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# THE ROLE OF THE NEED FOR UNIQUENESS IN CHOOSING BETWEEN CONVENTIONAL / UNCONVENTIONAL CUSTOMIZATION: THE CASE OF GEN Z

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## ABSTRACT

*Social sciences such as economics and marketing have a growing interest in consumer behavior and the underlying psychological factors. In particular, Consumer Need for Uniqueness (CNfU) receives notable attention from scholars. However, the literature lacks focus on how customization is related to CNfU. Moreover, Gen Z, the highest population of consumers, has been neglected in previous studies. The main objective of this study is to understand the impact of CNfU on Gen Z consumers' choice between conventional and unconventional customization options for technology products. The paper uses survey-based data and a combination of statistical techniques, such as EFA, CFA, and structural equation modeling (SEM). It is revealed that CNfU has no influence on choosing between conventional and unconventional customization options. The results have significant implications for researchers and practitioners.*

***Keywords:*** *Consumer Need for Uniqueness, Customer Behavior, Customer Experience.*

***Jel Codes:*** *M30, M31.*

# GELENEKSEL VE GELENEKSEL OLMAYAN KİŞİSELLEŞTİRME ARASINDAKİ SEÇİMDE EŞSİZLİK İHTİYACININ ROLÜ: Z KUŞAĞININ TUTUMU

## ÖZET

*Ekonomi ve pazarlama gibi sosyal bilimler, tüketici davranışına ve altında yatan psikolojik faktörlere artan bir ilgi göstermektedir. Özellikle Tüketici Benzersizlik İhtiyacı konusuna araştırmacılar yoğunlukla eğilmeye başlamıştır. Bununla birlikte, literatürün kişiselleştirmenin Tüketici Benzersizlik İhtiyacı ile nasıl bir ilişkisi olduğuna yeterince odaklanmadığı görülmektedir. Ayrıca, en yüksek tüketici popülasyonu olan Z kuşağı bu çalışmalarda ihmal edilmektedir. Çalışmamızın temel amacı, Tüketici Benzersizlik İhtiyacının Z kuşağı tüketicilerinin teknoloji ürünleri için geleneksel ve geleneksel olmayan*

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*özelleştirme seçenekleri arasındaki seçimi üzerindeki etkisini anlamaktır. Çalışmamızda ankete dayalı veriler kullanılmış olup; analizler Açımlayıcı Faktör Analizi, Doğrulayıcı Faktör Analizi ve Yapısal Eşitlik Modellemesi gibi istatistiksel tekniklerle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışma sonucunda Tüketici Benzersizlik İhtiyacının geleneksel ve geleneksel olmayan kişiselleştirme seçenekleri arasında seçim yapmada hiçbir etkisi olmadığı ortaya çıkmıştır. Sonuçların araştırmacılar ve uygulayıcılar için önemli etkileri vardır.*

***Anahtar Kelimeler:*** *Tüketici Eşsizlik İhtiyacı, Tüketici Davranışı, Müşteri Deneyimi.*

***Jel Kodları:*** *M30, M31.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As economics began to approach buyers from a homo-sapiens perspective rather than seeing them as homo-economicus (Thaler, 2000), consumer behavior towards adopting a new product has received growing interest from researchers in social sciences for a multitude of decades (Rogers, 1983; Burns and Brady, 1992). Studies on customers' "sense of self" or "self-identification" have taken up a lot of space in this context (Escalas, 2013). Specifically, Need for Uniqueness (NfU) and Consumers' Need for Uniqueness (CNfU) have been the focus of many researchers (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980; Lynn, 1991).

As uniqueness theory suggests, individuals tend to differentiate themselves, especially when they feel high similarity within their own social group (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). On such occasions, most consumers pursue uniqueness through acquisition of products and services (Asshidin et al., 2016). As common-sense dictates, consumers with high NfU are more likely to adopt new products than consumers with low NfU (Lynn, 1991; Ross et al., 2014). Moreover, several researchers argue that consumers who want to differentiate themselves opt for product customization (Zaggi et al., 2019; Franke and Schreirer, 2018; He et al., 2016). However, there has been little discussion on the relationship between CNfU and customization behavior (Zhu et al., 2015; He et al., 2016), although customization topic has been generating growing interest on researchers in marketing (Dellaert and Stremersch, 2005; Liechty et al., 2001) and many companies have adopted customization to meet their consumers' individual preferences (Franke & Schreier, 2008).

In the meantime, Gen Z, a tech-savvy generation of "self-expression" (Cho et al., 2022), is taking over the consumer population (Kahawandala et al., 2020). It can be expected that Gen Z, who are more individualistic than older generations (Pichler et al., 2021) yet more connected to each other digitally, will have a higher tendency to display their uniqueness with consumption. Nevertheless, this specific consumer segment is neglected in terms of CNfU and CNfU's relationship with customization, despite youngsters and adolescents have been examined previously in the literature (Asshidin et al., 2016) from the NfU perspective (Mathew and Dey, 2020).

Furthermore, individuals with high NfU are known for their unconventional choices that express uniqueness (Simonson and Nowlis, 2000). Although the concept of customization promotes uniqueness

and implicitly implies the "unconventional," there is a chance that a product or service may not attract consumers if combinations in customization parameters result in traditional products. Despite this possibility, the literature lacks consumer behavior towards "unconventional" and "conventional" customization offerings.

Considering all these facts, the main objective of this study is to understand how Gen Zes' CNfU is related to their attitude towards conventional and unconventional customization options of a technology product and, as a result, contribute to filling the gap in the literature. We aimed to accomplish this objective by developing a model that includes a CNfU measurement scale, two customization options (one conventional, one unconventional), and the relationship between them. We tested the model by analyzing the survey data using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

We structured the paper as follows: First, we examine the Uniqueness Theory and the Need for the Uniqueness concept. Next, we visit Consumers' Need for Uniqueness literature. Third, we discuss the customization concept and how it relates to CNfU and Gen Z. Fourth, we develop our model, analyze the survey data, and present results. Lastly, we discuss the results, implications, limitations, and future areas of research.

