

Conspicuous consumption patterns of Turkish youth: case of cellular phones

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Abstract

Purpose – *The main purpose of this paper is to examine the notion that people consume goods and services not only to derive satisfaction from them, but also to publicize their social status and show off.*

Design/methodology/approach – *A survey questionnaire, based on a detailed literature review, is developed and applied to 691 university students at three state universities in Turkey.*

Findings – *The findings mainly indicate that one dimension of conspicuous consumption, namely prestige, is an influential variable on social (indirect) benefit of consumers. Another significant finding points out that conspicuous consumption expenditures are observed in all social strata.*

Research limitations/implications – *The sample consists of university students from three state universities in three cities of Turkey. A larger sample would increase the value of the paper. Despite this fact, the composition of the sample of students, who come from three state universities located in three cities and from all social strata, can be evaluated as a positive feature for the study.*

Originality/value – *The paper provides beneficial research implications for practitioners by postulating conspicuous consumption patterns of students, who form one of the biggest market segments for cellular phones. The study also employs a cause and effect approach to examine the conspicuous consumption approach, which aims to enhance the notions of Veblen's approach.*

Keywords *Mobile technologies, Telephone equipment, Consumer behaviour, Turkey*

Paper type *Research paper*

1. Introduction

Turkey was officially recognized as a candidate for full membership for European Union (EU) in 1999 and negotiations started in 2005. The process is expected to take at least a decade to complete. Prior to this recognition and these negotiations, on 31 December 1995, a customs union between Turkey and (EU) came into effect, which covers free flow of goods between two entities without any customs restrictions. Increasing trade relationships with EU has forced Turkish firms to redesign their organizational structures, production processes, and consumer research activities, which exhibit significant differences when compared with pre-customs union agreement. This change in relationships is assumed to continue at an increasing pace and an estimation of Turkish young population's consumption patterns becomes extremely significant as their number constitutes a huge population. The vast numbers of young people in Turkey make the Turkish market attractive for firms from around the world, especially European and Turkish firms, to produce and sell goods and services.

This research deals with Turkish university students, who constitute a significant part of Turkish youth, and their conspicuous consumption patterns in their purchasing behavior of cellular phones. The premise is that goods like cellular phones carry meanings among individuals in a particular society and are consumed by university students to transmit some status-related messages. This status-related message transmission also has the potential to

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show off levels of wealth and social strata that are assumed to be regarded as important by university students. By demonstrating conspicuous consumption patterns in university students, the purpose of this study is to confirm findings that will help European, Turkish, and other firms from other parts of the world form their production and marketing strategies.

2. Theoretical background

Solely based on human nature, it is postulated that humans are deeply involved in their social environments. According to Geertz (1973), the thought of humans is totally social in terms of origins, function, forms, and applications. Human conscience and thought reflect socioeconomic acts, which imply that meanings take their origin from social and economic activities of people.

Taking the pervasive impact of social interactions on identities and behaviors of people into account, the symbolic interactionism perspective helps us to conceive how people give meaning to their social interactions (Hewitt, 2000). Symbolic interactionism posits that individuals organize their behavior in accordance with their expectations of other people (Armstrong, 2007). Depending on the tenets of this organizing, people guide their behaviors as individuals and as members of certain groups.

As a result of individuals' interactions with other members of society, different social norms arise and guide their economic and social behavior patterns. One of the significant social norms, which has a great influence on the economic behavior of people, is concern for social status. It is important because it is assumed that social status interacts with the distribution of income and reflects non-observable abilities of individuals (Rege, 2008). According to Duesenberry (1949), a concern for status causes people to imitate other people with higher income in terms of their consumption behavior.

Bahn *et al.* (1982) indicate that people express themselves through consumption. The pervasive impact of social status in determining people's consuming behavior is discussed by Veblen (1899) in his pioneer study of "The theory of the leisure class". Veblen argued that social status makes people engage in conspicuous consumption. Marcoux *et al.* (1997) indicated that social status demonstration is a dimension of conspicuous consumption. Consumption, in this sense, not only means exploiting a functional benefit but also becomes a way for gaining social prestige and exhibiting status and one's own identity. It is seen as a way for people to show off their status and wealth. Byrne (1999) postulates that material goods will more likely be purchased and displayed than services to show off their status and success. In this context, people transmit messages by using their wealth and define themselves in this regard (Giddens, 1991).

