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MAPPING DIGITAL DISCUSSIONS ON NEETS IN TÜRKIYE: AN ANALYSIS OF YOUTUBE COMMENTS USING TEXT MINING AND INDUCTIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Oğuz KUŞ

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Mapping Digital Discussions on NEETs in Türkiye: An Analysis of YouTube Comments Using Text Mining and Inductive Content Analysis

Oğuz KUŞ¹

Abstract

Türkiye has a significant NEET population. However, there is a lack of research focusing on the discussions taking place on social media platforms. Content analysis of digital discussions concerning NEETs enables a deeper understanding of the forms of potential stigmatization they face, the extent of social empathy and solidarity surrounding them, and the possible underlying causes of NEET status. This exploratory study analyzes user comments under the most-watched Turkish-language YouTube videos about NEETs, using a Multilingual SBERT-based clustering algorithm and qualitative inductive content analysis. The findings revealed the factors contributing to NEET status, the experiences of NEETs, perspectives that promote empathy, gendered dimensions of being NEET and potential risks of stigmatization. In addition, based on the interaction metric, the study identified themes which are important for the users. The findings can support institutions, organizations and NGOs in policy development and help shape communication strategies for societal behavior change.

Keywords: content analysis; social media; text mining; Türkiye; NEET.

Introduction

It is possible to define NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in the European Union as individuals aged 15–29 (Eurofound, 2022); in Türkiye, as those aged 18–29 (SODEV, 2022); as young individuals who have not been engaged in education or employment (SODEV 2023; European Commission, 2010) for at least four weeks (International Labour Organisation, 2015). According to TÜİK's 2023 data, 22.5% of young people in Türkiye were NEET and this rate increased to 22.9% in 2024 (TÜİK, 2025). According to 2022 figures, Türkiye hosts the highest number of NEET individuals aged 15–29 among OECD countries (OECD, 2022). In 2024, Romania, Italy, and Lithuania had the highest NEET rates in the EU. In

¹ Faculty of Communication, Istanbul University, TÜRKİYE. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2593-4980>, E-mail: oguz.kus@istanbul.edu.tr

comparison, NEET population in Türkiye, a candidate country, reported a 25.9% (Eurostat, 2025). Given the available data, despite its large youth population, Türkiye's high NEET rate poses a threat to the country's potential.

Literature review

Researchers explain the factors leading to becoming NEET through five major variables: individual, family-related, education-related, environmental, and labor market-related factors (Mascherini, 2019; Ak *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic is also noted as a contemporary factor contributing to the global rise in NEET population (Rahmani & Groot, 2021; Tokol & Emirgil, 2023; Özer & Suna, 2023). COVID-19 measures in workplaces and educational institutions led to young people with fragile employment contracts to lose their jobs and disrupted educational processes, hindering the accumulation of skills and intellectual capital (Sándor *et al.*, 2021). OECD (2020) called for the development of policies to address the consequences of COVID-19, emphasizing the need for policies targeting NEET. Moreover, reports published in previous periods (see Eurofound, 2022) underline that during the major economic crisis of 2008–2013, youth unemployment in the EU rose to 40%, indicating that economic recession is a significant factor in the increase of the NEET population. Kõiv & Saks (2023) observe that society expects youth to be self-directed but those with limited initiative often disengage from education and employment. Warburton (2010) states that 70% of NEET-related media reports include stereotypes that promote blame and undermine self-confidence.

The NEET population is estimated to cost European economies €142 billion (Eurofound, 2022). İltir (2023) highlights that a large NEET population may cause social instability, crime, economic burden, exclusion, and integration issues. Pehlivan (2022) notes that being in NEET status increases the likelihood of engaging in criminal activity, drug use and trafficking. Warburton (2010) emphasizes that NEETs face risks of marginalization and exclusion. Concerns about the stigmatization and othering of NEETs have been noted. (Strecker *et al.*, 2021). Parola and Donsi (2019) argue that NEETs struggle to build a vision for their future and lack the skills to set goals or develop plans.