## 2.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Uniqueness Theory and the Need for Uniqueness (NfU)

NfU is a universal phenomenon (Burns and Brady, 1992; Ruvio et al., 2008) and has been studied in a variety of areas such as sociology, social psychology, economics, and marketing ((Bellezza et al., 2014; Schumpe et al., 2016). Uniqueness is the degree to which people perceive themselves as different from the average society (Mittal, 2015). According to the uniqueness theory, most individuals need to feel unique to a moderate degree (Synder and Fromkin, 1977; Ling, 2008) on some dimensions relative to others (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). They are urged to see themselves as different from others to identify their "self" in a meaningful way (Abosag et al., 2020). Simply, NfU is the need to be different from others (Schumpe et al., 2016). The tendency toward self-expression (Tepper and Hoyle, 1996), having a high social status (Bellezza et al., 2014), expressing unconventional opinions (Synder and Fromkin, 1977), and demonstrating innovative behavior (Burns & Brady, 1992; McAlister and Pessemier, 1982) and acquiring unique products (Snyder, 1992; Simonson and Nowlis, 2000) such as designer suits (Tian et al., 2001) can be indicators of NfU.

Ultimately, NfU is the result of a negative self-evaluation (Fromkin, 1972) or perceived self-concept (Burns and Brady, 1992) and depends on the similarity level within the social group and individuals' internal motivations in various groups with various similarity levels (Snyder, 1992). The basic focus of the theory is the individuals' emotions and behaviors towards information (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980): People tend to avoid unpleasant emotions derived from high similarity (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980) and demonstrate behaviors towards pursuing moderate levels of uniqueness (Lynn and Harris, 1997). In other words, people with high NfU would prefer non-conformity rather than conformity (Asch, 1956).

In general, uniqueness has a positive connotation attached to it. It is a quality that can be perceived as a sign of strong character, autonomy, and independence (Simonson and Nowlis, 2000). However, "being too unique" can have negative social consequences and be punished by the society (Ruvio, 2008; Levine, 1989) in the form of social isolation, disapproval (Lynn and Harris, 1997; Tian & McKenzie, 2001; Tian et al., 2001), ridicule, and exclusion (Kruglanski and Webster, 1991). Therefore, people need to conform to a certain degree to be validated by their peer group (Brewer, 1991; Snyder and Fromkin, 1980), and NfU is limited to the extent that the individual needs social assimilation (Abosag et al., 2020). Therefore, NfU is situational as well as personal (Imhoff and Erb, 2009).

People with a feeling of moderate uniqueness tend to have high self-esteem (Mittal, 2015) and better mood states than those who feel extremely different from / similar to others (Workman & Kidd, 2000; Schumpe et al., 2016). Instead of seeking to differentiate within their group, individuals can choose to meet their non-conformity needs among other groups and keep conforming to their group (Chan et al., 2012). In addition, people have the most negative self-evaluations when they see their most-liked attributes as relatively common and least-liked attribute as rather unique (Ditto and Griffin, 1993).

Briefly, informational motivation triggered by the social group (Chan et al., 2012) and normative motivation that comes from within (dispositional (Tepper and Hoyle, 1996)) determines NfU (Ling, 2008; Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). Based on these two motivational factors, the individual chooses to be assimilated by or differentiate from the group (Ruvio, 2008), which in turn affects the person's future decision-making behavior (Kelly, 1952)

In the next section, we will examine NfU from consumers' perspectives and exhibit how it relates to consumer behavior.

### 2.2. Consumers' Need for Uniqueness (CNfU)

Choosing and using a specific product or service is a way of expressing one's uniqueness (Ruvio, 2008; Lynn and Harris, 1998; Richins, 1994). In other words, people tend to differentiate themselves (Fromkin, 1971; Snyder, 1992; Burns and Brady, 1992; Tian and McKenzie, 2001) and express their desired identities (Berger and Heath, 2007) by possessing unique products. The symbolic meaning of consumption (Ruvio et al., 2008) provides a unique social image (Chan et al., 2012; Berger and Heath, 2007). Therefore, NfU shows itself in consumer behavior (Workman and Kidd, 2000). CNfU is defined as individuals' effort to distinguish themselves from others, which they aim to meet by acquiring and utilizing specific products that they perceive supports their personal and social identity (Asshidin et al., 2016; Tian and McKenzie, 2001; Ross et al., 2014).

Individuals are also inclined to buy similar products with the social groups they want to be a part of, as in buying Harley Davidson motorcycles to be a part of the "tough guys" group (Chan et al., 2012). By doing so, they simultaneously conform to one group and nonconform to the other groups by avoiding and choosing specific products (Abosag et al., 2020). Still, it is safe for a person to feel different by purchasing materials because non-conformation is not strong enough to damage the sense of assimilation

(Ruvio, 2008). Consumers can also choose to conform to some aspects of the group and nonconform to one specific part to distinguish themselves (Chan et al., 2012).

Consumers with high CNfU aim for more self-expression relative to functional benefit of the product (Ding and Keh, 2016). Opposing opinions are ineffective for them or conversely motivate them to buy more unusual products (Simonson and Nowlis, 2000). Consumers with low self-esteem usually prefer status products (Rucker and Galinsky, 2008). As status seekers, they aim for uniqueness but have a strong inclination to conform to their aspired group (Clark et al., 2007; Mittal, 2015; Ling, 2008).

Studies show three types of non-conformity consumer choices: Creative/innovative choice (Lynn and Harris, 1998; Dollinger, 2003), unpopular choice (Knight and Kim, 2007; Ross et al., 2014), and minority choice (Tian, 1997). Consumers with high NfU also go after products that are scarce (Lynn, 1991; Wu et al., 2011; Cheema and Kaikati, 2010) and new (Lynn and Harris, 1997; Snyder, 1992; Ross et al., 2014; Seo and Lang, 2019). Choosing less frequented and unusual stores is another way that consumers use to differentiate themselves (Lynn and Harris, 1998).

Luxury items are also targets of high NfU consumers (Wilcox et al., 2009; Chan et al., 2015) due to luxury products' scarcity value and luxury brands' distinctive image (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), as well as the opportunity of signaling the status (Bellezza et al., 2014) of being able to afford luxury (Bellezza et al., 2014). This costly consumer behavior depends on the consumer's awareness of the luxury brands: as consumers know more about them, they may negatively evaluate the most popular luxury brands (Zhan and He, 2012).

