

DIGITAL SOCIALISATION AMONG NEET YOUTH: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS BASED ON EXPERT OPINIONS ON PSYCHOSOCIAL PROCESSES AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

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This study complies with research and publication ethics.

Abstract

This study examines the social media use of NEET youth through the lens of economic, psychological, and socio-cultural vulnerabilities reflected in the digital environment. Research findings indicate that disengagement from education and employment, family pressure and conflicts, gender-based constraints, and weakened peer relationships are the primary factors driving young people toward the digital sphere. Under these conditions, social media emerges as an alternative psychosocial space that goes beyond being a communication tool, fulfilling needs such as gaining visibility, forming a sense of belonging, regulating emotions, and preserving self-worth. The findings show that young people develop a more controlled presentation of their identity in the digital environment, compensating online for areas where they struggle in offline relationships due to a reduced risk of rejection. However, excessive use of social media can also create new vulnerabilities such as comparison pressure, feelings of inadequacy, and social withdrawal. Overall, the study reveals that digital practices are closely intertwined with social exclusion among NEET youth; digital participation can only be empowering when combined with psychosocial support, concrete opportunities, and youth-friendly social environments.

Keywords: NEET, NEET youth, digital vulnerability, social media use, digital exclusion.

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'NEET' GENÇLERDE DİJİTAL SOSYALLEŞME: PSİKOSOSYAL SÜREÇLER VE TOPLUMSAL ENTEGRASYON ÜZERİNE UZMAN GÖRÜŞLERİNE DAYALI NİTEL BİR ANALİZ

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Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Öz

Bu çalışma, 'NEET' gençlerin sosyal medya kullanımını ekonomik, psikolojik ve sosyo-kültürel kırılmalıkların dijital ortamdaki yansımaları üzerinden incelemektedir. Araştırma bulguları, eğitim ve istihdamdan kopuşun, aile içi baskı ve çatışmaların, toplumsal cinsiyet temelli kısıtların ve akran ilişkilerindeki zayıflamanın gençleri dijital alana yönelten temel etkenler olduğunu göstermektedir. Sosyal medya, bu koşullar altında bir iletişim aracı olmanın ötesinde görünürlük kazanma, aidiyet oluşturma, duygusal düzenleme ve benlik değerini koruma gibi ihtiyaçların karşılandığı alternatif bir psikososyal alan olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bulgular, gençlerin dijital ortamda daha kontrollü bir kimlik sunumu geliştirdiklerini, reddedilme riskinin azalmasıyla çevrimdışı ilişkilerde zorlandıkları alanları çevrimiçi düzlemde telafi ettiklerini göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, sosyal medyanın aşırı kullanımı karşılaştırma baskısı, yetersizlik duygusu ve sosyal geri çekilme gibi yeni kırılmalıklar da üretebilmektedir. Çalışma genel olarak, dijital pratiklerin 'NEET' gençliğin toplumsal dışlanma deneyimleriyle yakından ilişkili olduğunu; dijital katılımın ancak psikososyal destek, somut fırsatlar ve gençlere uygun sosyal çevrelerle birleştiğinde güçlendirici bir yapıya dönüşebileceğini ortaya çıkarmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: NEET, NEET genç, dijital kırılmalıklık, sosyal medya kullanımı, dijital dışlanma.

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Introduction

In recent years, discussions on youth unemployment, along with growing concerns about young people not in education, employment, or training, have brought the concept of 'NEET' (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) to the forefront. The NEET concept refers to the proportion of young people in a specific age group and gender who are neither working nor participating in education or training (EUROSTAT, 2021). The concept is used to describe not only unemployment but also forms of social exclusion, disengagement, and vulnerability prevalent among young people (Maguire, 2015, p. 124).

According to the OECD and ILO definitions, the concept of employment covers people who work at least one hour per week for pay, as well as those temporarily absent from work. According to this definition, young people who are unemployed and not in education or training are classified as NEET. The concept of education, on the other hand, covers formal programs, whether part-time or full-time, but does not include informal or short-term learning activities (OECD, 2024). The term NEET emerged in the 1990s, following research in the United Kingdom to identify young people at risk of social exclusion. The concept was first officially defined in the 1999 Social Exclusion Report and was quickly adopted by other countries. Today, NEET has become an important indicator for assessing the position of young people in the global labor market (Tatar & Öztürk, 2024, pp. 133-134).

According to 2024 OECD data, Turkey ranks first worldwide in the average number of NEETs aged 15-29 (OECD, 2024). The interest in the concept of NEET stems from its ability to explain multidimensional vulnerabilities, such as early school leaving, disengagement from the labor market, hopelessness, and weakening ties to education. Economic stagnation in industrial economies and global crises such as COVID-19 have increased the number of NEET youth and further reinforced the importance of the issue for policymakers (Rahmani & Groot, 2023, p. 1).