It can be argued that public perception of NEETs plays a significant role in shaping societal responses. Perspectives on social issues and groups are shaped through social-sphere discussions; they are now largely centered on new media platforms. Accordingly, interaction between digital discussions, discourse, public opinion and the construction of norms related to social groups and issues are closely related with digital discussions. According to Burr (2015: 91) “discourses make it possible for us to see the world in a certain way. They produce our knowledge of the world”. Drawing on the ideas of researchers such as Van den Brink, Metze, and Hajer, van Hulst *et al.* (2024: 4–5) describe discourse theory

as viewing language “as constitutive of power and dominance, and as intertwined with practice,” while defining discourse as “a social practice; in other words, it is through structures in our language that taboos are created, biases are mobilized and dominant ideas get institutionalized.”

In Lippmann’s terms (1998 [1992]), the “pictures in our heads” are no longer shaped solely by traditional media, as participatory web culture has made user-generated content central to public opinion formation. In a multi-country study by Pew Internet Research (2022), most participants said the internet and social media made people more informed about domestic current events. Various studies show that social media shapes public perception, positively or negatively, especially toward specific social groups.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2024) reports that migrants and asylum seekers were portrayed on social media with negative, inflammatory or misleading language that framing them as an “invading force” and such narratives have contributed to mainstreaming conspiracy theories. Refugees are often labeled as “invader”, “flood”, or “influx”, framing them as immoral and indistinct, which weakens compassion and legitimizes punitive or defensive reactions to “protect us from them” (Bleiker *et al.*, 2013; Kirkwood, 2017). There are discourses also target groups other than refugees. Trindade (2024: 32–33) states that mocking a person’s disabilities online serves to remove a person’s value and reduce them solely to their physical or mental impairment, describing this as a “discursive strategy [that] objectifies the person, disregards the disability condition to circumvent social norms and turns them into a laughable ‘object’ devoid of humanity”. These examples show that social media shapes perceptions of disadvantaged groups and draws others into these discourses.

Positive examples also exist. During COVID-19, social media helped counter anti-Asian hate speech, foster support and awareness, and disrupt echo chambers through counter-speech (Jacques *et al.*, 2022). Malik *et al.* (2018) analyzed the #ILookLikeAnEngineer hashtag, describe online social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram as a new stream of data and state that these platforms act as a key sensor of social behavior and attitudes of the public. They note that the hashtag #ILookLikeAnEngineer received significant media coverage in the US and UK, evolved into events in the Bay Area, and transformed into a fundraising campaign to finance billboard advertisements promoting gender equality in STEM fields.

Recent studies show that social media discussions shape public perception and influence societal norms. However, in Türkiye, research on NEET-focused social media discussions remains limited. Content analysis of these discussions can inform policy aimed at reducing stigma toward NEETs, fostering empathy and solidarity, identifying root causes and inform strategies promoting supportive messages for social benefit.

Methodology

This study aims to identify the nature of digital discussions surrounding NEETs in Türkiye. In line with this objective, two sub-research questions have been formulated:

RQ1: What is the thematic distribution of digital discussions about NEETs in Türkiye?

RQ2: Which themes gain prominence when user engagement is taken into account?

Global and local studies show that social media is a key part of NEETs' daily lives. "Hanging out online" or "spending time on social media" rank among their top three routines, while smartphones and computers are consistently listed as essential items (Thornham & Cruz, 2016; SODEV, 2022). This suggests that NEETs both shape and are shaped by digital discussions about them.

Considering the concept, the dataset was collected from YouTube, chosen due to its relevance to Türkiye's digital culture, NEETs' daily habits and platform dynamics. According to Datareportal (2025), YouTube is Türkiye's second most visited website after Google and most-used app after WhatsApp, making it a key space for social issue discussions. Unlike other social media platforms, YouTube offers a more accessible and efficient infrastructure for data collection through its YouTube Data API v3.

In this context, when the term "ev genci" (in English: domestic youth) was searched on the YouTube platform, the three most-viewed Turkish-language videos published by well-known Turkish news outlets were selected as data sources. User comments on these videos were collected on 4 July 2025, using Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2021) via the YouTube Data API v3. In addition, like counts were gathered as indicators of visibility and validation on social media, helping identify dominant ideas in discussions.

