

# **The Blue Eagle Ecosystem: An Ethnographic and Sociological Analysis of Student Culture at Ateneo de Manila University**

## **1. Introduction: The Atenean Paradox**

The Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU), situated on a sprawling, verdant campus along Katipunan Avenue, occupies a distinct and often paradoxical position within the Philippine tertiary education landscape. As one of the "Big 4" universities, it is frequently juxtaposed against the militant intellectualism of the University of the Philippines (UP), the corporate-driven pragmatism of De La Salle University (DLSU), and the traditional, volume-heavy rigors of the University of Santo Tomas (UST). This report provides a comprehensive sociological analysis of the "Atenean" experience, dissecting the interplay between its Jesuit Catholic formation, its elite socio-economic demographic, and its aspirations toward social relevance.

The data indicates that ADMU functions not merely as an educational institution but as a "total institution" of social reproduction and cultural formation. The "Ateneo Way"—often encapsulated in the Jesuit value of *Cura Personalis* (care for the entire person)—creates a supportive, resource-rich environment that stands in stark contrast to the resource-scarcity narratives of state universities. However, this environment is simultaneously criticized as a "bubble," an insulated ecosystem where the harsh realities of the Philippines are studied theoretically but experienced selectively.

This report is structured to provide both raw evidentiary data—direct testimonials and discourse from the community—and deep sociological pattern analysis across seven key dimensions of campus life.

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## **2. Academic Culture: The Liberal Arts "Gauntlet"**

The academic identity of Ateneo is forged through its Core Curriculum, a mandatory set of interdisciplinary subjects that all students, regardless of major, must complete. This creates a shared intellectual lineage but also a common source of academic trauma and triumph.

### **2.1 Primary Source Data (Student Testimonials)**

"Ateneo is heavily a liberal arts university, everyone from STEM to Theatre is

required to take philosophy, theology, and history courses (these are infamously hard due to being oral tests too).... There's a saying that: 'It's harder to get into UP... It's harder to stay in Ateneo.' Ateneo enforces a minimum QPI, basically you need to maintain a certain grade to stay in your course/Ateneo."<sup>1</sup>

"Oral exams and group projects/presentations are a big part of learning here. Traditional exams are less common, but it depends on your course and professor.... Ateneo will humble you to the core, not only with the environment but with academics too. Pressure is inevitable, of course you're studying in the top univ of the ph."<sup>2</sup>

"Ateneo professors like it when students take initiative and aren't big on spoon-feeding (reverse classroom approach is common here).... You won't find world-class, discipline-defining research or groundbreaking academic work, but you will get competent professors who know their stuff and are good at teaching."<sup>2</sup>

"Depending on the course, some students can be too competitive sa acads and internships; schedule is not as heavy as UST but not as laid back as DLSU."<sup>1</sup>

"Terror profs, however, set the bar of expectations higher than usual. No other choice there but to really focus and prioritize doing your best in the class.... Calasanz, the terror prof I had, was one of those that set the bar high. It was difficult, but he taught the class well. He'd have you slog through a long reading material, and the single quiz he'd give for that is to explain a particular sentence from the text."<sup>3</sup>

"When I was in my final sem, a stupid prof by the name of Michael Mariano who was teaching us of all subjects the philosophy of ethics, decided to poke my head using his finger for the entire class.... He screamed so loudly that my other classmates in the hall looked into the oral exam room."<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2 Pattern Analysis: The Formation of the "Articulate Generalist"

The data suggests that ADMU's academic culture is defined by "**Guided Rigor.**" Unlike the "sink or swim" survivalism attributed to UP, where students often navigate a lack of resources and administrative support, Ateneo provides robust structures (mentorship, consultations, organized enrollment) but demands a high level of **reflexive articulation.**

### The Oral Exam as a Cultural Rite of Passage:

The prevalence of oral examinations, particularly in Philosophy and Theology, serves a specific sociological function. It forces students to internalize concepts rather than rely on rote memorization. This pedagogy cultivates the "Atenean accent" not just in terms of phonetics, but in rhetoric—graduates are trained to be articulate, argumentative, and capable

of synthesizing complex humanities concepts on their feet. The "terror prof" narratives surrounding these oral exams reveal a culture of high-stakes intellectual performance, where public humiliation or "being grilled" is seen as a necessary crucible for character formation.