Although the NEET concept is convenient for policy design, it is important to emphasize that the group of young people it covers is heterogeneous. This group includes young people who have dropped out of education, those who cannot work due to family responsibilities, individuals who prepare for exams on their own without participating in any formal education, and young people who cannot participate in employment due to health or care responsibilities (Çakmak & Yiğit, 2022, pp. 151-152). Therefore, NEET youth cannot be limited to the unemployed category alone. According to O'Higgins (2025), this group includes all young unemployed people who are not in education, as well as individuals who are not looking for work for various reasons but are not completely disconnected from the labor market. With the latest revisions in international statistics, a person must now be paid to be considered employed. This situation leads to young people who earn their living through their own production or who work as unpaid family workers being included in the NEET

category if they are not also in education (Rahmani & Groot, 2023, p. 1).

The NEET concept has become an important indicator for understanding youth unemployment, social exclusion, and social fragility. Policies that increase these young people's participation in education and employment are critical not only economically but also for social integration (Tatar & Öztürk, 2024, pp. 133-134). In this context, the NEET concept today reflects multidimensional realities that should be understood as an important indicator encompassing deeper social dynamics beyond merely pointing to youth unemployment. Therefore, action plans that include reintegrating young people into education and employment processes should be evaluated not only as mechanisms that support economic development but primarily as goals that increase individual well-being and, in turn, promote social integration and solidarity.

In this context, evaluating NEET youth solely in terms of their relationship with the labor market is an incomplete approach. At this point, it is also important to understand young people's position within digital culture. This study aims to examine in depth the social media practices of NEET youth, their tendencies toward digital addiction, and their processes of online visibility, belonging, and identity search, as reflected in expert opinions. Thus, the research aims to move the NEET phenomenon beyond economic indicators and address digital culture, psychosocial vulnerabilities, and communication practices within a holistic framework.

The Decisive Role of Gender in NEET Youth

When discussing the multi-layered nature of the NEET concept, it is important to emphasize that risk distribution is unequal and that gender is a decisive factor (Amendola, 2022; Odoardi et al., 2022; Susanlı, 2016). Research shows that women are more likely than men to remain outside the labor force (Analytics Development, 2020; Lüküslü & Çelik, 2022). The high risk of young women becoming NEET is attributed in many countries to gender roles and women's excessive family responsibilities and domestic roles (Arabacı, 2020; Holmes & Taki, 2022; Odoardi et al., 2022; Özdemir et al., 2023). It has been found that women with children and low levels of education face serious difficulties in entering the labor market and are excluded from it (Malo vd., 2023). This situation creates a persistent area of inequality that limits both the economic independence and social participation of young women (Elitaş, 2025). In this context, the importance of social policy interventions in reducing gender-based differences has also been emphasized in the literature. Rodríguez-Modroño (2019) states that most policies developed to combat youth unemployment do not sufficiently consider gender differences and that this situation leads to the continuation of existing inequalities. Kang & Youn (2024) argue that public social spending, education investments, and early childhood education programs play a key role in reducing gender differences in the likelihood of

entering NEET status.

Educational Level and Vocational Adjustment Problems Among NEET Youth

The role of educational level in determining NEET risk has also been strongly demonstrated in the literature (Susanlı, 2016; Smoter & Szymczak, 2024). Research shows that low educational attainment and lack of practical experience significantly reduce young people's employability (Leino et al., 2013; Şen, 2025). Economic hardship and negative perceptions of the education system contribute to young people's disengagement from education (Şahin & Boduroğlu, 2025). Structural mismatches between the education system and the labor market increase the risk of job insecurity and NEET status; low-skilled young people remain in NEET status for long periods due to limited vocational training opportunities (Rahmani & Groot, 2023; Holmes & Taki, 2022).

Studies across countries have shown that strong vocational education and apprenticeship programs reduce this risk, but these policies have had limited impact in most countries (Brzinsky-Fay & Jongbloed, 2022). Profile studies conducted in Turkey show that most NEET youth are high school graduates, have no work experience, and come from low-income families (Şahin et al., 2021). Brzinsky-Fay (2022) found that university graduates are not adversely affected by short-term NEET periods at entry to the labor market. Rahmani et al. (2024) state that a higher level of education plays a protective role against NEET status. While education is one of the most important protective factors that reduce the likelihood of NEET, it is also stated that even a high level of education alone does not provide sufficient protection in some countries (Ibourk & Elouaourtı, 2024). In this context, parental education, household income, and social conditions also emerge as decisive factors (Elitaş, 2025).

Family Structure, Socioeconomic Status, and Parental Characteristics of NEET Youth

In addition to individual educational level, the social and economic resources provided by family structure and parental characteristics play a critical role in the emergence of NEET status (Alfieri et al., 2015; Broschinski & Feldhaus, 2025; Elitaş, 2025; Zuccotti & O'Reilly, 2019). The family's socioeconomic stability, educational level, and the quality of parent-child relationships significantly influence young people's risk of becoming NEET (Broschinski & Feldhaus, 2025; Elitaş, 2025). Research conducted in Germany shows that trust-based parent-child relationships, emotional support, and social capital within the family reduce the likelihood of long-term or recurring NEET situations (Broschinski & Feldhaus, 2025).