In evaluating exhibitionist properties, two significant criteria must be considered: The first criterion is the properties of the good and the second one is how individuals who purchase the good evaluate themselves in the social environment (Sirgy, 1982). These two criteria symbolize functional and social benefits (Thaler, 1985) that consumers seek to derive from their purchases of goods and services. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) and Engel *et al.* (1990) indicate that appraising benefit in terms of product properties and utilization of the hedonic (indirect) benefits can, jointly, be expressed as the total benefit.

In terms of acquiring social benefit, prices of goods become a signal of not only quality but also prestige, which is an outcome of status. A positive relationship has been found between price and prestige. In Veblenist thought, consumers have been evaluated as price-oriented because of their intention to affect other people by purchasing higher-priced goods and get the respect of others (Tellis and Gaeth, 1990; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 1993).

In addition to prestige and status, materialism plays a significant role in shaping consumption patterns of individuals. Richins and Dawson (1992) define materialism by using three components: success in life as defined by possessions; acquisition as the central goal in life; and acquisition as the path to happiness. As Oropesa (1995) indicates, materialism has been derived as a shallow cultural value and fuels narcissistic self-absorption of individuals. It is cited by Tatzel (2002) that those with strong material

values consume more than those who are less materialistic. Materialistic people are also more involved with status consumption that has public rather than private visibility.

Constituting a significant portion of total consumers in markets, university students, who are a portion of the youth population, are a distinctive area of population to study. As Wolburg and Pokrywczynski (2001) point out, the college market is one of the most promising consumer segments in the long run due to the market's size. Authors also describe college students as trendsetters and early-adopters, which plays a significant role in their lifelong brand loyalties and influences parental purchases. Conspicuous consumption patterns of university students and youth have been an interesting but not a well-documented area of study. A number of studies conducted on the subject (Marcoux *et al.*, 1997; Carr, 2005; Armstrong, 2007), which has something in common, is that symbolic interactionism and conspicuous consumption have a significant impact on consumption patterns of young people.

Having 19 million Generation Y consumers (individuals ages between 14-30 years) (TUIK, 2007), Turkey has a relatively young consumer market when compared with European countries. Out of these 19 million young people, 2.3 million of them are university students (MEB, 2008) and expected to exhibit conspicuous consumption behavior patterns in their purchase of goods. According to social comparison theory, people compare themselves with other people in terms of self-esteem and competence (Festinger, 1954). In this sense, people compare their own fashion choices with others to show them that they are trendy or keeping up with peers, allowing them to feel stylish (Noble *et al.*, 2008, p. 7).

Having a limited amount of income that, generally, comes from their families, young people have some constraints, but also few commitments, such as children and spouses (Pritchard and Morgan, 1996). In analyzing the subject, social strata to which young people belong must be taken into account. Studies, which examined the relationship between consumption and social strata, have received significant attention in the literature (Holt, 1997, 1998). It is claimed that all social strata exhibit conspicuous consumption behavior patterns to a certain degree. It is expected that rich people are more inclined to exhibit conspicuous consumption behavior due to their higher resources to consume. By the same token, young people that belong to higher social strata are expected to be more inclined to conspicuous consumption than those belonging to lowering social strata.

Based on the above theoretical framework, we propose three hypotheses:

- H1a.* Students from higher-income level families will more likely buy goods that will provide them a social benefit.
- H1b.* Students from lower-income level families will more likely buy goods that will provide them a functional benefit.
- H2a.* Social strata will have an impact on university students' tendencies toward prestige in consumption.
- H2b.* Social strata will have an impact on university students' tendencies toward status in consumption.
- H2c.* Social strata will have an impact on university students' materialistic tendencies in consumption.
- H3.* University students' tendencies toward prestige, status, and materialism will have an impact on their consumption to gain a social benefit.