The QPI Anxiety and Retention:

The Quality Point Index (QPI) acts as a constant Sword of Damocles. The sentiment that "it is harder to stay in Ateneo" points to a system of active culling. This creates a distinct form of academic anxiety; unlike institutions where passing is sufficient, Ateneo students are pressured to maintain specific numeric standards to retain scholarships or honors program status. This structural pressure explains the competitive nature observed in "honors" courses like Management Engineering (ME) or Applied Mathematics.<sup>5</sup>

Sub-Cultural Divergence (The "Two Ateneos"):

A distinct dichotomy exists between the School of Science and Engineering (SOSE) and the John Gokongwei School of Management (JGSOM).

- **SOSE students** characterize themselves as "starving geniuses" or "crying STEM majors"<sup>1</sup>, bonding over the shared trauma of problem sets and the high mortality rates of departmental exams (e.g., Math 21). Their culture is meritocratic and survival-oriented.
- **JGSOM students** operate in a "corporate simulation." Their academic rigor is tied to group work, presentations, and networking. The culture here is often critiqued as "out of touch" or "elitist," with a focus on efficiency and "hustle" that mirrors the corporate world they are destined to inherit.<sup>1</sup>

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### 3. Social Environment: The "Conyo" Hegemony and Socio-Economic Stratification

The social fabric of Ateneo is perhaps its most scrutinized aspect. The campus is a microcosm of the Philippine elite, yet it struggles with the internal contradictions of inequality and exclusion within its own walls.

#### 3.1 Primary Source Data (Student Testimonials)

"There's some validity in Ateneo's reputation as being elitista and sheltered, being a katipunan school many are already not connected to the general zeitgeist in the country."<sup>1</sup>

"In Ateneo, however, being rich—or at least looking rich—is the norm. Flaunting luxury brands like Goyard or LV isn't seen as extraordinary. It's just another casual topic, as if discussing a bag from the SM department store lol."<sup>9</sup>

"I feel bad for a lot of scholars and students whose families work tooth and nail just to get them in ADMU because outside, they get lumped in with the rest of the other very elitist and privileged kids.... college students dont know how to

commute because they're are being fetched by their drivers."<sup>10</sup>

"While Ateneo has a reputation of being the school for rich kids, most people don't know that around 17-18% of the student population are scholars. During my time, I interacted with kids coming from all income classes."<sup>11</sup>

"They will look down on you if you don't show that you are worth it romantically and socio-economically, they won't try to go past platonic. I would separate the social and economics but that's my hot take."<sup>12</sup>

"I've met a lot of SOM students who have the money to spend on frivolous luxuries like apple products and trips abroad, and I've met a lot of starving geniuses in SOSE."<sup>7</sup>

### 3.2 Pattern Analysis: The Bubble and the Barrier

Linguistic Capital as a Gatekeeper:

The "Conyo" accent—a code-switching blend of English and Tagalog, often with a distinct, affluent intonation—serves as the primary shibboleth of the Ateneo social hierarchy. While often mocked externally, internally it functions as a neutralizer of regional origins. Students from the provinces or lower-income backgrounds often adapt this linguistic code ("social chameleon" behavior) to assimilate.<sup>9</sup> The dominance of English creates an environment where students who are less fluent may feel intellectually inadequate or socially isolated, reinforcing the "elitist" stereotype.

The Invisible Class Divide:

While overt discrimination is socially unacceptable in a university that preaches "social justice," the data reveals a spatial and logistical segregation based on class.