Similarly, parents' employment status is also a decisive factor; young peo-

ple with unemployed parents are more likely to become NEET than those from households where at least one parent is employed, but this difference is not observed at the same level across all ethnic groups (Zuccotti & O'Reilly, 2019). The family's economic stability is directly related to parents' employment status, and this has a protective effect against NEET risk. Income level has been found to have a U-shaped relationship with the likelihood of being NEET (Eli-taş, 2025; Leino et al., 2013). Furthermore, parents' educational level and supportive attitudes also have a protective effect against NEET risk. Alfieri et al. (2015) found that parental autonomy reduces the likelihood of NEET among males, but overly intrusive parental attitudes increase NEET risk, particularly among females.

Household Well-Being, Regional Differences, and Economic Factors Among NEET Youth

Household welfare and demographic structures are also considered decisive factors in NEET risk (Analytics Development, 2020; Ciccarelli & Fabrizi, 2017; Ibourk & Elouaourti, 2024; Karma, 2024; Özdemir et al., 2023). In highly developed countries with extensive social protection systems, economic stability reduces NEET rates (Çizel et al., 2023), while regional differences in education, female employment, and household income play a decisive role (Özdemir et al., 2023). GDP and labor market regulations have significant effects on NEET (Karma, 2024), while an increase in the number of working or higher education-educated individuals in the household reduces the likelihood of NEET (Ibourk & Elouaourti, 2024). In Italy, most NEET youth are found in households experiencing economic hardship and unable to receive state support (Ciccarelli & Fabrizi, 2017). In contrast, in Turkey, a higher number of employed household members reduces the risk of NEET (Susanlı, 2016).

Another factor affecting NEET status in the literature is geographical location (Analytics Development, 2020; Assmann & Broschinski, 2021; Çizel, et al., 2023; Ibourk & Elouaourti, 2024; Özdemir, et al., 2023). In Türkiye, the likelihood of being NEET among young people is particularly high in the Southeast Anatolia, Central Anatolia, and Mediterranean regions and low in the Marmara and Aegean regions (Analytics Development, 2020; Özdemir et al., 2023). Studies conducted across Europe reveal that NEET groups exhibit regionally distinct characteristics. Young NEETs with family care responsibilities are generally concentrated in Central and Eastern European countries where social services for families are weak. In contrast, disabled NEETs are more prevalent in Northern Europe. Unemployed and discouraged young NEETs are concentrated in Southern and Central-Eastern European countries, which are most affected by economic crises and have high labor market rigidities (Assmann & Broschinski, 2021). In general, it is emphasized that living in urban areas reduces the likelihood of becoming a NEET and that regional differences must be evaluated alongside economic, social, and institutional factors (Ibourk &

Elouaourti, 2024).

The unemployment experiences of NEET youth have psychological, social, and economic consequences. Research shows that men are more likely to become NEET due to labor market uncertainty and health problems, while women are more likely to become NEET due to social roles and family pressure (Arabacı, 2020). Long-term unemployment causes effects such as stress, hopelessness, loss of self-esteem, and social isolation in young people. This situation negatively affects social welfare by reducing productivity (Işık, 2019; Şen, 2025). Research shows that young people are distancing themselves from employment and school due to low wages, insecure work, and distrust of the education system (Şahin & Boduroğlu, 2025). Particularly, young women risk losing their individual freedoms under the pressure to marry (Tolgay & Çakır, 2022). Therefore, the NEET phenomenon is a multidimensional problem that reflects not only economic but also psychological and social vulnerabilities.

Digital Socialization and Psychosocial Vulnerabilities Among NEET Youth

While most studies on NEET youth in the digital age focus on education and employment, the psychological and communicative dimensions of these young people's social media experiences have been largely overlooked. However, social media is not only a means of entertainment and communication for NEET youth but also a center for visibility, belonging, and identity search. Studies such as Grigorescu et al. (2025) and Smoter & Szymczak (2024) show that a lack of digital skills increases the risk of NEET, while Neagu et al. (2021) reveal that digital exclusion hinders social mobility, especially among rural youth.

In this context, it is evident that the concept of NEET has evolved beyond a narrow category referring solely to youth unemployment; it has become a multidimensional indicator in which social, cultural, and psychological vulnerabilities intersect. Therefore, policies aimed at reintegrating young people into education and employment processes must be approached as inclusive mechanisms that go beyond economic development to strengthen individual well-being and prioritize social integration. This study delves into the digital life practices, social media usage, and digital addiction tendencies of NEET youth through expert opinions. Understanding how NEET youth experience processes such as visibility, seeking approval, belonging, and identity construction on social media contributes to a more comprehensive assessment of this group's psychosocial vulnerabilities. Thus, the research repositions the NEET phenomenon not merely as an economic problem but as a multi-layered social issue intertwined with digital culture, communication practices, and psychological processes, emphasizing the necessity of a holistic, interdisciplinary perspective in understanding this field.

