and the Foucauldian qualifications discussed above. Such an interpretation and evaluation are especially important as they offer the opportunity to critically elaborate on the different ways of making sense of popular cultural forms, particularly in the age of digitalization.

To introduce some form of structure to the application of the conceptual discussion to its case, this paper employs purposeful sampling where selection of the sample is carried out in a non-arbitrary fashion. In this light, three representative videos from TSoL’s YouTube channel and four merchandise sold on the online shop of TSoL are selected as sample analysis material. The videos are then broken into relevant themes and analyzed as discursive practices, which enables

a critical appraisal of both the form and the content of what is expressed. On the other hand, the products on offer on the online shop of the initiative provide material for an analysis of the non-discursive elements of the practices at issue. The guiding criterion for the selection of the samples is that they manifest, in different ways, the mutual conditioning of strategies and tactics developed above, and they thereby show the ambivalent, unstable and inconsistent nature one would expect on the basis of such an understanding of strategies and tactics.

The School of Life is an initiative that has been founded in 2008 by the philosopher, writer and public intellectual Alain de Botton, who is also arguably a pop culture figure/spectacle. According to the information on the organization's website,

The School of Life is devoted to developing emotional intelligence. We address such issues as how to find fulfilling work, how to master the art of relationships, how to understand one's past, how to achieve calm, and how better to understand the world (The School of Life, n.d.a).

The organization is based in London and has physical branches in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Berlin, Istanbul, Melbourne, Paris, São Paulo, Sydney, Seoul, Taipei and Tel Aviv. TSoL also has a YouTube channel that uploads three videos a week and has approximately

6.1 million followers. TSoL offers several programs and services including special events, conferences, classes, workshops and online psychotherapy – all of which are come at varying costs. It has a physical shop in London that sells and ships its products worldwide. These products range from game-kits to stationary products, from books to homewares and gifts.

In the opening page of TSoL's website, under the "who we are" section, the viewer is met with the following introductory text:

Headquartered in London, we operate around the globe. We produce videos, articles and books, and make and sell a range of products to assist you in the quest for a more fulfilled life. We share new content several times a week and run classes and special events in major cities around the world. We also offer brand consultancy services and learning and development workshops for businesses. The School of Life is a place to step back and think intelligently about central emotional concerns. You will never be cornered by dogma, but we will direct you towards ideas that will exercise, stimulate and expand your mind. Through our digital channels and branches, you will meet other curious, sociable, and open-minded people in an atmosphere of exploration and enjoyment (The School of Life, n.d.a).

In a 2016 interview given to Huffington Post, Alain de Botton explains his motives in establishing TSoL as follows,

I started it from a sense that schools forget to teach you so much of the stuff we need to get by in this world. ...I wanted to make the school a one-stop shop for information about the area of life I call emotional intelligence. ...We're trying to bring order and coherence to a confusing part of everyone's life (Matousek, 2016).

At first sight, TSoL might be seen as a product of the culture industry embodying all its commercial, capitalistic forms. The initiative is a profit seeking/making enterprise, it makes use of numerous conventional capitalistic marketing strategies and techniques, it can be seen as a corporate entity as opposed to being a user-generated project, and it can be argued that it is a populist attempt at offering quick fixes through the trivialization of social and structural problems. However, to think of TSoL solely as a popular culture product embedded in the culture industry would be an incomplete approach. Its culture industrial aspects notwithstanding, the conceptual discussion developed above suggests that the initiative is far from univocal and may be imbued with the potential for counter-practices and empowerment. In order to make visible the ambivalence at work in such a cultural product, one must pay attention to both aspects in turn and comprehend their mutual conditioning.