- **Dining Segregation:** Wealthier students congregate in areas like **JSEC (John Gokongwei Student Enterprise Center)** or off-campus restaurants (Regis Center), where meals cost ₱150-₱300+. Scholars and budget-conscious students frequent the **ISO Canteen, LST (Loyola School of Theology)**, or **Ebai's**, where meals are under ₱100. Food choices become a proxy for social circle formation.<sup>14</sup>
- **Transport Segregation:** The divide is physically manifest in the parking lots filled with student driven cars versus the lines for the campus e-jeep or the long walks to the tricycle terminals. The "car culture" is so pervasive that traffic management is a primary administrative concern, and students without cars often feel the "logistics" barrier in socializing or dating.<sup>12</sup>

The "Rich Kid" Spectrum:

The data distinguishes between the "Old Rich" (described as low-key, wearing t-shirts, eating at simple places) and the "Nouveau Riche/Social Climbers" (brand-conscious, loud, exclusionary). The "Old Rich" are often romanticized as humble, while the anxiety of social climbing is attributed to the middle class trying to keep up with the perceived Ateneo

lifestyle.<sup>9</sup> This nuance suggests that the "elitist" label is often driven by the visible minority of status-conscious students, particularly in the School of Management (SOM).

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## 4. The Organization (Org) Scene: The Corporate Simulation

If academics are the mind of the Ateneo, the "Org" (student organization) is its soul. Participation is not merely a hobby but a cultural mandate, functioning as a rigorous training ground for the Philippine corporate elite.

### 4.1 Primary Source Data (Student Testimonials)

"Orgs: Healthy and very vibrant, like most schools there are BS Org personalities, but otherwise there are orgs that cater to everyone and everything. Cliqueish tendencies, this is something that is being combatted since it's frowned upon, but don't be shocked to find a group of executive officers who only host parties for themselves."<sup>1</sup>

"I really think that the disconnect between sanggu and the student body doesn't necessarily lie in its leadership but rather because of the org culture we have in ADMU. Idk about other schools, but in SOSE a lot of our needs are taken care of na by our home orgs."<sup>18</sup>

"Org culture is very involved.... However, imo there are still a lot of people who are not politically correct to a toxic degree. I hate the use of the N word and it's very rampantly used by mostly 'homegrowns'."<sup>19</sup>

"But there was one time I screwed up and while the executive committee said it wasn't really a big deal, news about it spread across the org and several people and even newcomers started becoming wary of me. I didn't like the backstabbing, gossiping and passive aggressiveness in that org."<sup>20</sup>

"In terms of extracurricular naman, mas solid yung org life natin kaysa sa iba. Sa ibang schools parang magbayad ka lang ng mem fee, member ka na. Unlike sa atin medyo grueling yung app process."<sup>1</sup>

### 4.2 Pattern Analysis: Professionalization and Toxicity

The "BS Org" Phenomenon:

The term "BS Org" (implying a student majors in their organization rather than their actual degree) highlights the intensity of this sector. Ateneo organizations operate with a level of professionalism that mimics multinational corporations. They have rigorous recruitment

processes (interviews, assessments), distinct corporate hierarchies, and substantial budgets.<sup>1</sup> This "Corporate Simulation" prepares students for the workforce but also instills a culture of toxic productivity and burnout early in their lives.

#### The Decentralization of Power:

The strength of the Org culture has a parasitic relationship with the Student Government (Sanggunian). Because Orgs are so efficient at providing services, community, and representation (e.g., Home Orgs for specific courses), the central student government is rendered structurally redundant in the eyes of many students.<sup>18</sup> Students look to their Org for identity and support, leading to a fragmented student body ("siloed" communities) rather than a unified "Atenean" voice.

#### Social Capital and Exclusion:

Orgs are the primary marketplaces for social capital. "Clique-ishness" and "gatekeeping" are recurring complaints.<sup>1</sup> The "homegrown" students (those who came from Ateneo High School) often form the nucleus of these cliques, creating an exclusionary barrier for transferees or non-Manila students. The toxicity often manifests not as open aggression but as passive-aggressive exclusion—gossip, "seen-zoning," and selective invites to "after-school" drinking sessions.<sup>20</sup>

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## 5. Political Climate and Activism: The "Radical Moderate"

The political identity of the Ateneo student body is complex, caught between its elite demographics and its Jesuit mandate for social justice.