Methodology

This study aims to analyze the psycho-social, structural, and environmental factors that determine the social media use of NEET youth within digital culture and to reveal the digital vulnerabilities of this group within a comprehensive framework. Based on expert opinions, the research examined why NEET youth turn to digital environments, how social media functions as a compensatory space for them, and what opportunities these platforms offer for re-participation in social life. In this context, the study aims to identify the risk and protective factors that influence the nature of social media applications among NEET youth and to explain the NEET phenomenon from an interdisciplinary perspective that simultaneously addresses digital culture, communication applications, and psycho-social processes. This research employed a qualitative method grounded in expert opinions and semi-structured interviews. In line with the principles of qualitative research design, purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data were analyzed using thematic analysis; expert opinions were classified into themes, considering similarities and differences.

Research Population and Sample¹

The research population consists of experts who work with NEET (not in education, employment, or training) youth and possess experience, observation, and professional knowledge of this group's social media use. Ten experts in psychology, sociology, youth studies, and media and communication with direct field experience with NEET youth were selected as the sample. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with rich knowledge. The criteria for including participants in the study were professional experience with NEET youth and the ability to evaluate social media applications within the scope of professional observation.

Six participants were female, and four were male. The interviews were conducted online between November 11 and 21, 2025, and lasted 12 to 26 minutes. The purpose and scope of the research were explained to the participants, and they were informed in writing that their identity information would be kept confidential and that the data obtained would be used only for this study. The participants and the researcher signed voluntary participation forms confirming that participation was entirely voluntary. During the analysis phase, all participants were assigned pseudonyms (*P1*, *P2*, etc.). Information about the participants is presented in *Table 1*.

¹ The research was deemed ethically appropriate by the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Osmaniye Korkut Ata University with its decision dated 19/09/2025 and numbered E.249683.

Table 1. Information about participants

| Participant | Gender | Employer | Occupation |
|-------------|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| P1 | Male | YEŞİLAY (YEDAM) | Psychologist |
| P2 | Female | Ministry of Family and Social Services | Psychologist |
| P3 | Female | Ministry of Family and Social Services of the Republic of Türkiye | Sociologist |
| P4 | Male | Ministry of Youth and Sports | Youth Worker/Communication-Social Media Officer |
| P5 | Female | Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Youth and Sports | Youth Worker/Sociologist |
| P6 | Male | Ministry of Youth and Sports | Youth Worker/Psychologist |
| P7 | Male | Ministry of National Education | Specialist Teacher / Youth Association Manager |
| P8 | Female | Bilgi University | TÜBİTAK Project Scholar (Doctorate) |
| P9 | Female | Gazi University | Academic/Youth Association Manager |
| P10 | Female | Research Foundation | Project Specialist |

Research Questions

The following questions were addressed in the research:

- RQ1: How do the psycho-social vulnerabilities of NEET youth shape their social media usage?
- RQ2: How does the breakdown of family and friend relationships lead NEET youth to meet certain emotional needs on social media?
- RQ3: How can digital strategies support the reintegration of NEET youth into social life and the workforce?

Findings

Psycho-social dynamics shaping social media use among NEET youth

Expert opinions indicate that NEET youth's social media use is too layered and contextual to be explained by a single-dimensional addiction category, while also pointing out that social media often serves as a refuge for young people, compensating for experiences of loneliness, worthlessness, exclusion, and aimlessness. In this context, social media is positioned as a means of emotional regulation, identity construction, and an alternative space for socializa-

tion. Discussed in the literature as compensatory internet use (Kardefelt-Winter, 2014; Zhou et al., 2020), this approach emphasizes that the shift towards the digital environment is, in most cases, a result of underlying psychosocial vulnerabilities. Expert opinions strongly support this perspective.

In this context, *P1* emphasizes that the stories of young people who apply to the YEŞİLAY counselling center generally begin with a need. He states that experiences such as exclusion, rejection, and a lack of belonging can trigger a shift towards the digital realm. According to *P1*, the process begins with “an innocent need to find and create oneself there, but over time, this usage can evolve into a cycle of addiction by overtaking personal needs.”

We observe that the story generally begins with a need. For example, exclusion or not being accepted, not feeling a sense of belonging, I observe that this is not only seen in technology addiction but also in other addictions. The story begins innocently with the need to find and create oneself there, and then we see addiction coming in, and once addiction kicks in, we observe that it has already overtaken the needs. Although other types of addiction are also observed, social media is the most accessible.

This statement shows that social media use is a cyclical process that starts functional and coping-oriented but can lead to loss of self-control and deterioration of functionality over time. As emphasized by *P1*, *P9*, and *P4*, social media stands out as the most readily accessible, lowest-barrier, and most functional compensatory mechanism in the lives of NEET youth compared to other coping strategies due to its low cost, lack of time constraints, and quick escape from daily troubles.

P2 also states that most young people in the population he worked with were connected to social media through proving themselves and the like-being-liked cycle, and that digital platforms were brought to the fore in their efforts to cope with boredom. This pattern has persisted since adolescence. His emphasis that young people with social phobic tendencies are more comfortable expressing themselves on social media than in face-to-face interactions indicates that the digital environment provides NEET youth with a low-risk, controlled, and invisible space for expression. Therefore, social media creates an alternative space for subjectification for NEET youth.