The YouTube channel of TSoL is perhaps one of its most visible components. It is the school's showcase where it reaches the maximum number of people through visualized elaborations on the issues around which it aims to revolve. The YouTube channel has approximately 6.1 million followers and around 900 uploaded videos that are continuously growing in number as the school continues to upload three videos per week. The videos are categorized under various playlists with titles ranging from 'popular culture' to 'political thought' and from 'relationships' to 'philosophy'. The videos are approximately five to six minutes and are professionally prepared via reproduction editing techniques. They are standardized in format, but they appear to be distinct in their own sense – quite similar to Horkheimer and Adorno's (1972) claim concerning the music industry through his concept of "pseudo-individualism". In most of the videos, philosophy and various forms of 'high art' are used to offer a better understanding of ordinary, everyday issues. Analogous to any product of culture industry, thoughts and emotions are turned into fast food through short, simplified and visualized texts, where it becomes impossible to achieve any in-depth understanding. Below are some screen shots from the YouTube channel of TSoL.

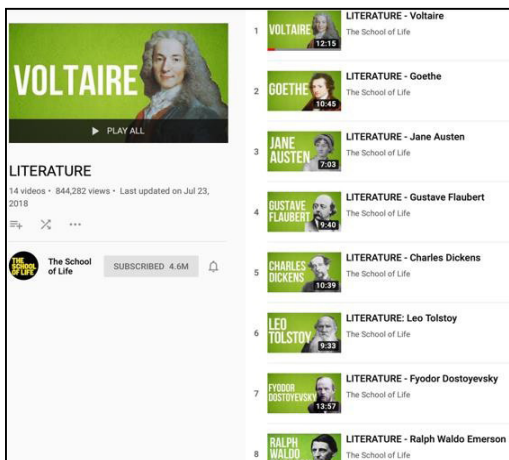


Figure 1

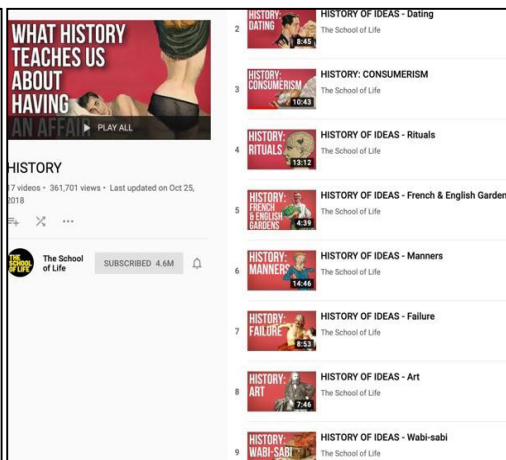


Figure 2

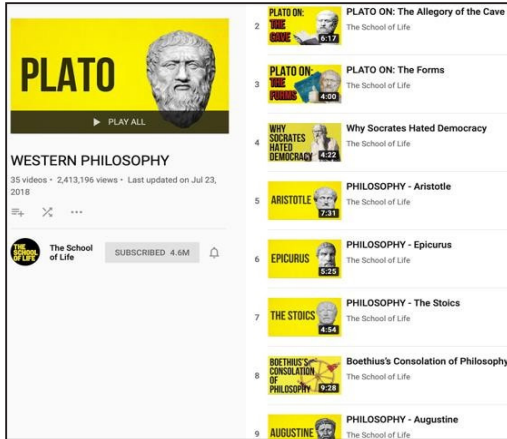


Figure 3

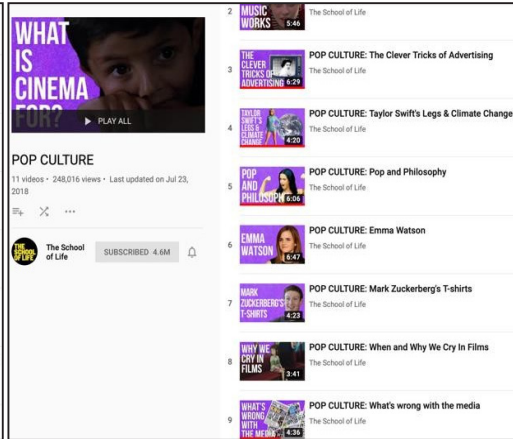


Figure 4

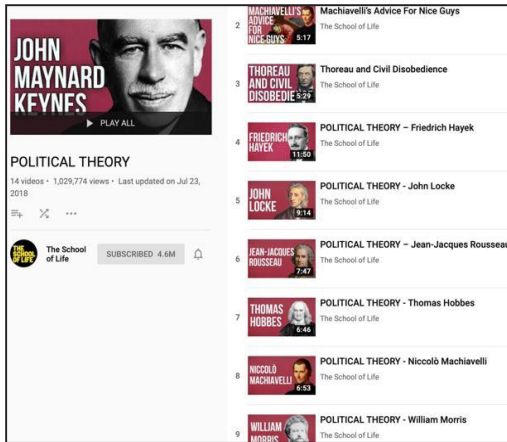


Figure 5

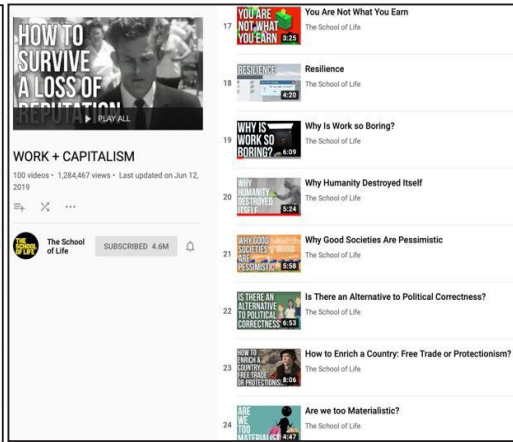


Figure 6

The videos produced and shared by TSoL all aim at intellectual, emotional self-help. Furthermore, most videos make explicit references to the disparaging impact of consumer oriented modern, capitalist life style. They revolve around a general theme that is in the following lines: *for self-fulfillment, for a happier