### 5.1 Primary Source Data (Student Testimonials)

"Politics: Vast majority are left leaning, with a very, very small minority who are active in protests (outside of campus), little to no hardliners or militant protesters. The most you'll see in protests are snake rallies or marches in campus. Someone commented that Ateneo is far right?? Simply no... You'll have an easier time finding cheap food than someone who is openly right in Ateneo."<sup>1</sup>

"Ateneo will impart a 'Save the Philippines/the world' mentality and the need to spread its values wherever you go.... During my college years, I thought it's the most progressive thinking and socially aware place I've been but I'm sorry to say I've been hurt by the emotional dishonesty and hypocrisy I found in some people and in the system itself."<sup>24</sup>

"Ateneo is definitely hypocritical and self-serving. We're called to serve the country, but in ways that still maintain the status quo.... Not only that but also had my bad experiences with Ateneans na 'pa woke'. Like seeing government officials and senators from Ateneo who present themselves as 'progressive' but they are

against legalizing divorce because of religious beliefs."<sup>25</sup>

"Sanggu is losing its credibility in comparison to its peers in La Salle or UP. Instead of being a benchmark, it's being left behind.... none of them seem to offer anything concrete beyond 'consultations' or 'providing democratic spaces'."<sup>26</sup>

## 5.2 Pattern Analysis: The Limits of Elite Activism

Performative vs. Structural Activism:

The data points to a prevailing culture of "Radical Moderation." While the student body is socially liberal (pro-LGBTQ+, anti-dictatorship), their activism is often critiqued as "pa-woke" (performative). It remains confined to safe spaces—Twitter threads, campus rallies, and intellectual discourse—rather than the "frontline" activism associated with UP. This is a structural inevitability: many students belong to the very families or economic classes that benefit from the status quo, creating a cognitive dissonance where they advocate for change theoretically but resist it structurally (e.g., opposition to divorce due to conservative Catholic upbringing).<sup>25</sup>

The Crisis of Representation (Sanggunian):

The Student Government is facing a crisis of legitimacy, evidenced by high abstention rates in elections and a failure to field candidates for the presidency.<sup>22</sup> The analysis suggests this is due to "Bureaucratic Paralysis." The Sanggunian has become so obsessed with "consultations" and "democratic processes" (mimicking the national government's worst traits) that it fails to deliver tangible results (like wellness breaks), leading to student apathy. The student body views the Sanggunian as a training ground for "traditional politicians" (trapos) rather than genuine servant leaders.

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## 6. Identity, Values, and Religion: The Jesuit Mold

Ateneo is explicitly Catholic and Jesuit, but this identity interacts with a modern, secular student body in unique ways.

### 6.1 Primary Source Data (Student Testimonials)

"The Jesuits were very refreshing because they were faithful but also socially progressive compared to usual Catholics. Ray Aguas's Th 151 class was really icing on the cake, because he really taught us to examine our faith more critically. Turns out there's nothing wrong if you think for yourself."<sup>28</sup>

"Theo classes made me realize that Catholicism is shit.... In my experience with Philo/Theo classes, the goal was to tear down everything you know about religion and spirituality, so you can build it back up with a much stronger foundation."<sup>28</sup>

"But if you got traumatized from the 'most progressive' Catholic group, then

you're the bad guy.... It's their dishonesty, half truths and manipulation that almost destroyed my sexuality and my life. It's thanks to the Jesuits I once thought the Catholic Church is feminist..."<sup>29</sup>

"ADMU is a Catholic school and as such you have Theology classes, prayers before class... Of course they still uphold the Church doctrine on homosexuality and Catholicism being the one true faith however you'll meet people of every possible religion."<sup>30</sup>

"Not only are we friendly to queer folks, there's an Ateneo office specifically dedicated against SOGIE based harassment and supporting LGBTQ+ / sex-based rights.... We also have our own pride month and pride march as well."<sup>31</sup>

## 6.2 Pattern Analysis: Secularization through Theology

The "Freethinker" Pipeline:

Paradoxically, the intense theological education in Ateneo often leads to secularization or agnosticism. By teaching students to critically deconstruct their faith (a Jesuit pedagogical tool intended to strengthen belief), many students end up deconstructing it entirely. The "Theology/Philosophy Core" is less about indoctrination and more about existential literacy. Students learn to speak the language of ethics and morality, which they then apply to secular issues (politics, gender rights) often in opposition to Church dogma.<sup>28</sup>

The "Progressive" Catholic Trap:

The Jesuits cultivate an image of being the "cool" priests—intellectual, scientific, and open-minded. This creates a "safe" environment for LGBTQ+ students, who feel accepted on campus (Gender Hubs, Pride March). However, this acceptance has hard limits. Students report "religious trauma" when they realize the institution still fundamentally adheres to conservative doctrines on issues like reproductive health or the sanctity of marriage, leading to feelings of betrayal among those who bought into the "progressive" branding.<sup>29</sup>

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## 7. Campus Vibe, Infrastructure, and Safety

The physical space of the Loyola Schools campus plays a critical role in shaping the student psyche. It is an "Urban Sanctuary" that serves as both a refuge and a cage.