Interestingly, some studies indicate that willingness to portray one's social standing doesn't differ radically among western and eastern cultures (Bian and Forsythe, 2012; Miremadi et al., 2011), contrary to the belief that western cultures are individualist/materialist (Mathew and Dey, 2020; Cai et al., 2018; Ruvio et al., 2008; He et al., 2016) and eastern cultures are collectivist (Hofstede, 1991). Yet, easterners are more inclined to embrace conformity (Liang and He, 2011) despite the cultures are converging with globalization. On the other hand, CNfU is increasing in eastern countries like China (Cai et al., 2018).

Briefly, CNfU is defined by the characteristics of the individual, group, situation, and the brand (Ling, 2008; Lascu and Zinkhan, 1999) and results in three behavioral dimensions: creative choice counter conformity, unpopular creative choice counter conformity, and avoidance of similarity (Tian et al., 2001). In the following section, we will examine CNfU from a product customization perspective.

### 2.3. CNfU and Product Customization

A growing body of literature has examined product customization (D'Angelo et al., 2019) and industry experts see it as retailing's "new era" (Pardes, 2019; Vossoughi, 2013). Because the customization results in a higher willingness to pay (WTP) (Franke and Steger, 2009; Moreau and Herd, 2010; Franke and Schreier, 2008), the interest is growing bigger every day, especially with the commercialization of 3D printers in an extensive range of sectors including food industry (Dankar et al., 2018). The concept is basically defined as enabling consumers to adapt some product features to fit their expectations (He et al., 2016; Franke and Schreier, 2008)

Although it may seem at first that customization helps consumers achieve better aesthetic and functional fit or meet their hedonic consumption goal (Ding and Keh, 2016) by designing their own products (Dellaert and Stremersch, 2005; Randall et al., 2007), it also provides them a feeling of uniqueness (Zaggi et al., 2019; Park et al., 2013; Lynn and Harris, 1997) helps build a social image (Park et al., 2013). Consumers may even choose customization to express uniqueness at the expense of their functional needs (D'Angelo et al., 2019).

Therefore, characteristics of individuals (Zhu et al., 2015) such as CNfU form a positive attitude towards customization (Seo and Lang, 2019; Li et al., 2020; Park, Han, et al., 2013; He et al., 2016) and express their self-image through their own customized products (D'Angelo et al., 2019). This customization can be made by the customer after product purchase (Belk et al., 1989), or customization options can be offered before the purchase as a strategy to enhance customer experience (Franke and Schreier, 2008; Tian et al., 2001; Ding and Keh, 2016).

On the other hand, because a moderate level of uniqueness is pursued by the customers, it is critical to provide a balanced mixture of conforming and nonconforming customization options for the customers (Zaggi et al., 2019). Sometimes, when it comes to an online news service, customers may even show interest in news content that represents the opposite of their identity (Li et al., 2020).

To sum up, individuals with high CNfU favor customization in general. In the next section, we will discuss customization and CNfU from the perspective of Gen Z. We will also discuss conventional and unconventional customization and develop our model accordingly.

### 2.4. Hypothesis Development

As we mentioned previously, there are considerable studies that reveal CNfU is an antecedent of purchase and customization decisions (Wu et al., 2011; Asshidin et al., 2016; Liang and He, 2011). However, it shows little guidance on what type of customizations people with high CNfU would favor (Chan et al., 2012). As individuals with high NfU are known to make relatively more unconventional associations (Dollinger, 2003) and opt for more unconventional choices than individuals with low NfU, we decided to analyze how individuals with high NfU would choose between an unconventional customization offering and a conventional customization offering.

Moreover, it is well-known that Gen Z consumers born between 1996 and 2010 have relatively higher NfU and tendency to signal social status (Cho et al., 2022; Mathew and Dey, 2020). As a digital-born generation, technology plays a big role in every part of their lives (Pichler et al., 2021). However, the literature neglects Gen Z, the largest population of the globe (Seemiller and Grace, 2018), in terms of CNfU and customization attitude. As a result, we narrowed down our scope with Gen Z consumers and technology products and aimed to understand how CNfU influences Gen Z consumers' choice between a conventional customization option and an unconventional customization option for a technology product. Our initial hypothesis assumes that Gen Z individuals with high CNfU are more likely to choose unconventional product customization options. Since the CNfU construct has three widely accepted dimensions, namely creative choice counter-conformity, unpopular choice counter-

conformity, and avoidance of similarity (Tian et al., 2001; Tian and McKenzie, 2001), we developed three hypotheses as below:

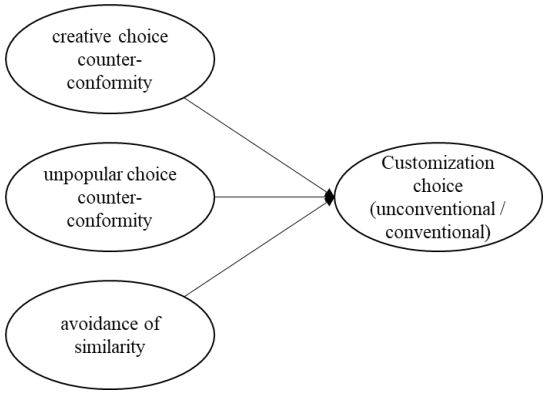
**H1:** Gen Z individuals with high creative choice counter conformity are more likely to choose unconventional laptop computer customization options

**H2:** Gen Z individuals with high unpopular choice counter-conformity are more likely to choose unconventional laptop computer customization options

**H3:** Gen Z individuals with high avoidance of similarity are more likely to choose unconventional laptop computer customization options

The model in Figure 1 emerged based on three hypotheses:

**Figure 1: CNfU - Customization Type Model**




As seen in the hypotheses, we chose laptop computers as the technology product in our research. In the following section, we explain our research methodology.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our research includes five main steps. First, we made a list of laptop computer specifications that customers review to make a purchase by examining computer marketplaces and shops on the web. Second, we sent out a survey to university students and asked them to choose the most original/unconventional and the most standard/conventional feature to customize when buying a computer. Third, we designed two sets of customization options using the three top-voted conventional features for set 1 and the three top-voted conventional features for set 2. Our aim was to create one hedonic and one utilitarian option and see how people with high and low CNfUs respond (Ding and Keh, 2016).