3. Methodology

Because the purpose of our study was to investigate conspicuous consumption patterns of university students, 691 students from three state universities in three midland cities in Turkey were targeted. Cellular phones were selected as the product, which is thought to represent best conspicuous consumption behavior of university students. This selection was based on the assumption that social visibility is high when using cellular phones. In this sense, Fisher and Price (1992, p. 477) postulate that, in order to observe the complete

impact of conspicuous consumption, examination of “social visibility is necessary so that the public is aware of the behavior and has the opportunity to decode its meaning”.

Because there is no generally accepted model or approach to measure and analyze conspicuous consumption in the literature, we employed a survey questionnaire in order to examine conspicuous consumption patterns of university students. In developing our survey questionnaire, we benefited from a certain number of studies. Moschis’ (1981) study on social motivation for consumption and Lumpkin and Darden’s (1982) study on fashion conscience were among these studies. Also, *Marketing Scales Handbook Volumes I and II*, which is considered to be the handbook of researchers (Bruner and Hensel, 1994; Bruner and Hensel, 1996), was thoroughly scrutinized before preparation of our survey. In order to develop questions regarding “price-prestige relationship”, Lichtenstein *et al.*’s (1993) “price-sensitivity scale” was utilized jointly with Ward and Wackman’s (1971) “materialism” scale.

We also benefited from Chung and Fischer’s (2001) study, which examined the consumption habits of Hong Kong people who settled down in Canada. Authors grouped the sample in terms of ethnic social ties by assuming that they will exhibit different tendencies for conspicuous consumption. This study helped us to create questions regarding class separation of consumers according to their social strata. In our study, conspicuous consumption behavior was examined *vis-à-vis* whether or not income level has a discriminative power in classifying university students.

4. Findings

In analyzing the data to describe the sample and to test hypotheses, descriptive statistics, factor analysis, *t*-test, ANOVA, and multiple regression analysis are employed. Table I portrays demographic characteristics of the sample, in terms of gender, grade at the university, and income level of students’ families. As can be seen from the Table, 39 percent of respondents are female and 61 percent of them are male, which is quite a credible number to show common gender distribution at Turkish universities. It can also be observed from Table I that most of the respondents are third and fourth grade (52.5 percent) students.

It can also be observed from Table I that most of the respondents come from middle and upper social classes in terms of their families’ income-levels. Looking into the family incomes, 13.1 percent of students (<€200 and between €201-400) appear to have an income lower than the middle class. Both results indicate that the majority of students come from the middle and upper social classes of Turkish society.

| Table I Demographics of respondents (<i>n</i> = 691) | |
|--|------|
| | % |
| <i>Gender</i> | |
| Male | 61 |
| Female | 39 |
| <i>Grade</i> | |
| First | 16.4 |
| Second | 21.2 |
| Third | 26.4 |
| Fourth | 26.1 |
| 5 + | 9.9 |
| <i>Income (€)</i> | |
| <200 | 1.3 |
| Between 201-400 | 11.8 |
| Between 401-600 | 16.7 |
| Between 601-800 | 19.5 |
| Between 801-1,000 | 22.0 |
| >1,001 | 28.6 |

Based on the idea that perceived benefit from tangible goods is easier to observe, direct and indirect benefit criteria were analyzed, in terms of students' purchasing decision of a cellular phone. The cellular phone is assumed to exhibit both functional and exhibitionist properties of tangible goods. Factor analysis results postulated that warranty and functionality of cellular phones are found to be functional (direct) benefits (Eigenvalue = 1.13), while design, brand name and thoughts of other people are appraised as being social (indirect) benefits (Eigenvalue = 1.94) Also, our KMO test (65 percent) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($X^2 = 385.8$) revealed statistically significant scores (see Table II).

Table III portrays descriptive statistics for functional and social benefit variables. According to results, the functional benefit criteria have been evaluated as relatively significant compared with social benefits. While warranty (Mean = 4.27; SD = 0.98) and functionality (Mean = 4.26; SD = 0.88) are perceived to be considerably important, design (Mean = 3.93; SD = 1.0) is considered important to some extent, and the brand name (Mean = 3.51; SD = 1.15) and thoughts of other people (Mean = 2.08; SD = 1.14) have a moderately lower impact in the purchasing decision.