and more achieved life we need to be aware of and free ourselves from the pressures of modern societies, and we can make use of psychotherapy, political theory, philosophy and arts in general to aid us in this endeavor*. While, on the one hand, the videos offered on the school's YouTube channel are immersed in the mainstream triviality of mass culture; on the other hand, they are all geared towards emancipation, resistance and change. This seemingly contradictory juncture is exactly where the possibility of resistance lies according to de Certeau. In his theorization, forms of popular culture and everyday practices can challenge predominating societal structures to the extent that they are submersed in them and can make use of them. In his own words,

More generally, a way of using imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference. That is where the opacity of a 'popular' culture could be said to manifest itself – a dark rock that resists all assimilation (de Certeau, 1984, p. 18).

The YouTube channel of TSoL uses the language, sphere, and the devices of the culture industry to subvert it from within; it is a way of “using the imposed system”. How then is it that these videos are both an integral part of the imposed system of mechanisms and ideas, and at the same time cultural texts that challenge these predominating values? First and foremost, YouTube is chosen as a platform to share the videos of the school – a profit driven commercial platform. The videos involve general advertising and more specific marketing techniques, such as micro targeting (“*Looks like you are in Turkey, would you like to visit School of Life in İstanbul?*” etc.). All that the videos seem to offer are at best forms of online learning that lack actual experience – which usually makes them artificial and may even create alienation. The videos offer themselves as quick fixes to issues that deserve/require much more in-depth engagement.