P3 and *P5* address this functional aspect of social media within a broader framework. *P3* states that a significant portion of NEET youth feel socially isolated, and this group, which is neither in employment nor education, turns to the digital environment as an escape from their circumstances, such as unemployment and staying at home; *P3* defines this escape as a psychosocial need. *P5* emphasizes that when time management and self-control weaken, screen addiction can become inevitable. In the absence of tasks and responsibilities, control is left entirely to the individual’s own initiative. *P5* states that psychological fragility combined with weak time management and self-control makes screen use inevitable and that social media functions as a filler in young people’s lives, filling voids such as approval, being liked, self-expression, and

friendship:

Especially when accompanied by the young person's negative psychological state and a repressive, judgmental social environment, screen addiction becomes an escape, a filler that fills all the gaps in their life, such as approval, being liked, self-expression, and friendship, and takes over their daily life so much so that the universe does not tolerate emptiness.

This metaphor strikingly reveals that social media acts as a filler, temporarily covering the emotional and social cracks in the lives of NEET youth, while concealing the underlying structural problems. One reason this filler quality is so powerful is that the NEET youth community is heterogeneous; different subgroups exhibit varying needs and vulnerability profiles regarding social media. It is precisely at this point that the heterogeneous structure of NEET youth, as emphasized by *P10*, becomes significant.

P10 emphasizes that NEET youth do not constitute a single group. According to her, a significant portion of this group exhibits characteristics typical of permanent NEET, and typical youth behaviors such as risk-taking, mobility, and dreaming about the future are markedly weakened in these young people. They tend to be more introverted, static, and resigned. For this reason, social media has become virtually the only medium through which these young people, who already have limited access to physical socialization spaces, can connect with the outside world. *P10* points out that, especially for female NEETs, due to the burden of domestic care and limited mobility, the digital space plays a critical role in terms of both social visibility and access to information about the outside world, indicating that social media use must be considered in conjunction with gender roles, class inequalities, and spatial constraints:

Whenever we undertake a project involving NEET youth, one of the most critical issues is their limited access to socialization spaces. Education and employment are areas where people can encounter different individuals and cultural groups. When they are far from these areas, and especially when they leave home, they lack the economic and financial resources to do so; in such cases, social media becomes an indispensable tool. That's why I think social media has this kind of vision, based on our own research.

The *P8* assessment deepens this picture, emphasizing that social media use among NEET youth often stems from structural and emotional constraints. It notes that among university graduates who fall into the NEET category, irregular daily routines, the absence of a routine tied to work or school, and associated behaviors such as staying up late and sleeping in facilitate longer exposure to digital platforms. According to *P8*, young people's inability to organize their days, access social spaces, and participate in real social life turns social media into both a means of distraction and an emotional compensation zone. Especially for young people who compare themselves to their peers because they cannot find a job or establish a professional position, social media can become an area that reinforces feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness.

Especially for university graduates and those in the NEET category, comparing

themselves to their friends can make them feel inadequate and, in turn, emotionally drained. One issue we discuss with NEETs is social exclusion and stigmatization, which can lead to staying at home and being connected to the digital world but not being able to participate in real social life. We can also talk about mobility restrictions, autonomy restrictions, and not being able to socialize outside due to financial constraints. This also leads to efforts to socialize or build relationships more on social media, or simply to connect by following others.

P6 emphasizes that the fundamental criterion of addiction is impaired social functioning. According to him, for some young people, social media creates a picture approaching behavioral addiction, accompanied by neglect of responsibilities, weakening of relationships, and loss of interest in daily activities. Therefore, while it is not accurate to label all NEET youth as addicted, it has been noted that for a specific subgroup, usage has evolved from a compensatory need into an addictive pattern that diminishes quality of life.

P9 and *P4* add a balancing perspective to the picture. *P9* emphasizes that not only NEET youth but all people with ample free time can use social media intensively, but that this does not always reach an uncontrollable level, as in other types of addiction. According to him, the fundamental problem is often the lack of better alternatives to replace it, such as engaging community programs, job training, or educational opportunities that could provide more fulfilling ways to spend their time. This assessment offers a framework that points to a lack of opportunities and options rather than pathologizing NEET youth's orientation toward the digital realm. *P4* similarly states that social media use is mostly a result, not a cause, expressing that young people turn to digital media to fill the voids in their lives.

When all these expert opinions are considered together, it is seen that the assessment of social media addiction is shaped largely as a result rather than a cause. The turn to digital media among NEET youth often reflects prior psychosocial vulnerabilities, such as exclusion, worthlessness, low self-esteem, unstructured time, the void created by being out of work or education, and a lack of family support. Social media thus becomes both easily accessible and low barrier, as well as a quick emotional compensation area in young people's lives. As a result, while for some young people its use remains a functional coping strategy, for others, as *P2* and *P6* point out, it evolves into a vicious cycle of seeking approval, weakening social relationships, and loss of functionality. Therefore, social media addiction is positioned not as a problem that arises on its own among NEET youth, but rather as a result of existing social, economic and emotional vulnerabilities becoming visible.