Up to this point, our results revealed that exhibitionist intentions of respondents have lower importance relative to functional benefits. At this stage, it is too early to conclude that "conspicuous consumption behavior is not a factor that influences buying behavior of university students" and more analyses are needed.

In analyzing respondents' tendencies towards consuming goods, we conducted a factor analysis by using 14 conspicuous consumption behavior questions (see Appendix 1, Table AI for the descriptive statistics of these questions). KMO score (85 percent) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($X^2 = 1,839.2$) scores imply adequacy of sample size and significance of the factor analysis. Reported in Table IV, factor analysis results revealed three factors, which are named as prestige orientation, status, and materialist orientation. All the eigenvalues for these factors are over 1 and statistically satisfactory.

To test *H1a* and *H1b*, two ANOVA analyses are performed. Based on the ANOVA results in Table V, the income level difference among social strata is significant at 95 percent confidence level in terms of both social ($F = 7.16$; $p = 0.00$) and functional ($F = 2.81$; $p = 0.05$) benefit criteria. Thus, two hypotheses proposed have been supported by analysis results

According to Bonferroni analysis results (see Appendix 2, Table AII), students from higher-income social strata attach more importance to conspicuous consumption relative to

Table II Factor analysis results for factors in cellular phone purchases

| | <i>Social</i> | <i>Functional</i> |
|--------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Thoughts of other people | 0.73 | |
| Brand name | 0.72 | |
| Design | 0.66 | |
| Functionality | | 0.77 |
| Warranty | | 0.74 |
| Eigenvalues | 1.94 | 1.13 |

Table III Descriptive statistics for functional and social benefit variables

| | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|-------------------|------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Warranty | 679 | 4.27 | 0.98 |
| Functionality | 684 | 4.26 | 0.88 |
| Design | 671 | 3.93 | 1.00 |
| Brand name | 674 | 3.51 | 1.15 |
| People's thoughts | 666 | 2.08 | 1.14 |

Table IV Factor analysis for conspicuous consumption behavior variables

| <i>Variables</i> | <i>Prestige</i> | <i>Status</i> | <i>Materialism</i> |
|--|-----------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Buying the most expensive brand of a product makes me feel classy | 0.85 | | |
| I fancy the prestige that is accompanied with a high priced product | 0.84 | | |
| Buying a high priced brand makes me feel good | 0.80 | | |
| I bought the most expensive one of a product with the sole purpose that people will recognize it | 0.66 | | |
| I sometimes hope in my head that some of the things I buy would affect other people | 0.59 | | |
| Even for a relatively inexpensive product (range), it is impressive to choose the more expensive one | 0.54 | | |
| Constantly searching for a low priced one of a good makes other people consider you stingy | | 0.59 | |
| I believe other people judge my personality by the type and brand of the goods that I use | | 0.58 | |
| Buying the high priced one of a product implies a silent message | | 0.58 | |
| When you buy the most expensive brand of a product, people will recognize it | | 0.57 | |
| It is genuinely true that money can buy happiness | | | 0.69 |
| People judge one another by what they possess | | | 0.57 |
| The most important criterion in choosing a job is the earnings | | | 0.57 |
| My greatest dream in life is to possess something expensive | | | 0.54 |
| Eigenvalues | 4.1 | 1.3 | 1.2 |

Table V ANOVA analysis for income-benefit relationship

| | | <i>n</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>Sig.</i> |
|--------------------|------------------|----------|-------------|-----------|----------|-------------|
| Social benefit | Low income | 191 | 3.10 | 0.78 | 7.16 | 0.00 |
| | Intermed. income | 272 | 3.09 | 0.78 | | |
| | High income | 181 | 3.35 | 0.80 | | |
| | Total | 644 | 3.17 | 0.79 | | |
| Functional benefit | Low income | 196 | 4.36 | 0.66 | 2.81 | 0.05 |
| | Intermed. income | 278 | 4.24 | 0.75 | | |
| | High income | 187 | 4.18 | 0.84 | | |
| | Total | 661 | 4.26 | 0.75 | | |

those from lower-income social strata. It means that higher social strata are more prone to exhibit conspicuous consumption behavior as expected. Also, statistically significant difference is observed among social strata for the functional benefit criterion. The significant difference between income levels in terms of functional benefit criterion seems to be a result of the significantly different scores between the higher-income and the lower-income social strata. It seems that (see Appendix 2, Table AII) students from lower-income social strata attach more importance to functional characteristics of goods compared with those from higher-income social strata.