An exploratory content analysis combining conventional and innovative methods was conducted due to the limited prior research. The study used qualitative inductive content analysis and text mining techniques. The conceptual framework proposed by Kyngäs (2020: 14) guided the qualitative inductive content analysis step: "This form of content analysis is suitable when the phenomenon under study has not been covered in previous studies or when prior knowledge is fragmented (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). A basic inductive content analysis is performed according to the following phases: data reduction, data grouping and the formation of concepts that can be used to answer research questions. [...] Instead, content analysis can be considered a discussion between the researcher and their data."

Participants often argue that the increase in the number of universities has lowered educational quality, weakened market-relevant skills and reduced both employability and motivation for higher education. Another recurring theme is soaring rents in major Turkish cities, which force adults to live with their families. High interest rates are also seen as harming production and contributing to rising unemployment.

Moreover, the absence of personal connections or references is cited as a significant barrier to employment. A strong link is frequently drawn between limited employment access and the high number of migrants in Türkiye. Many comments claim that migrants working for lower wages displace native workers. These discussions are often marked by a highly critical and harsh tone.

Some users emphasize the lack of effective national-level planning, pointing to issues such as talent creation and management, misallocation of budgets for entrepreneurial initiatives, unequal access to opportunities and income inequality as prominent concerns within this thematic category.

Criticism of Society and Family

User comments under this category (n=434) focus on societal attitudes, traditions, behavioral norms, intergenerational criticism, patterns of family communication and behavior. These factors are framed both as causes of NEET status and as elements that worsen NEETs' challenges.

A recurring theme in these discussions is the unrealistic expectations Turkish families hold for their children. Negative consequences of parental behaviors, such as comparing children to others, perceiving them as failures, enforcing conformity to social norms and imposing personal choices, are frequently cited as contributing to emotional distress among NEETs. Some comments note that "the price of staying at the parents' home is paid with psychological health" or they avoid participating in social interaction during holidays. The discussions also include calls for families to provide more support to NEET.

A notable intergenerational conflict emerges, with users often criticizing Generation X, Baby Boomers and retirees for political decisions in their era that have burdened today's youth. It is also noted that older generations often judge today's youth through the lens of their own youth-era conditions. The findings suggest that younger individuals often shift the responsibility for their NEET status to previous generations and hold their families accountable for the psychological difficulties they experience during this period.

Negative Working Conditions

User comments in this category (n=252) explore why NEETs may avoid work, struggle to keep jobs or fail to find employment. It is often noted that wages, especially in major Turkish cities, are spent on rent, reinforcing the choice to

stay in the family home instead of working. Many users argue that the income earned is not enough to support a livable life, but merely to sustain working itself, reducing the notion of “home” to a place used only for sleeping. Some NEETs are university graduates, and in these cases, avoiding low-paying jobs often appears to be a deliberate choice.

Other comments cite heavy workloads, long hours, mobbing and hard conditions as reasons for avoiding employment. These unfavorable working conditions are described as a form of “modern slavery.”

Solution Suggestions

User comments in this category (n=235) focus on proposed solutions for overcoming NEET status, often reflecting outsider perspectives from non-NEET users. A common solution, in line with earlier themes, is relocating from major cities due to high rent. Another recurring suggestion is to reduce housing costs by finding roommates and to begin working regardless of the conditions.

Some users argue that tolerating poor working conditions temporarily can lead to better job opportunities and help build professional networks. Some commenters suggest NEETs gain new skills and pursue market-relevant technical jobs. Additionally, there are discussions suggesting migration as a solution for NEET. These discussions often overlook NEETs’ existing skills and sometimes portray university education as a “waste of time.”

This is Our Shared Story

Comments in this category (n=190) were written by users who are/were in a similar situation themselves. Rather than expressing empathy for others, these users focused on sharing personal experiences and interpreting NEET status through their own lens. Some users perceived the video content or fellow users’ comments as a form of social support, expressing sentiments such as “seeing similar stories comforted me” or “I felt less alone.”