To some extent, these videos function only as distractions from the problems that they propose to help fix. Therein lies the insights offered by culture industry-oriented analyses. Or, to express the same point in the terminology we discuss above, TSoL videos—both as form and content—operate within global strategies that aim at privatization of education, and profit – and efficiency-maximization. They become effective utilities in allowing the viewer to fall into the illusion that by watching the videos s/he is actually doing something about her or his problems, thereby becoming substitutes for tangible remedial action. This is precisely how the culture industry works. In elaborating on Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of the culture industry, Douglas Kellner (n.d.) states that “the culture industries had the specific function of providing ideological legitimation of the existing capitalist societies and of integrating individuals into its way of life”. On the other hand, however, almost all videos are informative, educational, and oriented toward self-emancipation. The content of most of the videos contain a challenge to the urbanized, capitalistic, standardizing, homogenizing traits of the culture industry. They have a participatory aspect to them (one can contribute with subtitles etc.) and in this sense they may be considered semi-grassroots cultural formations. By making use of the prevailing spaces, discourses and structures, this form of “making use” bears the possibility to challenge these same spaces, discourses and societal values. Hence it becomes possible to think of TSoL's YouTube channel also as a “tactic” in the sense that de Certeau (1984) uses the concept. If we recall the Foucauldian proviso discussed above, this duality should not be surprising, as tactical reversals share the same site as the strategies that structure the social field.

While a detailed content or discourse analysis of these videos are beyond the scope of this study, a brief analysis of three representative videos will help better articulate this point. The first video that is quite illustrative in this sense is titled *How the Modern World Makes Us Mentally Ill*.



Figure 7

This is a six-minute-long video which has received approximately one million views. The video is about the destructive aspects of modern life and its possible remedies. In the very beginning of the video we hear a male voice narrating as follows, “the modern world is powerfully and tragically geared to causing a high background level of anxiety and widespread low-level depression. There are six particular features of modernity that have this psychologically disturbing effect” (The School of Life, 2018). One of these six features is then introduced as the media. The narrator goes on to state that “the media has immense prestige and a huge place in our lives – but it routinely directs our attention to things that scare, worry, panic and enrage us, while denying us agency or any chance of effective personal action” (The School of Life, 2018). While a lot may be said about this video, it suffices here to state that TSoL is deploying the internet and YouTube – two of the most widely consumed media platforms – to engage in a critique and draw attention to the negative qualities and effects of the media itself. In other words, it is making use of “strategies” (the spaces, mechanisms of the powerful) for the sake of challenging their hegemony.

Another representative video on similar lines is titled *The Dangers of the Internet*. This is a seven minutes video discussing the potential ‘dangers’ of the Internet as a relatively recent technology.



Figure 8

The video at issue here is a critique of the internet – the platform which it uses itself to reach its viewers. Among others, the two main criticisms the narrator raises throughout the video with regards to the internet is that it creates addiction and hinders the critical faculties of human beings by immersing them in a flood of information. Of course, these are the exact schemes of the videos shared on TSoL’s YouTube channel. Three videos a week both become addictive and create an information flood that is difficult to process. So again, the videos are disguised as “strategies”, but with their content that draw attention to the malice of the online realm they work as “tactics”. Later in the video, the narrator reminds us that the internet in many ways gets in the way of self-realization. He suggests:

Because the internet is often a source of reliable information, we exaggerate its accuracy, its importance and its wisdom. The 12th most popular question typed into Google is: 'what shall I do with my life?' It doesn't know, but at the same time, it constantly gets in the way of the conversations you might have with the one person who does: namely, you (The School of Life, 2014).

Ironically, one of the most prominent themes throughout the whole variety of TSoL's videos (not to mention its conferences, events, and the online shop) is self-realization. The videos consist mainly of self-help content offering tips for a more fulfilled life. As TSoL grants in its own video, this is an issue that an individual needs to resolve on her/his own

– albeit with various forms of resourceful help. While self-help videos do get in the way of conversations one needs to have with one's self, they also may offer valuable insight and clues. This again brings up inconsistent positioning of TSoL's videos as strategy and tactic.

One final video from TSoL's YouTube channel that deserves to be touched on here is titled *Pop and Philosophy*. This video is important because in its attempt to juxtapose popular culture and philosophy it actually gives clues as to how TSoL may work as a "tactic".