Fourth, we sent out another survey to a different population of college students. There were four main parts of questions to test our model. The first part included demographic questions such as age and gender. The second part included one question that was, “If you were to buy a computer right now, would you choose your computer among computers with standard configurations, or would you be

interested in computers with flexible configurations that you can customize some features yourself? Please mark the answer closest to you." With this question, we aimed to understand their attitude to customization. Our survey design did not let the participants who chose standard configurations proceed with the rest of the survey.

The third part of the survey included another question that was "The computer you would buy offers two triple feature sets that you can configure according to your wishes. Which feature set would you choose to configure? Please mark the set you feel closest to." Here we asked the participants to choose between the non-conventional and conventional set of customization features that we prepared beforehand with the use of the first survey study. Our aim was to understand their attitude to conventional / unconventional customization options.

In the last part of the survey, we asked twelve questions of the CNfU scale developed by Ruvio et al. (2008) so that we had sufficient data to test our model.

Lastly, we analyzed the data by taking the steps as follows:

- Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Reliability Assessment
- Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Measurement Model Estimation
- Structural Equation Modelling [SEM] and Assessment of Model Fit

EFA is conducted using SPSS 28.0, a statistical package for social sciences (Tabachnick et al., 2007). SPSS AMOS 28.0 was used to perform both CFA and SEM.

We explain the details of these steps in the following sections.

### 3.1. Data Collection Method and Instruments

For both survey studies, we sent out the questionnaire online and reached university students through email announcements made by the administrations of ten universities in Turkey. We utilized Ruvio et al. (2008)'s CNfU scale to measure the CNfU levels of the participants. Essentially, Synder and Fromkin (1980)'s NfU scale is widely use in the literature. However, it is problematic when it comes to consumer research (Lynn Harris, 1998). To address it, a widely accepted and reliable CNfU scale (Clark et al., 2007; Bian and Forsythe, 2012; Zhan and He, 2012) was developed by Tian et al. (2001), which is an application of the NfU scale in the consumer context (Ruvio, 2008). However, there are 31 measures on the scale, which makes it challenging to collect healthy data from the field (Ruvio et al., 2008). Considering the survey completion time and accuracy, we preferred to use the shortened and cross-culturally validated version of the CNfU scale developed by Ruvio et al. (2008). The scale includes four measures for each of the three dimensions (creative choice nonconformity, unpopular choice nonconformity, and similarity avoidance), making a total of 12 measures, hence 12 questions in the survey listed below.

**Table 1: Cnfu Scale Survey Questions**

| **Related Dimension** | **#** | **Variable Name** | **Please select the appropriate answer for each of the statements below** | **I totally disagree** | | **I neither agree** | **I agree** | **I totally agree** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| creative choice counter conformity | **1** | CREA_COMBINE | I often combine possessions in such a way that I create a personal image that cannot be duplicated. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| creative choice counter conformity | **2** | CREA_INTERESTING | I often try to find a more interesting version of run-of-the-mill products because I enjoy being original. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| creative choice counter conformity | **3** | CREA_BRAND | I actively seek to develop my personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| creative choice counter conformity | **4** | CREA_EYE | Having an eye for products that are interesting and unusual assists me in establishing a distinctive image. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| unpopular choice counter conformity | **5** | POP_RULES | When it comes to the products I buy and the situations in which I use them, I have broken customs and rules. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| unpopular choice counter conformity | **6** | POP_VIOLATE | I have often violated the understood rules of my social group regarding what to buy or own. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| unpopular choice counter conformity | **7** | POP_SOCIAL | I have often gone against the understood rules of my social group regarding when and how certain products are properly used. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| unpopular choice counter conformity | **8** | POP_CHALLENGE | I enjoy challenging the prevailing taste of people I know by buying something they would not seem to accept. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| avoidance of similarity | **9** | SIM_POPULAR | When a product I own becomes popular among the general population, I begin to use it less. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| avoidance of similarity | **10** | SIM_AVOID | I often try to avoid products or brands that I know are bought by the general population. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| avoidance of similarity | **11** | SIM_DISLIKE | As a rule, I dislike products or brands that are customarily bought by everyone. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| avoidance of similarity | **12** | SIM_COMMON | The more commonplace a product or brand is among the general population, the less interested I am in buying it. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**Source:** *(Ruvio, Shoham, & Brencic, 2008)*

The first survey included laptop computer features that were compiled from online shops and market places. The list can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2: Laptop Computer Features**

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Processor Chipset and Speed | 8 | Cam with face recognition | 15 | Detachable tablet screen |
| 2 | RAM Capacity | 9 | Touch screen | 16 | Guarantee duration |
| 3 | Operating System | 10 | 180-degree folding screen | 17 | Pre-installed MS Office |
| 4 | Storage Capacity | 11 | Integrated screen pen | 18 | Backlit keyboard |
| 5 | Battery capacity | 12 | Finger print reader | 19 | Pre-installed anti-virus software |
| 6 | Display adapter | 13 | Chassis color | 20 | Weight |
| 7 | Screen Size | 14 | Same-day repair/maintenance | 21 | Display refresh rate |

We provide details regarding the sample population information and descriptive analysis of the sample data in the following section.