The impact of fragility in family and peer relationships on digital orientation

Expert opinions indicate that NEET youth's orientation toward the digital world should be understood in the context of a lack of social support in family

and peer relationships, as well as through the lens of impaired emotional regulation processes. For most of these young people, relational vulnerabilities that have persisted since childhood and adolescence place them at the threshold of adulthood in a position where they are devoid of secure attachment figures and reluctant to engage with the outside world.

The nature of the family structure plays a critical role in this process. As *P6* points out, when authoritarian, indifferent, or overly permissive-indulgent parenting models fail to meet the young person's emotional needs, the young person turns to the digital world to fill this void. *P9* and *P5* state that young people, especially in oppressive families, use social media more intensively to both distance themselves from their families and discover an outlet for their unexpressed emotions. *P7* observations add an important detail to this picture: generational differences within the family, communication breakdowns, and having many siblings make it difficult for young people to gain visibility and a voice at home; this feeling of invisibility leads them to feel more understood and freer on social media. *P4* field experience further deepens these dynamics:

If communication within the family is weak, young people may begin to use social media as an escape, a coping mechanism, and sometimes as a place to develop their identity. I would say that this disconnect usually begins with communication problems within the family.

The fact that this disconnect, as expressed by *P4*, begins with communication within the family is further highlighted by tensions within the family stemming from NEET status, as emphasized by *P8*. According to *P8*, being NEET is a situation that increases pressure on young people within the family in terms of both economic and gender-based expectations; for female NEETs, statements such as "If you're not working, then get married" and for male NEETs, stigmatizing approaches such as not being able to build a life or not being a man are important sources of this tension. Therefore, NEET youth's use of digital media is often seen by families as disturbing or incomprehensible behavior, and this situation further sharpens generational conflict, especially in families with low socioeconomic status:

Young people's use of digital media may become disturbing or incomprehensible to their families, especially for families with low socioeconomic status. The longer a young person remains NEET, the less influence they have within the family and the less they participate in and share with it...

P8 points out that the longer the NEET period, the less say young people have within the family, the less they participate in decision-making processes, and the less visible they are. This situation reinforces young people's feelings of ineffectiveness and not taking up space within the home. *P10*'s contributions place this picture within a structural framework. According to him, the vast majority of NEETs with low educational attainment also come from families with low educational attainment; this creates significant inequalities in ac-

cess to technological tools, literacy, and digital awareness. Weak restrictions or guidance regarding digital use during childhood and adolescence largely shape young people's independent digital behavior in adulthood. *P10* also emphasizes that NEET women have extremely limited freedom:

On the other hand, NEET women are not free. I am referring specifically to women's access to phones in cities outside Istanbul. Therefore, rather than believing that the pressure there could result in an addictive relationship, I think the opposite is true: confiscation of their phones, especially when they talk to members of the opposite sex, could lead to family-related situations, particularly for women, where they experience violence. There is a serious conflict with the family on this issue. Considering that they cannot leave the house or have private space, we cannot even talk about a secret social media addiction, especially for women.

These findings generally indicate that NEET status weakens the family's balance of power and narrows the young person's contact with the social world. Young people who lose their visibility in the family are excluded from decision-making processes and are not emotionally supported. They not only turn to the digital realm but also become shy, tending to stay in the background in their relationships with the outside world. Thus, this relational disconnect created by intra-family tensions and gender-based pressures makes it even more difficult for young people to maintain peer bonds, gradually distancing them from their social circles.

This invisibility and relational withdrawal, which begins within the family, produces a much more pronounced fragility when reflected in young people's peer world. According to *P10*, one of the most striking characteristics of NEET youth is that the vast majority of them have very few friends or are completely disconnected from peer relationships. *P5* states that this disconnection creates a feeling of inadequacy in real relationships, fear of rejection, and intense anxiety about social environments in young people. *P1* emphasizes that with the loss of peer contact, basic social skills weaken and young people become increasingly withdrawn.

The need for visibility and recognition is strongly emphasized in the participants' statements. As *P1* puts it, young people sometimes try to compensate for being excluded from their environment or not being seen enough by their family through digital visibility. As *P3* points out, every like, comment, or interaction they receive on social media serves as a recovery area where young people's needs that cannot be met in daily life are addressed. Thus, visibility becomes a kind of emotional validation mechanism in the digital environment, as it allows young people to feel acknowledged and supported in ways that may be lacking in their offline interactions. *P8*'s views reveal how social media use among university-educated NEET youth is linked to a complex emotional cycle. Compared to their working peers, these young people experience increasing feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness; they withdraw inward under the pressure of shame, feelings of failure and the stigma of being socially. *P8* explains his observation as follows:

In that sense, I think social media is a place where the disconnection they experience in real life continues and where they may remain observers in a more normal flow of life. Paradoxically, a high level of education creates an identity caught between the expectation of a better life and the emotional fragility of not being able to acquire a job.

For this reason, social media becomes the most accessible way to both soothe these feelings and construct an alternative self.

When these findings are evaluated together, it is seen that the basis of NEET youth's use of the digital space is a much more complex mechanism than addiction or excess free time. The combination of emotional deprivation within the family, insecurity in peer relationships, and social pressure feeds a cycle of relational withdrawal and digital orientation among young people, transforming social media from an entertainment platform into an "emotional survival strategy."