### 7.1 Primary Source Data (Student Testimonials)

"Campus: BIGGG... Katipunan (Katip) has a chance to flood BIBLICALLY... You might get winded walking around but the large amount of trees provid great shade and an overall beautiful campus."<sup>1</sup>

"Safety is not a problem. I mean you live in Ateneo with 24/7 security.... The community is also amazing. ARSA (home org for dormers) has a lot of activities..."

Cons: Shared bathrooms. Kitchen/pantry is also shared... If you want to have a solo room/aircon room, additional bayad din yan." <sup>32</sup>

"Arete has the best internet, the best air conditioning, the best bathrooms... It's near the gate, Regis center, and the Tricycle shed." <sup>33</sup>

"My blockmate once left her bag (which contained her baon, phone, and laptop) in Gonzaga once and an outsider with a fake Ateneo ID stole it. OSS tracked down the thief, and her got her bag back." <sup>34</sup>

"There is a strict dress code about hair colors? Nah, Ateneo doesn't care about your hair color. Go crazy!... The SOM Dress Code can basically boiled down to: don't look sloppy. Don't wear just a sando, or slippers, or shorts." <sup>35</sup>

## 7.2 Pattern Analysis: The Gated Community Experience

Environmental Psychology:

The abundance of trees, open fields, and the "Church of the Gesu" creates a contemplative atmosphere. Unlike the urban congestion of DLSU or the open public access of UP, Ateneo is a "Gated Community." This fosters a sense of security and exclusivity but contributes to the student body's insulation from the chaotic reality of Metro Manila. The campus is designed to be a "thinking space," reinforcing the university's emphasis on the humanities and reflection.<sup>1</sup>

Infrastructure Class Divide:

While the campus is beautiful, facilities vary wildly. New buildings like the Arete (Arts Wing) are state-of-the-art, while older buildings (communications regarding humidity and lack of aircon) lag behind. This mirrors the tuition hikes—students feel they pay a premium ("tuition increases every year") but do not always see the return in basic amenities like consistent WiFi or air conditioning in all classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

Safety and Surveillance:

The strict security (guards at every gate, ID checks) creates a high-trust environment where students often leave laptops unattended (though theft still happens). However, this security theater also infantilizes students—the heavy reliance on "Kuya Guard" and the lack of exposure to public street dangers creates the "sheltered" archetype that struggles when navigating the "real world" outside Katipunan.<sup>10</sup>

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## 8. Practical Lifestyle: The Economics of Being Atenean

The "Ateneo Lifestyle" is a distinct economic ecosystem that requires significant financial or logistical maneuvering to navigate.

### 8.1 Primary Source Data (Student Testimonials)

"Food inside admu are around 100-150 pesos per meal. 5k a month?... food

outside ateneo, within katipunan is ridiculously expensive with around 200-300 pesos per meal."<sup>37</sup>

"If u want ulam less than 100, u can go to ebais (85 lang ung chicken, pork, and fish nila. beef is 135), the canteen for the dorms area. there are also 1st canteen and iggys around the loyola school of theology area."<sup>14</sup>

"From One Ayala take MRT to Cubao then switch over to LRT. Take LRT to Katipunan Station.... Or take a tricycle... with an Ateneo sticker... Or take a jeep going to UP... but get off at Ateneo Gate 3.5."<sup>17</sup>

"My guy, everything is so fuckin expensive for some reason. Wala masyadong cheap karinderya meals for students who are too tired to cook but want a quick meal.... Halos everyday akong nag s-struggle meals."<sup>10</sup>

## 8.2 Pattern Analysis: The High Cost of Belonging

The Gentrification of Student Life:

Katipunan Avenue has gentrified to the point where the "average" student budget (₱200-₱300/day) is insufficient for the standard lifestyle (eating at Regis Center or UPTC). This pushes scholars and middle-class students to the margins—literally. The "cheap" food options (LST, ISO, Ebai's) are located at the edges of the campus, requiring a trek or an e-jeep ride. This physical separation reinforces social stratification: the wealthy eat centrally and conveniently; the budget-conscious eat peripherally.<sup>14</sup>

The Commuter's Penalty:

The "Katipunan Commute" is a major equalizer of misery but also a divider of class. While wealthy students complain about traffic in their air-conditioned cars, commuters face a multi-modal gauntlet (LRT -> Jeep -> Tricycle -> Walk). The "Gate 3.5" (pedestrian gate) experience creates a distinct sub-culture of students who are "street smart" versus those who are "car-dependent." The lack of internal mobility (shuttles are often full) forces a walking culture that is physically demanding in the tropical heat.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1: Comparative Food Economics in Ateneo**

Tier	Locations	Price Range	Social Signal
<b>Budget / Scholar</b>	ISO Canteen, LST (Theology), Ebai's (Dorms), Manang's	₱60 - ₱100	Practicality, "In the know," Humility. Often frequented by scholars and faculty.
<b>Standard /</b>	Gonzaga Hall (Caf),	₱120 - ₱200	The "Default"

<b>Convenience</b>	AMPC, JSEC (Student Stalls)		student. Social hub. JSEC implies support for student businesses.
<b>Premium / "Conyo"</b>	Regis Center, UPTC (Town Center), Esteban Abada Restos	₱250 - ₱500+	Affluence, "After-school" hangouts, Date spots. Exclusionary to budget students.

## 9. Conclusion: The "Magis" Burden

The Ateneo de Manila University produces a student culture defined by **"Curated Excellence."** It is an environment designed to engineer a specific type of citizen: one who is articulate, introspective, and possessed of a "service-oriented" conscience, yet who remains comfortably ensconced in the privileges of the Philippine elite.

The "Atenean" is a product of contradictions:

1. **Academic:** They are subjected to the rigors of the Core Curriculum, learning to deconstruct power structures in Philosophy classes while simultaneously training to inherit those power structures in Management classes.
2. **Social:** They exist in a "safe space" that is tolerant of gender and identity but is subtly exclusionary based on class and language (the "Conyo" barrier).
3. **Political:** They are "radical moderates," possessing the intellectual tools for revolution but lacking the material desperation to enact it, resulting in a politics of "consultation" and "process" over disruption.

Ultimately, the student culture is a constant negotiation between the comfort of the "Bubble" and the Jesuit mandate to burst it. For the wealthy student, Ateneo is a finishing school for leadership; for the scholar, it is a daily exercise in resilience and code-switching. The resulting synthesis is a graduate who is "Down from the Hill"—symbolically descending to serve the nation, but often remaining culturally and economically elevated above it.

**Table 2: The "Big 4" Cultural Matrix (Ateneo Contextualized)**

Feature	Ateneo (ADMU)	La Salle (DLSU)	UP Diliman (UPD)	UST
<b>Primary</b>	The	The	The	The "Resilient

<b>Archetype</b>	"Philosopher-King"	"Corporate Tycoon"	"Activist-Intellectual"	"Worker"
<b>Academic Load</b>	Heavy Core (Humanities focus); "Guided Rigor"	Fast-paced (Trimestral); "Chill" but relentless	Heavy (Sink or Swim); Independent	High Volume; Traditional Pedagogy
<b>Social Stratification</b>	High (Old Rich vs. Scholars); Language barrier	High (New Rich); "Happy-Go-Lucky"	Moderate to High (Public but gentrifying)	Moderate (Middle Class); Uniform equalizer
<b>Political Vibe</b>	Moderate Left / Liberal Catholic	Apolitical / Centrist	Radical Left / Militant	Conservative / Catholic Social Teachings
<b>Response to Adversity</b>	"Mental Health Break" / Consultation	"Go with the flow" / Party	Protest / Resilience	Compliance / "Trauma Bonding"

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