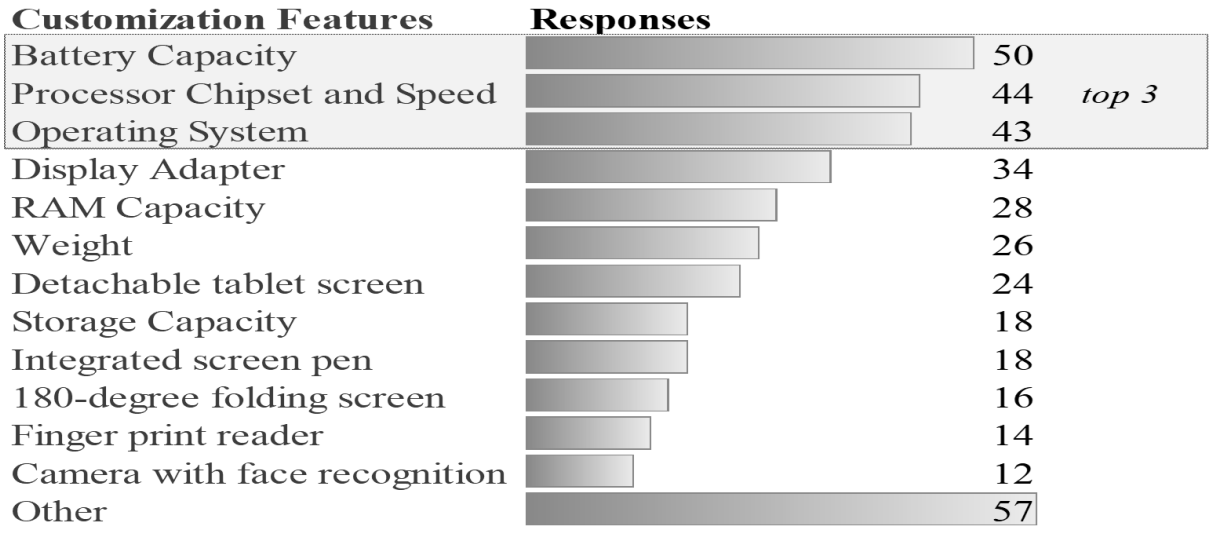
### 3.2. Sampling

We explained the rationale of the sample population profile in previous sections. For our research, our target population is Gen Z (people born between 1996 – 2010). Our two surveys reached approximately 10.000 students from 10 universities via e-mail.

*Survey I*

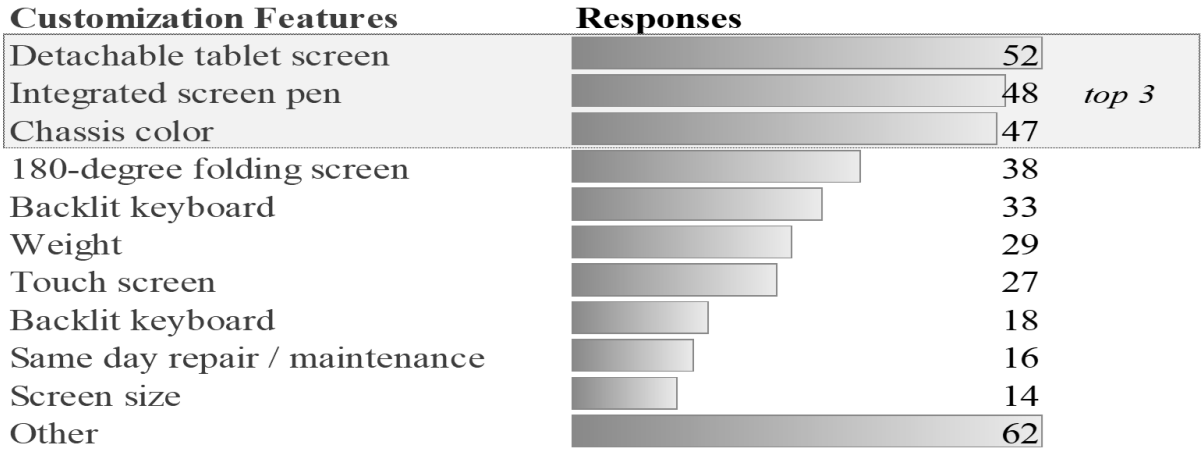
A total of 384 students, 172 women, and 212 men, participated in survey I, where they voted for the most unconventional and the most conventional laptop feature. The age distribution was between 18 and 22.

**Figure 2: Participants' Votes for The Most Standard / Conventional Features**



Battery capacity, processor chipset & speed, and operating system were the features that got the most votes for standard / conventional features. Mostly utilitarian attributes were chosen as conventional features (Figure 2).

**Figure 3: Participants' Votes for The Most Standard / Conventional Features**




Detachable tablet screen, Integrated screen pen, and chassis color were the features that got the most votes for original / unconventional features (Figure 3). Mostly hedonic attributes were chosen as unconventional features. This was in line with our goal, as high (versus low) need for uniqueness consumers favor hedonic attributes such as design and color (Jacoby and Kaplan, 1972).

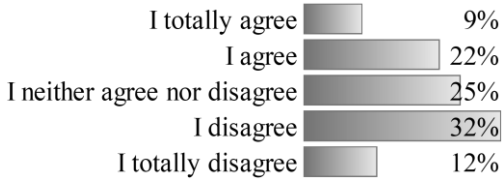
Survey II

A total of 482 students, 250 women, and 232 men, participated in survey II. The age distribution was between 18 and 22. The sample population and the number of questions together are eligible for EFA, CFA, and SEM studies.

**Figure 4: Participants' Customization Choice**


78% of the participants chose conventional customization option whereas 22% opted for the unconventional one (Figure 4). This may be an indicator that our sample population's CNfU is generally low.

**Figure 5: The Distribution of Participants 'Answers to The 12 Questions of Cnfu Scale**




Looking at the number of answers to the CNfU scale questions, 44% of the answers are "I disagree" or "I totally disagree". 31% of the answers are "I totally agree" or "I agree" (Figure 5). This may indicate a skewness in the direction of "low CNfU" for the sample population.

### 3.3. Hypothesis Testing and Results

We started to test our model with EFA. Despite we used a well-known and robust model from the literature; we still utilized EFA for the refinement of the constructs.

*Reliability test*

Prior to EFA analysis, we applied reliability tests for three dimensions of the scale. First two dimensions are below 0.70 but still acceptable. Third dimension is above 0.70 and eligible for EFA as well. The results are shown below in Table 3.