The role of digital platforms in the reintegration of NEET youth into society

The reintegration of NEET youth into social life and the labor market is closely linked not only to the availability of economic opportunities but also to digital interfaces that enable access to them. Expert opinions indicate that digital platforms offer young people not only an escape but also the opportunity to reconnect and become visible when the right strategies are employed. This finding aligns with the increasingly important discussions in the literature on digital participation (Wadood et al., 2019) and digital empowerment (Goh et al., 2022).

P4 particularly emphasizes that non-judgmental, youth-focused, and relatable language is necessary for social media content to mobilize young people. According to *P4*, young people connect more with content that reflects their stories and makes peer experiences visible than with official announcements from institutions: *P4* states, "When young people see themselves, they come. When the language becomes harsh, they disconnect. In our content, we always use the tone "we are here for you"; we say, "If young people produce it, we will share it." This emphasis shows that representation on digital platforms is critical for social participation.

Reintegration into social life is possible not through a single intervention but through a combination of interconnected support mechanisms. Psychosocial support significantly accelerates the process, especially for young people experiencing loss of self-confidence and motivation; similarly, peer support and mentoring make it easier for young people to connect with someone like themselves and feel that they can do it too.

Other experts also emphasize that for digital strategies to be effective, they must be complemented by concrete opportunities and material and

structural support. *P2* emphasizes that content that merely provides information is inspiring but insufficient for young people. *P3* states that raising awareness alone does not bring about transformation and that young people will not act unless they see opportunities that have real-world counterparts. These assessments align with findings in the literature that digital participation does not create lasting transformation without structural support.

At this point, the interviews reveal that the fundamental vulnerabilities and protective conditions determining the impact of digital integration have become more visible. It is observed that the relationship NEET youth establish with digital platforms is shaped by a combination of risk-increasing and risk-reducing socio-emotional conditions. Research data shows that psychological vulnerabilities such as unemployment, aimlessness, family pressure or neglect, social isolation, economic constraints, and loss of self-confidence, anxiety, or depression are the main risk factors that push young people into the digital realm. Conversely, areas of engagement such as education and training, supportive family communication, peer relationships, inclusive social programs, digital literacy initiatives, and accessible physical social spaces for young people emerge as protective factors that enhance the transformative potential of digital platforms. This framework reveals that it is not only content or platform design that determines the impact of digital strategies; the social, economic, and emotional context in which young people find themselves shapes the direction and nature of digital behavior to a decisive extent.

P10 contributions particularly highlight access inequalities, gender dynamics, and macro-structural barriers. *P10* notes that access to digital tools is limited for many NEET youth, and therefore digital strategies must necessarily involve a hybrid model that combines physical contact. *Sabancı Foundation's Young Women Building Their Future* project is exemplary in this regard, supported by an online education and mentoring system with physical components that engage directly at the local level. According to *P10*, publicly supported care work, childcare services, and the provision of safe public spaces play a critical role, especially for the reintegration of female NEETs. In addition, soft skills training for young people, such as self-confidence, communication, interview techniques, and CV preparation, is an indispensable part of the employment journey.

P8 emphasizes the ineffectiveness of announcing youth-oriented initiatives through the wrong channels. According to him, announcing courses offered by municipalities on their websites is not accessible to young people; announcements must be published on platforms where young people are active (such as *TikTok*) in a way that suits their visual aesthetics and language. In addition, transportation support and free or low-cost youth spaces are vital in situations where young people cannot attend job interviews or leave their neighborhoods due to financial constraints. *P7* points out that digital content is a powerful tool for drawing young people into the physical world through

storytelling. According to *P7*, *TEDx-style* short talks, role models, and mentoring programs have a motivating effect on young people.

When participant views are evaluated, it is seen that digital platforms have four critical functions in reintegrating NEET youth into social life: accessibility, representation, continuity, and connection. The accessibility of social media creates an initial point of contact and a low-barrier space for participation for young people who cannot physically participate in social life. The representation function increases motivation by making people who resemble them visible and lowering the psychological threshold for returning to social life. Continuity ensures that motivation is sustained over time through short video formats, micro-learning content, and peer stories, presented in the right language to keep young people engaged. The connection function should serve as a bridge, directing young people in the digital space to workshops, volunteer programs, educational opportunities, and professional networks. When designed correctly, digital platforms will thus function as a space for transformation where young people are made visible, supported, and reconnected to social life. Participant evaluations show that digital strategies are effective when grounded in a strong psychosocial infrastructure alongside technology.

Conclusion

This study examined how the psychosocial vulnerabilities and social relationships of NEET youth affect their use of social media, focusing on the role of digital strategies in reintegrating them into social life and the workforce. In this context, NEET youth's use of social media reflects their experiences of social exclusion, rather than being merely an individual choice. Expert opinions emphasize that social media has become an alternative escape for NEET youth. It has been stated that these young people use digital platforms not so much to spend their free time but rather to fill the emotional void they feel in their daily lives, to meet their need to be seen, and to feel that they have a place in life. As outlined in Kardefelt-Winther's (2014) compensatory internet use approach, this type of usage functions as a defense mechanism resulting from vulnerabilities, rather than simply meeting a need. In this context, social media is a safe space where they can regain the self-worth they lack, make themselves visible, and overcome social anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.