It is important to note that many of the NEETs represented in this category do not feel like a part of society and frequently describe themselves as lacking talent and experiencing deep loneliness. Many users express feeling trapped between two undesirable options: “being a slave with a diploma” or “being unemployed with a diploma.”

Discussions Ranging from Negative Statements to Stigmatization

User comments in this category (n=186) contain negative sentiments, hate speech and stigmatizing expressions. These remarks are directed at the young individuals featured in the videos as well as at NEETs in general. Digital discussions in this category often have a harsh tone and sometimes include curse words.

NEETs are accused of being overly selective about jobs, lazy, prone to making excuses and unable to handle adversity. They are frequently described as having unrealistic expectations and as “viewing the world through rose-colored glasses.” In these comments, NEETs are portrayed as individuals “trapped in their comfort zones,” “addicted to convenience” and as people who shift the blame for their lack of skills onto others.

Furthermore, NEETs are referred to with derogatory and dehumanizing terms such as “princess boys,” “mama’s boys” and even “parasites.” Some of the negative comments are rooted in traditional gender roles, depicting NEETs as weak or as men who fail to fulfill what society considers to be male responsibilities.

Sharing Empathy

Digital discussions in this category (n=175) reflect empathetic external observations of NEETs, offering supportive and motivational messages. Some users, possibly former NEETs, share their perspective based on past experiences.

Being a NEET Female

In the digital discussions within this category (n=83), NEET women share their personal experiences. Users describe the stress not only of searching for employment but also of performing unpaid labor in the family home. They note that, as women, they face restrictive household rules, experience emotional breakdowns and are subjected to pressure and verbal abuse.

Additionally, pressure to marry is a recurring theme for NEET women living with their families. It is also observed in the discussions that NEET women’s attempts to engage in feminist activism are met with skepticism by working women.

NEETs and Male Perspective

In this category (n=51), NEET men do not share personal experiences; instead, comments target the youth in the videos and NEETs in general. These discussions offer an external view on NEET men, resembling earlier negative comment categories by linking the issue to masculine norms and reinforcing stigma.

Some comments express misogynistic views by blaming women for the existence of NEET men. These comments suggest that women are more frequently preferred in the workforce and benefit from “positive discrimination.” In this category, NEET men living with their families are described as a “burden,” and the amount of money earned is presented as a measure of manhood and deserving respect. Some comments include reductive statements such as “a man who doesn’t work is nothing.”

Expressions of Sympathy toward People in the News

Comments in this category (n=46) express sympathy toward the featured youth in the news report, praising their courage, self-confidence and energy rather than discussing the NEET issue in general.

Other

The high number of comments in this category (n=630) contains uncategorizable inputs like emojis, sarcasm, remarks about the publisher, or short, context-free sentences. These comments were analyzed twice to enhance categorization accuracy.

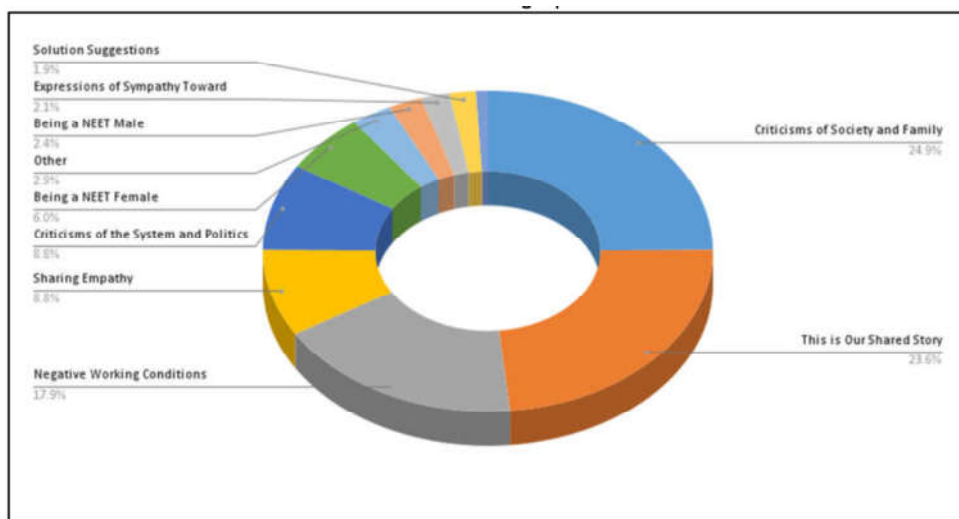


Figure 2. Percentage Distribution of Average like Counts on User Comments About NEETs by Thematic Category