**Table 3: Cronbach Alpha Reliability Test Results For Cnfu Dimensions**

| Dimension | Cronbach's Alpha | Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items | N of items |
|---|---|---|---|
| creative choice counter conformity | .684 | .681 | 4 |
| unpopular choice counter conformity | .646 | .644 | 4 |
| avoidance of similarity | .809 | .810 | 4 |

*EFA*

We conducted EFA using varimax rotation and Principal Component Analysis (PCA) extraction method. The results of the analysis indicate that the sample population is adequate for EFA; as KMO measure of sampling adequacy is calculated as 0.877. The bivariate correlations among the extracted scales' items are significantly different from zero according to BTS. KMO and BTS results are shown below in Table 4.

**Table 4: KMO And Bartlett's Test For Cnfu Scale**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. | | .877 |
| Bartlett's Test of Sphericity | Approx. Chi-Square | 874.606 |
| | df | 66 |
| | Sig. | 0 |

After the first run of EFA, 3 components were extracted, which have eigenvalues more than 1, explaining the 58.73% of the total variance. Two measures of "unpopular choice", POP_VIOLATE and POP_RULES have merged with 4 measures of "avoidance of similarity". CREA_EYE has merged with the remainders of the "unpopular choice" measures, POP_SOCIAL and POP_CHALLENGE. Rest of the "creative choice" measures have stayed together. All factor loadings of the 3 components are above 0.5. However, POP_SOCIAL is very close to 0.5 and leads to low reliability for Component 2. Therefore, it is excluded from the scale and another EFA is run.

After the second run of EFA, three components were extracted, which have eigenvalues more than 1, explaining the 61.84% of the total variance. Component 1 and 3 remained unchanged. Component 2 has two items now: POP_CHALLENGE and CREA_EYE.

**Table 5: Final EFA results**

| **Initial Dimension** | **Variable Name** | **Comp 1** | **Comp 3** | **Comp 2** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| avoidance of similarity | SIM_DISLIKE | 0.794 | <0.5 | <0.5 |
| avoidance of similarity | SIM_AVOID | 0.779 | <0.5 | <0.5 |
| avoidance of similarity | SIM_COMMON | 0.762 | <0.5 | <0.5 |
| avoidance of similarity | SIM_POPULAR | 0.729 | <0.5 | <0.5 |
| unpopular choice | POP_RULES | 0.650 | <0.5 | <0.5 |
| unpopular choice | POP_VIOLATE | 0.642 | <0.5 | <0.5 |
| unpopular choice | POP_CHALLENGE | <0.5 | 0.807 | <0.5 |
| creative choice | CREA_EYE | <0.5 | 0.739 | <0.5 |
| creative choice | CREA_COMBINE | <0.5 | <0.5 | 0.855 |
| creative choice | CREA_INTERESTING | <0.5 | <0.5 | 0.668 |
| creative choice | CREA_BRAND | <0.5 | <0.5 | 0.550 |

Our initial CNfU scale dimensions have changed after EFA runs. For the time being, we will call these dimensions as "component 1, component 2, and component 3" for practical reasons. New and improved reliability values for new components are listed in Table 6.

**Table 6: Cronbach Alpha Reliability Test Results After Cnfu Dimension Restructuring**

| Dimension | Cronbach's Alpha | Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items | N of items |
|---|---|---|---|
| Component 1 | .850 | .851 | 6 |
| Component 3 | .629 | .28 | 4 |

Because Component 2 has two items, Spearman's rho and Pearson correlation tests were conducted. Both Spearman and Pearson correlations, significant at the 0.01 level, are listed in Table 7.

**Table 6: Spearman's Rho And Pearson Correlation Test Results**

| Dimension | Spearman's rho | Pearson correlation |
|---|---|---|
| Component 2 | .385 | .410 |

The correlation values are not promising, yet items are kept for CFA and SEM steps. We will conduct CFA as the next step.

*CFA*

Using SPSS AMOS 28, a CFA is run for our model. When the measurement model is estimated by CFA, five dimensions of construct validation are assessed. Construct validity requires; (1) unidimensionality of a construct (2) reliability, (3) convergent validity, (4) discriminant validity, and (5) nomological validity (Gerbing & Anderson, 1988; Steenkamp & Trijp, 1991).

Model fit measures are listed in Table 8 and the values are eligible for SEM.