Figure 9

The video claims that since the 1960s, while philosophy with its seriousness stalled, pop culture with its delinquent nature conquered the world. The narrator states, pop "is now the foremost medium for the articulation of ideas on a mass scale" (The School of Life, 2014). The narrator goes on to argue that there are a host of lessons philosophy can learn from pop and states that, "philosophy must study pop. Part of its salvation lies in understanding pop's techniques, so as to be able to become, in crucial ways, a little more like it" (The School of Life, 2014). The video then suggests that the success of pop lies partly in its repetitive, simplistic, trivial and ordinary nature, and that in order to succeed in reaching a wider audience philosophy must also make use of these traits. Put simply, the video advocates the use of the space, discourse, language and the mechanisms of pop by philosophy. This in many ways is in parallel with what TSoL attempts to do. Namely, making use of the provisions and the arsenal of "strategies" to emerge as subversive "tactics".

Alongside its YouTube channel, the school's online shop constitutes the second most prominent component of the organization. Therefore, any attempt at a critical analysis of TSoL must take its profit-oriented nature into account. An online shop that sells and delivers worldwide stands out as a defining component of the business. The sales pitch of TSoL itself is woven around the discourse of delivering products that aim at helping individuals increase the quality of their emotional lives. Below are a few screenshots of a selection from the products that are offered for

purchase on the online shop of the initiative. These images are quite telling in that they offer not only a snippet of the products being sold, but also serve as a testament to the commercial nature of TSoL. They depict the conventional website structure used by the school that is commonly encountered in most online shopping venues.