To test *H2a*, *H2b*, and *H2c*, three more ANOVA analyses are conducted. Analyses results, portrayed in Table VI, indicate that there is a statistically significant difference among university students' tendencies towards prestige in consumption when social strata are taken into account. By the same token, statistically significant differences are observed for students' tendencies towards status and materialism in consumption. Thus, three hypotheses proposed have been supported.

Observing differences among social strata in the Bonferroni analysis table (see Appendix 3, Table AIII), it can be postulated that students from high-income class, on average, behave

Table VI ANOVA analysis for income – prestige, status and materialism relationship

| | | n | Mean | SD | F | Sig. |
|-------------|----------------|-----|------|------|------|------|
| Prestige | Low income | 167 | 2.07 | 0.80 | 7.05 | 0.00 |
| | Interm. income | 238 | 2.13 | 0.76 | | |
| | High income | 148 | 2.40 | 0.90 | | |
| | Total | 553 | 2.19 | 0.82 | | |
| Status | Low income | 196 | 2.58 | 0.77 | 3.60 | 0.03 |
| | Interm. income | 277 | 2.63 | 0.72 | | |
| | High income | 192 | 2.77 | 0.74 | | |
| | Total | 665 | 2.66 | 0.74 | | |
| Materialism | Low income | 197 | 2.69 | 0.75 | 3.62 | 0.03 |
| | Interm. income | 273 | 2.76 | 0.65 | | |
| | High income | 183 | 2.89 | 0.78 | | |
| | Total | 653 | 2.77 | 0.72 | | |

differently from the other two income classes in terms of prestige fondness. Also status and materialism variables revealed similar results for students from the higher-income stratum.

To analyze whether conspicuous consumption could be explained in a linear format a multiple regression analysis was performed. The social benefit variable obtained after the factor analysis was considered as a dependent variable, which is an indicator for conspicuous consumption. Prestige, status and materialist tendencies of our sample were taken as explanatory variables in the analysis. Specifically, the overall function explained a significant percentage of the variation in dependent variable, where $R^2 = 0.20$, $F = 42.129$, ($p = 0.000$) (see Table VII). Each of the independent variables regressed on the dependent variable produced the following betas: $\beta_1 = 0.405$ ($p = 0.000$) for prestige, $\beta_2 = 0.007$ ($p = 0.878$) for status and $\beta_3 = 0.069$ ($p = 0.141$) for materialism. Consequently, only prestige, as an independent variable, has a statistically significant influence on social benefit as an indicator of conspicuous consumption. Thus, $H3$ has been partially supported, indicating that only students' tendencies towards prestige will have an impact on their consumption that is related to gaining social benefit.

5. Conclusions

Conspicuous consumption expenditure of affluent people, as suggested by Veblen in his study of "The theory of leisure class", was the starting idea for this study. Our main aim in conducting this study was to explore reasons for conspicuous consumption behavior of Turkish students. This reason was seen to be especially important because Turkey has a customs union agreement with the European Union and is in the process of EU accession. Besides this, increasing exports and imports among Turkey and European countries necessitate that all the parties should explore the consumption habits of the host country consumers.

Given the fact that conspicuous consumption can only appear in a social environment and benefit does not depend only on the function of goods, it was crucial to study social strata in terms of their income levels. Our analyses results suggested that direct benefit criteria were found to be prior/superior to social benefit criteria. Based on both criteria, differences in

Table VII Regression analysis results for social benefit

| | β | ($R^2 = 0.20$) | Significance |
|-------------|---------|------------------|--------------|
| Constant | 2.087 | | 0.000 |
| Prestige | 0.405 | | 0.000 |
| Status | 0.007 | | 0.878 |
| Materialism | 0.069 | | 0.141 |
| F | 42.129 | | 0.000 |

income levels were found to be supportive of differentiation of conspicuous consumption behavior in various social strata.