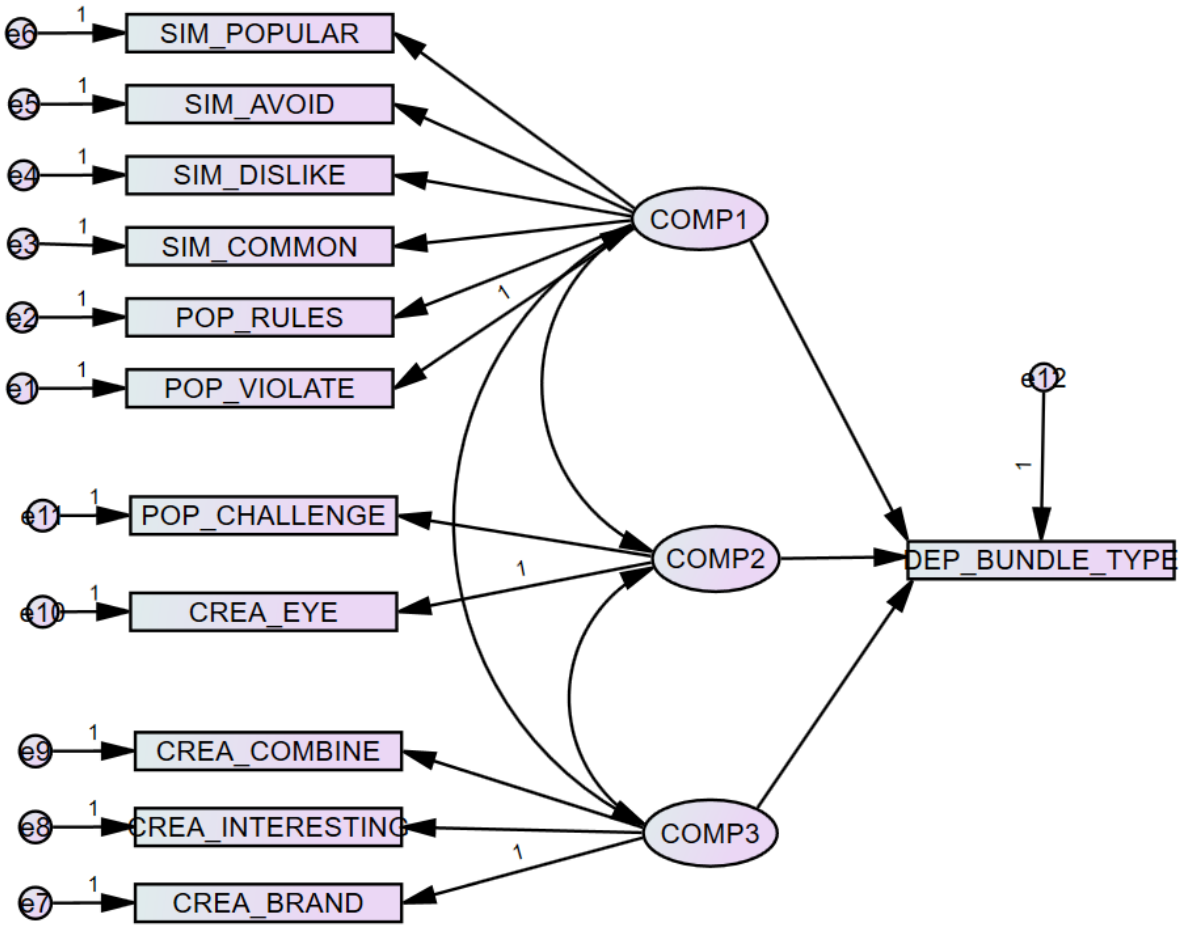
**Table 7: Model Fit Measures**

| Measure | Value |
|---|---|
| Chi-square/df (cmin/df) | 1.480 (good < 3) |
| CFI | .970 (meets > .90) |
| GFI | .954 (good >.90) |
| AGFI | .928 (recommended > 0.90) |
| RMSEA | .044 (good < .05) |
| NFI | .916 (recommended > 0.90) |

In terms of convergent validity, t values emerged as significant. In addition to t values, Average Variance Extracted (ρv - AVE) values are calculated for each measure and all of them are greater than 0.6 and "greater than .5" is acceptable. Moreover, composite reliability of each measure is greater than 0.9, whereas "greater than 0.7" is acceptable. Lastly, Squared Multiple Correlations (SMC) are examined and values emerged greater than 0.5, which is eligible for convergent validity. POP_CHALLENGE, POP_VIOLATE, and CREA_COMBINE items have values below 0.5. Because the values are close to 0.5, we choose to keep the items in the model for face validity reasons.

Following the construct validity test steps, we will use the model in Figure 6 for SEM analysis.

**Figure 6: SEM Model**

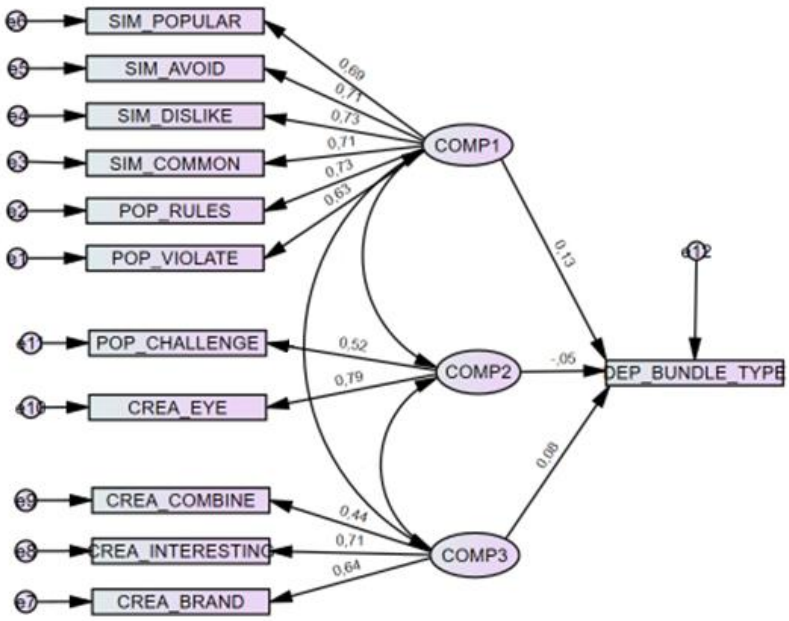



SEM analysis steps are explained in detail the following section.

*SEM*

Using SPSS AMOS 28, a SEM is run for our model. Results are shown in Figure 7:

**Figure 7: SEM Results**



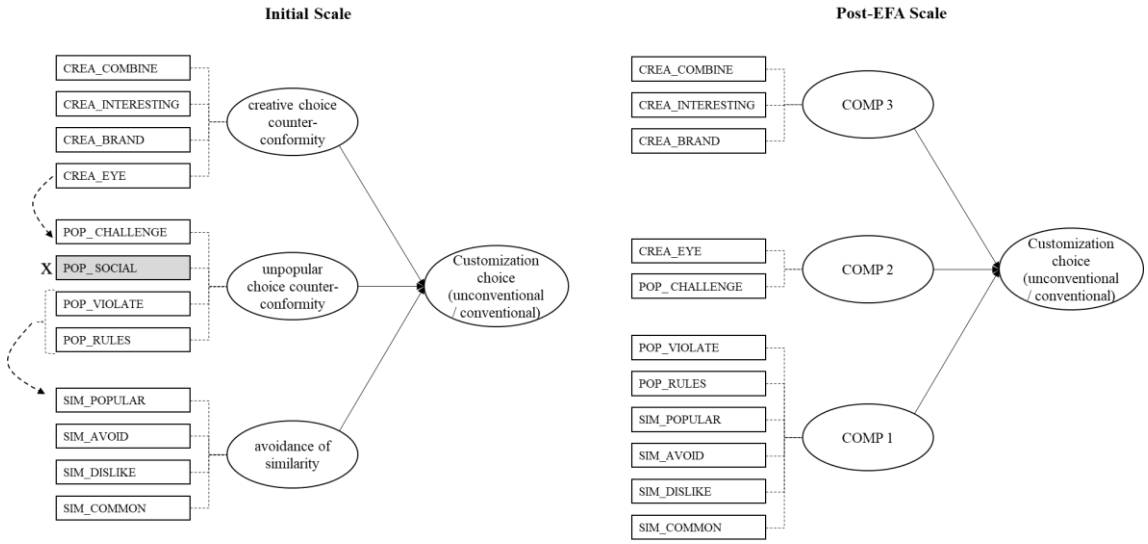

At the first look, it can be seen that the updated CNfU scale works in general. Only the standard regression weights (SRW) are relatively low for CREA_COMBINE and POP_CHALLENGE.