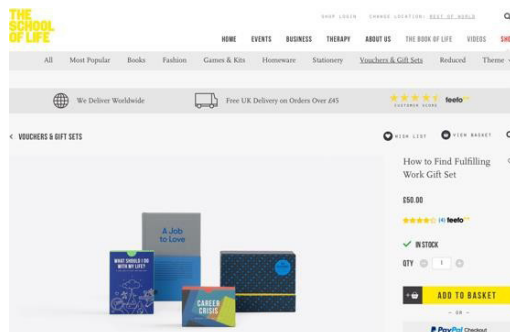


Figure 10

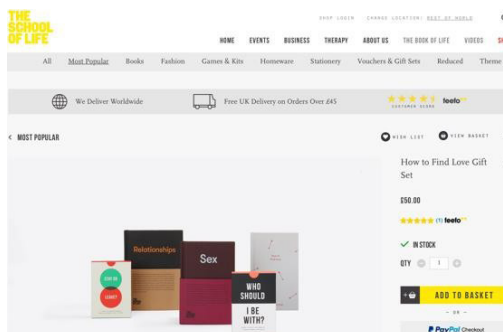


Figure 11

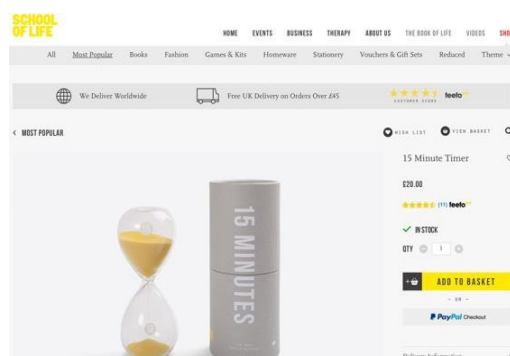


Figure 12

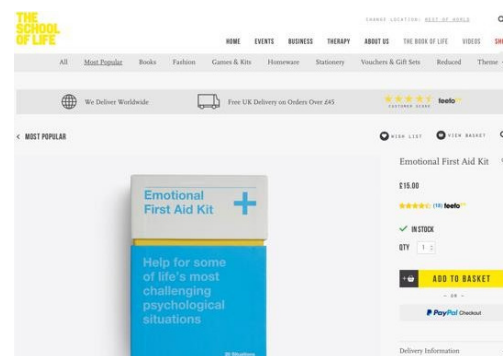


Figure 13

The above figures are images of four of more than 50 products being sold on TSoL's website and they are quite representative of the complete product range with respect to their nature. Most of the products sold are self-help materials that promise to enrich the individuals' (in this case the buyers') emotional intelligence and maturity. Book sets, gift – sets, card-sets, stationary products such as pencils and journals, along with homeware products such as vases and flower pots, all engraved with inspirational self-help quotes constitute TSoL's product range in general. The fact that an important component of the school is constituted by a profit seeking shop that sells products to customers is a blatant manifestation of the commercialized, company-like nature of the initiative. Furthermore, the populist 'sales pitch' adopted on the website complements the consumerist cultural aura that is strongly experienced on the website. Some of the sales discourses include expressions and themes such as "free delivery on purchases above a certain price", "weekend sales", "sales on particular products that are bought in bundles", "sales on special

days” (Christmas, Valentine’s day etc.), “vouchers & gift sets”. In fact, these sales pitches are not only visible on the front pages of the online shop but are infiltrated into the descriptions of the products as well. For instance, particular products are promoted as potential “gifts” for a loved one. The descriptions of some products lead the buyer (through hyperlinks) to other products sold in the shop.

There is a definite profit-oriented agenda one encounters when visiting the online shop of TSoL. Hence it is clear that TSoL partakes of a broader “strategy” that serves to reproduce and consolidate the consumerist, profit seeking imperatives of a capitalist society. It is at this particular junction, however, that a “tactical reading” becomes possible. By emphasizing both the content it generates and the ways in which it makes this content available, one can focus on how this whole process may actually work towards challenging the hegemonic cultural values of contemporary society. If it is necessary that a tactic mobilize the relations enveloped by given strategies, then a case can be made that this may be exactly what TSoL is doing. Its immersion in marketing strategies and consumeristic aura is perhaps a disguise. To realize a potential for resistance here, one needs to carefully study not only the content of the products but also the ways in which these products are ‘marketed’ (or in a less loaded language) ‘made available’. Furthermore, one needs to do this with an openness towards a reading of how such an initiative can perhaps be a form of resistance, and thereby offer genuine channels for self-realization.

Almost all of the products that the school sells are geared towards enlightening individuals with regards to what TSoL’s discourse labels as *emotional intelligence*. According to an informational video on TSoL’s YouTube channel, “Emotional Intelligence is the quality that enables us to confront with patience, insight and imagination the many problems that we face in our affective relationships with ourselves and with others” (The School of Life, 2017). It is also repeated in a number of videos shared by the school’s YouTube channel along with information on the school’s website that capitalist modern societies (while not being presented as the sole culprit) with their consumerist, competitive, dehumanizing, industrialized nature hinder the development of emotional intelligence. In this sense, the general content of the products being sold on the online shop of TSoL aim at helping individuals free themselves from the shackles of modern society and to emancipate them with respect to their emotional intelligence.

A set of books on “being calm” or establishing “fulfilling relationships”, a gift set of card games about “connecting with oneself”, an hourglass that reminds one to seek solitude from the “time-pressed and information-rich world” are all products that revolve around an idea of a remedy (and to a certain extent a challenge) to the negative impact of a modern, capitalist, consumption-oriented lifestyle. In his definition of critical theory, Max Horkheimer (1982) claims that critical theory aims “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (p. 244). TSoL offers itself as a subtle but nonetheless critical intervention into the hegemonic and oppressive dictates of the culture industry. What deserves specific interest here is its subtleness. What is of particular interest in the context of this article is not only the fact that it intervenes and resists, but more so the ways in which it engages in this intervention and resistance through the means of the culture industry itself. As de Certeau states, tactics are “more than just resistances

to power, tactics use the strategies of the other as vehicles for resistance” (de Certeau 1984, p. xix). In a similar sense, TSoL presents itself as a commercial enterprise, a company, a profit-seeking business, making use of all the mechanics and facilities of what it ultimately criticizes. Therefore, the argument concerning duality or ambivalence developed above with respect to the TSoL’s videos may also be made with respect to its online shop. On the one hand, it is immersed in capitalistic marketing strategies; but when one focuses on the ways in which the content of its products manipulates and makes use of the apparatuses of the culture industry to challenge it from within, it becomes possible to see in them the potential for tactical reversals.