The difference among income levels in terms of social benefit criteria refers to higher priority/weight of the conspicuous consumption behavior in the high-income class relative to middle and low levels. With regard to the functional characteristics of the good, it is observed that students from low-income families attach more significance to the functionality than those from high-income families. Based on social strata, examination of differences in prestige, status, and materialist tendencies of our sample revealed that affluent people were more inclined to conspicuous consumption, which was followed by middle and low-income groups respectively.

To examine university students' tendencies towards prestige, status, and materialism, we regressed these variables with social benefit criteria as a dependent variable. Depending on this regression analysis, our results postulated that conspicuous consumption was influenced by only the prestige-seeking tendencies of university students. However, we should bear in mind that other factors that are not included in this study might be influential predictors of conspicuous consumption.

In comparison with Veblen's notions, in which he blamed the leisure class for causing waste by exhibiting conspicuous consumption behavior, this study revealed that all social groups, from the wealthy to the poor, were engaged in this kind of consumption to different degrees. We believe that this finding is especially important for European and Turkish firms' managers in determining their production and marketing strategies when targeting university students as potential customers. These findings also provide useful insights for firm managers from other parts of the world to recognize consumption habits of Turkish youth when targeting the Turkish market. This study's findings not only comprise suggestions for practitioners but also extend to providing insights for academics who are interested in consumer behavior as useful knowledge in developing firms' strategies. Our study, also, is a useful contribution to the conspicuous consumption literature by providing country-specific findings.

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Appendix 1

Table AI Descriptive statistics for conspicuous consumption behavior variables

| | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|--|------------------|-------------|-----------|
| When you buy the most expensive brand of a product, people recognize that | 685 | 3.81 | 1.15 |
| The most important criterion in choosing a job is the earnings | 687 | 3.25 | 1.16 |
| People judge one another by what they possess | 681 | 3.11 | 1.25 |
| It is genuinely true that money can buy happiness | 683 | 2.80 | 1.28 |
| I sometimes hope in my mind that some of the things I buy would affect other people | 688 | 2.68 | 1.22 |
| Buying a high priced brand makes me feel good | 686 | 2.45 | 1.18 |
| I fancy the prestige that is accompanied with a high priced product | 682 | 2.41 | 1.21 |
| Constantly searching for a low priced one of a good makes other people consider you stingy | 689 | 2.38 | 1.18 |
| I believe other people judge my personality by the type and brand of the goods that I use | 690 | 2.34 | 1.17 |
| Buying the most expensive brand of a product makes me feel classy | 584 | 2.19 | 1.18 |
| Buying the high priced one of product (range) implies a silent cry (message) | 686 | 2.13 | 1.17 |
| Even for a relatively inexpensive product (range), it is impressive to choose the more expensive one | 685 | 2.09 | 1.06 |
| My greatest dream in life is to possess something expensive | 687 | 1.94 | 1.03 |
| I bought the most expensive one of a product with the sole purpose that people will recognize it | 688 | 1.51 | 0.83 |

Appendix 2

Table AII Bonferroni analysis results for income – benefit relationship

| <i>Dependent variable</i> | <i>(I) Income</i> | <i>(J) Income</i> | <i>(I-J) Mean difference</i> | <i>Std. error</i> | <i>Sig.</i> |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Social | High income | Low income | 0.25 | 0.08 | 0.01 |
| | | Interm. income | 0.27 | 0.08 | 0.00 |
| Functional | High income | Low income | -0.18 | 0.08 | 0.05 |

Appendix 3

Table AIII Bonferroni analysis results for income – prestige, status and materialism relationship

| <i>Dependent variable</i> | <i>(I) Adjusted income (triple)</i> | <i>(J) Adjusted income (triple)</i> | <i>(I-J) Mean difference</i> | <i>Std. Error</i> | <i>Sig.</i> |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Prestige | High income | Low income | 0.32 | 0.09 | 0.00 |
| | | Interm. income | 0.26 | 0.08 | 0.01 |
| Status | High income | Low income | 0.19 | 0.08 | 0.03 |
| Materialism | High income | Low income | 0.20 | 0.07 | 0.02 |

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