Looking at the SRWs of the relationships between the components and customization choice, it can be revealed that CNfU doesn't have any influence on customization set choices. The t values of "DEP_BUNDLE_TYPE <--- COMP1", "DEP_BUNDLE_TYPE <--- COMP2", and "DEP_BUNDLE_TYPE <--- COMP3" are also insignificant. Therefore, all of the hypotheses are rejected.

## 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Before we move on with discussing the results, we'd like to start with examining why the CNfU scale didn't pass the EFA preserving its structure. As mentioned, "avoidance of similarity" items merged with two items of "unpopular choice counter conformity". One of the 2 remaining items of "unpopular choice counter conformity" disappeared and the other merged with one item of "creative choice counter conformity". The remaining three items of "creative choice counter conformity" stayed together. The emergence of the scale is shown in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Emergence of The Scale**




A reason for this emergence might be the loss in translation of the scale questions. Despite the best efforts, there is a chance that the questions are perceived differently in other languages. Moreover, even if there are three group of scale questions under three different themes, they all serve to explain CNfU, and it is not surprising some of the items from separate groups move in the same direction and merge as a result.

Looking at Component 1, the dominant theme seems to be avoidance of similarity, so we choose to keep the name as it is. For Component 2, having an eye for products that are unusual requires challenging the status quo. Therefore, we assign an "unpopular choice" name to it. Lastly, Component 2 is fully composed of creative choice items, so the name stays the same.

Regarding results, our work has led us to conclude that CNfU has no influence on the attitude of Gen Zers to choosing between unconventional and conventional customization options for a technology product. In general, positive relationships are widespread in the literature. Negative relationships are also encountered (Matthews et al., 2019; Franke and Steger, 2009). However, "no influence" is rare (Ross et al., 2014), and our results are somewhat unexpected. This may have several reasons. "Lack of scarceness" can be one of them. As mentioned before, the scarcity of a product is an important factor in attracting consumers with high CNfU (Lynn, 1991). In this case, even though we offered two options, the participants may implicitly feel that they can find any combination of configuration features in real life. Therefore, the pseudo-scarcity of a narrowed option of customization may not have any influence on their NfU. Future research can eliminate this possibility by focusing on behavior instead of attitude and surveying based on scenarios. CNfU scale can be applied to people who already bought the products, hence the actual past behavior.

Second, even if the second customization option was found "unconventional" in the first survey concerning the first one, it is only "relatively" unconventional, and we are not sure about the degree to

which the Gen-Z participants think it is a creative choice. Therefore, the second option may not be "unconventional enough" for them. Future research can focus on brands that are well-known for their "identity expression attribute" such as Vespa and Harley Davidson to secure the product's unconventionality. In terms of practical implications, companies need to make sure that they offer the right customization options and communicate them effectively while targeting consumers with high CNfU.

Third, a laptop computer may not be an "identity signaling" product that helps communicate self-identity for Gen-Zers after all. Their NfU may be "product-specific" (Zaggi et al., 2019). Even if it is not, the unconventional customization option may not have been perceived as a way to show uniqueness. In addition, standard and conventional choices appeal to the utilitarian goals of the consumers (Ding and Keh, 2016), and consumers might have prioritized their utilitarian goal and chosen critical features such as battery capacity. Given the global economic stagnation, inflation, and interruptions in the supply chain, the consumers' focus might have shifted to utility instead of self-gratification and expressing self-identity. Future research may focus on which products and services are perceived as a way to express self-identity and uniqueness and which ones are perceived as utilities only. This has an implication on companies as to deciding to invest in unconventional options for their products and services. They can optimize their costs by effectively assigning budgets for product and service customization.

Fourth, we are aware that survey participants were limited to two options of customization. If none of the options provided their ideal mix of uniqueness and conformity (Zaggi et al., 2019), there is a possibility that their CNfU levels became irrelevant. Future research can provide flexible customization options and let the participants develop their ideal mix of uniqueness and conformity, thus exploring which features high-CNfU consumers choose to customize. Companies can achieve better results by providing flexible customization options other than fixed options of features.

Fifth, innovative behavior such as opting for the unconventional option is not exclusively dependent on CNfU but on some other factors such as sensation-seeking and risk-taking as well (Burns & Krampf, 1992; Tepper & Hoyle, 1996). There is a possibility that these factors may have stepped in to neutralize the effect of CNfU. Future research can also include these factors in order to understand the relationship between CNfU and other factors. Companies also need to take other factors into account to maximize their return on investments in mass customization.

Lastly, our findings can definitely not be generalized to other products and services. We strongly suggest that researchers work on a range of products and services to understand the variances of the impact of CNFU on customization.

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| Veri Toplama ve İşleme / *Data Collecting and Processing* | Verileri toplamak, düzenlenmek ve raporlamak / *Collecting, organizing and reporting data* | Asst. Prof. (Ph.D.) Cem DURAN<br>Asst. Prof. (Ph.D.) Anıl Savaş KILIÇ |
| *Tartışma ve Yorum / Discussion and Interpretation* | Bulguların değerlendirilmesinde ve sonuçlandırılmasında sorumluluk almak / *Taking responsibility in evaluating and finalizing the findings* | Asst. Prof. (Ph.D.) Cem DURAN<br>Asst. Prof. (Ph.D.) Anıl Savaş KILIÇ |
| Literatür Taraması / *Literature Review* | Çalışma için gerekli literatürü taramak / *Review the literature required for the study* | Asst. Prof. (Ph.D.) Cem DURAN<br>Asst. Prof. (Ph.D.) Anıl Savaş KILIÇ |

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