To consolidate this argument, below is a description of a product (a 15-minute hourglass timer) advertised on the online shop of the school;

This hourglass sand timer reminds us to carve out 15 minutes a day for what truly counts. It demarcates a very modest and manageable period to dedicate to the important things we so often let slide – finally writing that letter to an old friend, rationally analyzing our career ambitions, or playing in a concentrated way with a child. It’s an antidote to wasted days and a counter to the urge to procrastinate, prompting us to do a minimum of what really counts (The School of Life, n.d.b).

The rationalization behind the need for this product is, in a subtle way, built around the idea that contemporary time-pressed modern lifestyle enslaves the individual in such a way that one cannot find the time to dwell on “what truly counts”. This hourglass timer is offered as a quick fix against the pressures of modern life. In a similar tone, in the description of another product (a career crises prompt card set), we are reminded of the difficulties of finding and maintaining a job that would satisfy us. The advertised cards are presented as offering potential solutions to the anxieties related to our work life.

Finding a job we can love and that makes use of our talents is the single greatest challenge we face. Unsurprisingly, many of us regularly hit career crises: moments of intense anxiety about finding our true vocation in the time we have left. These Career Crisis Prompt Cards contain ideas and questions designed to unblock career crises and free up our thinking around work – setting us on a path to a job that will tap into the best parts of us (The School of Life, n.d.c).

Thus, it is not only the content of the products being marketed that challenge the predominating societal values, but also how these products are marketed through the language and the means of the culture industry that imbue them with the potential to challenge mainstream, hegemonic cultural patterns. It is easy enough to find in a cultural initiative such as TSoL nothing more than an analogue of the person who advertises in a journal that they will teach you the secret to becoming rich in a short time, provided that you send them a certain amount of money. The marketing strategies and sales pitches deployed by TSoL, the way it uses the internet to sell its products through an online shop, how all its goods (including psychotherapy sessions and conferences) are priced in such a way that profit is secured certainly entail relations that point in that direction. However, the strategy/tactic conceptual pair enables a more subtle interpretation

of these relations and suggests that such mimicking of the system may contain possibilities for counter-practices and may serve to “protect” its “customers” from that very system. It is precisely this characteristic of TSoL that renders it possible to think of it as a form of “tactic”. As de Certeau puts it “the place of a tactic belongs to the other” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix).

A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix)

Likewise, TSoL initiative does not manifest itself as an outright critique of the dominant cultural patterns, nor does it challenge the mainstream societal structure via its own arsenal. Rather, it makes use of what is already out there, what is at its disposal, what seems to be the inherent mechanisms of the system it subverts—not unlike its claim concerning the lessons philosophy might do well to learn from pop culture.

Conclusion

The present article juxtaposed two approaches on a specific form of popular culture through the case of *The School of Life* initiative. Drawing primarily on the analytic distinction between strategies and tactics, as articulated in the works of de Certeau and Foucault, it developed the argument that cultural artifacts such as these must be seen as embedded in the profit-driven capitalistic cultural structure, while at the same time containing a certain possibility for resistance to the logic of consumerism and self-realization for its users. Although these two perspectives present themselves as binary oppositions, this study has argued that in effect, neither of them necessarily negates the other. Rather, almost in any instance of cultural production and consumption, an amalgamation of these two positions prevails. Therefore, the aim in this article has not been to privilege one of these approaches over the other. Instead, the study has emphasized that to rethink this debate through the contemporary forms of digitalized culture of our times may offer valuable insights towards a better understanding of our everyday cultural practices and the place of popular culture therein. One of its central theses has been that attention to the imbrication or mutual conditioning of strategies and tactics provides a more nuanced conceptual grid that reveals levels of complexity in digital popular culture that are invisible in interpretations based on binary oppositions.