The study's findings show that the use of social media among NEET youth should be evaluated alongside structural inequalities, rather than through an individual psychology approach. Low income, insecurity, lack of access to education, unstable family structures, social gender pressure, and disconnection from peer relationships gradually distance young people from the physical world, making social media their only accessible social space. NEET youth who cannot participate in physical life seek refuge in digital spaces, experiencing social isolation.

Young people who cannot participate in the outside world take refuge in the digital world; young people who take refuge in the digital world become more disconnected from the outside world; this cycle transforms NEET status into a social isolation regime. This finding shows that NEET youth's social media practices are not just for entertainment but also a form of survival strategy. The findings show that themes emphasized in the international literature, such as the heterogeneity of NEET youth, gender inequalities, lack of social capital within the family, and digital exclusion, are also strongly reflected in social media relationships in the Turkish context (Maguire, 2015; Zuccotti & O'Reilly, 2019). This study reframes NEET youth as a social phenomenon situated at the intersection of multi-layered social, psychological, and digital vulnerabilities, rather than as a group excluded from economic productivity.

Research findings indicate that social media use is more of a consequence than a "cause" among NEET youth. NEET youth's turn to the digital sphere reflects prior vulnerabilities, including loneliness, exclusion, aimlessness, feelings of worthlessness, unstructured time, and a lack of emotional support. Therefore, digital platforms, while creating a communication space for young people, also become an alternative psychosocial space that supports emotional regulation, increases self-esteem, fosters a sense of belonging, demands visibility, and promotes a sense of autonomy.

The study's findings show that family structure and parental attitudes are determinants of digital orientation among NEET youth. Research in the field (Alfieri et al., 2015) indicates that authoritarian, oppressive, indifferent, or overly permissive parenting models; limited communication; having many siblings; low parental education; and economic instability, which create emotional deprivation in young people, increase digital orientation. The restrictive effects of gender-based pressures on female NEETs are also evident in the Turkish context. This situation reveals that gender is a determining factor, consistent with discussions in the literature regarding NEET risk (Kang & Youn, 2024; Malo et al., 2023).

Within the scope of the research objective, it was determined that digital platforms have significant potential for the social reintegration of NEET youth, consistent with approaches to digital empowerment (Wadood et al., 2019) and digital participation (Goh et al., 2022). However, the critical point emphasized by experts is that digital content alone does not create transformation; it does not produce sustainable effects unless concrete opportunities, psychosocial support, peer mentoring, vocational programs, and youth-friendly institutions support it.

When all findings are evaluated together, it is clear that policy and intervention programs targeting NEET youth cannot be limited to employment-focused economic measures; Instead, there is a need for a multidimensional framework that integrates psychosocial support, strengthening family communication, gender equality policies, digital literacy programs, accessible so-

cial spaces, inclusive designs that increase digital participation, and peer-based motivation models. This study shows that the digital behaviors of NEET youth are too complex to be explained by superficial reasons such as leisure time activities; they form a hybrid area of vulnerability where digital culture, economic inequalities, and emotional processes are intertwined. Therefore, the behaviors of NEET youth in digital spaces should be interpreted as reflecting social exclusion beyond problematic use. As highlighted by participants (e.g., P10), it is crucial to recognize the heterogeneous structure of the NEET category to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. For instance, the specific conditions of 'permanent NEETs,' or young women who remain outside of education and employment due to heavy domestic roles and family culture, require interventions that are lifestyle-oriented rather than solely employment-focused. The experiences of NEET youth extend beyond visible risks such as isolation or dependency, encompassing deeper layers where public oversight is more challenging, such as family responsibilities and informal work. In this context, an inclusive collaboration model that combines the protective framework provided by public authorities with the socio-cultural depth of academia and NGOs is important for understanding all dimensions of the problem and developing more effective solution strategies. Consequently, this research reveals that strategies targeting NEET youth require a holistic youth policy approach that simultaneously considers economic, psychological, and digital dimensions.

Future research must deepen its exploration of the digital orientations of NEET youth, particularly in the context of gender roles, forms of intra-family communication, and intra-domestic socio-emotional ecosystems. Given the functional diversity of digital platforms, platform-specific analyses that reveal how different media, especially community-based platforms such as *TikTok* and *Instagram*, facilitate young people's emotional regulation, search for visibility, and construction of belonging are important. Furthermore, netnographic studies examining the identities, peer relationships, and performative self-presentations of NEET youth in online communities can offer insight into how digital space functions as a socio-cultural encounter zone. Research comparing the experiences of urban and rural youth groups in terms of digital access, visibility, and digital capital will reveal the spatial dimension of digital inequalities. Finally, research on how algorithmic structures shape the emotional motivations and social contact searches of NEET youth is also expected to help explain the dynamics of digital platforms.

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