It is indubitable that TSoL is a profit-making corporate entity which, through the use of popular figures and celebrities, claims to offer quick fixes to individuals' problems and that these quick remedies themselves are in effect embedded within the logic of pre-existing profit-driven hegemonic structures of production and consumption. It is also likely that TSoL is not offering ways to effect political change that addresses the underlying conditions of the problems it acknowledges. These are the insights offered by the culture industry perspective, according to which TSoL would be little more than a symptom of the illness it claims to diagnose. And yet, TSoL, unlike for example “products” available online on, say, You Tube or Instagram, does bear a concern for offering ways

to change ourselves, or at least to find ways for us to adopt to or survive in the current societal structure. This is clearly a double-edged sword. Its discussion of such problems of modern life as gender discrimination, alienation, depression, consumerism and inequality are market-based and immersed in the capitalistic structure, which it claims to be one of the main culprits causing these problems in the first place. But perhaps this should not be surprising. As an effective means of expression reaching a relatively wide audience, it cannot help but be made possible in a field structured by contemporary strategies of power: the neoliberal tendency toward a complete privatization of education, the technological drive toward digitalization of all cultural expression and the logic of profit maximization. In other words, it is not surprising that TSoL, *to have become what it is*, has been shaped by such strategies. And yet, unlike some other cultural artifacts one finds on similar platforms, TSoL acknowledges these strategies as such and thereby the tactical level of its uses contains possibilities for critical reflection on one's self and tactical reversal in relation to the global strategies that condition our lives.

Simply put, it depends on how it is used. It is possible for it to become just another website that offers bite-sized pseudo-wisdom, at a discount no less. But it is also possible that it offers us a meaningful way to spend our online time, think new thoughts and develop useful coping mechanisms against the overwhelming stress of modern everyday life—should one be mindful enough not to forget that it is, after all, a *product* that one encounters. If people can be enlightened (even at a minimal extent) about their depressions through a book they read, or if they can come to grips with the destructive effects of their consumption behaviors through a short video they watch – should this not be counted as a valuable emancipatory intervention or a form of resistance? Perhaps this is much like the case of 'Beyoncé feminism' in that it is a product itself, but makes the issues it tackles much more relatable in everyday contexts. Adopting the conceptual grid developed above also makes intelligible what de Certeau claims for certain kinds of breakthroughs that occur when users “conform to [hegemonic structures] only in order to evade them” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiv). We see here the consolidation of the two positions – one of hegemonic production and the other of counterhegemonic consumption/use. It is the ways in which TSoL makes use of the predominating cultural strata that makes it possible for this initiative to reach such a wide array of audience. And it will in turn be up to the user/member of this audience to put it into critical use. It is because the organization so effectively mobilizes and deploys the means and the language of the culture industry such as mainstream marketing strategies, popular sales pitches, trivialization of social issues, commodification of knowledge and the commercialistic provisions of online platforms that it has a chance to make its voice heard and perhaps have an impact on its audiences/consumers. And, even though there are reasons for not being too sanguine about it—given the Foucauldian reminder discussed above—there is the possibility that the user of this particular use of digital education will make of it something transformative, however small, for his or her life. It is the contention of the present study that, an interpretation of TSoL through the mutual conditioning of strategies and tactics makes visible the inherent ambivalence and duality such an initiative maintains. One thereby eschews placing

it on the side of either oppression or emancipation, but grasps the importance of its uses, its risks, and its possibilities.

Given its scope and aims, the present study develops its argument predominantly through conceptual analysis and the interpretation of a select group of samples. However, it also points toward further empirical studies that may be undertaken to reach a more adequate appraisal of cultural products such as TSoL in particular, and online educational tools in general. The discussion above referred to TSoL as both a “producer” and a “user” depending on the particular context of argument; it also shifted from TSoL initiative as “user” to its audience as “users”, also depending on the context of argument. Thus, this study suggests, as a further line of enquiry, a more detailed empirical research that would gather data on the audience members in question and the uses to which they put their experience of TSoL.

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