When it comes to answering RQ2 (see Figure 2), user comments in the *Criticisms of Society and Family* category received nearly three times the average level of engagement. This category is followed by *This Is Our Shared Story* and *Negative Working Conditions*. These categories provide a meaningful foundation for exploring the reasons behind NEET status and the everyday experiences of NEETs.

The most-liked comments in the *Criticisms of Society and Family* category focus on the psychological impact of living at family home, messages to parents, personal reflections on household experiences. Despite having a comment count close to the average, the *Discussions Ranging from Negative Statements to Stigmatization* category had the lowest average engagement. This suggests that user interest more tends to be higher in categories focused on identifying the root

causes of the issue and proposing solutions. Comments in the *Sharing Empathy* category received nearly seven times more engagement on average than those in the *Discussions Ranging from Negative Statements to Stigmatization* category.

When considering the average number of likes on discussions that interpret the NEET experience through a gender roles perspective, it is observed that comments in the *Being a NEET Female* category received more likes on average than those in the *Being a NEET Male* category. In the *Being a NEET Female* category, comments in which women share the negative experiences they have faced received particularly high levels of engagement. The most-liked comments in the *Being a NEET Female* category received nearly six times more likes than the top comments in the *Being a NEET Male* category.

Digital discussions about NEETs in Türkiye intersect with gender dynamics and that there exists a user base that adopts an empathetic, gender equality-oriented stance while disregarding discriminatory narratives.

Discussion

The exploration of digital discussions about NEETs has made it possible to examine various dimensions of the issue, including its underlying causes, the experiences of NEET, how they are perceived and the role of gender. Findings of this study reveals the fluid and interconnected nature of factors that triggers NEET status.

Previous studies have explained the factors leading to NEET status through individual, family-related, education-related, environmental, and labor market-based causes (Mascherini, 2019; Ak *et al.*, 2021). These factors are also addressed in digital discussions within the Turkish context. Family-related discussions often highlight the negative impact of parental behavior on NEETs, reinforcing the vicious cycle and making it more difficult to escape this condition. Digital discussions emphasize that the oversupply of universities has lowered educational quality and increasing the number of graduates hindering youth employment in their fields of qualification.

Labor market-related discussions often criticize systemic issues and poor working conditions, noting that qualified individuals are forced into low-quality jobs, prompting some youth to choose unemployment over such conditions. Özdemir *et al.* (2024) highlight limited access to employment in rural areas, while our findings show that high housing costs in Istanbul make it financially unfeasible for young people to live there. Together, these findings suggest that NEET youth are trapped in a vicious cycle of unemployment and unaffordable housing.

Several researchers link COVID-19 to rising NEET rates (Rahmani & Groot, 2021; Tokol & Emirgil, 2023; Özer & Suna, 2023), yet references to the pandemic are scarce in Türkiye's digital discussions. Instead, many comments question

the link between NEET status and global or national economic conditions. Kõiv and Saks (2023) argue that society expects youth to be self-directed in fulfilling personal and societal goals. This is echoed in Türkiye's digital discussions too, especially in the Solution Suggestions category, where users often urge NEETs to work under any condition for personal growth and new opportunities.

While NEETs often face exclusion and stigma (Warburton, 2010; Strecker *et al.*, 2021), Türkiye's digital discussions tend to focus more on structural causes and show greater empathy. Although the risk of stigmatization and othering cannot be entirely ruled out, Türkiye's ongoing struggle with unemployment appears to foster a more collective, problem-solving attitude among users.

Digital discussions within the *Being a NEET Female* category focus on experience sharing and exploring the barriers women face in accessing education or employment. In this regard, it is possible to observe that the obstacles to young women's labor force participation, such as reconciling work and family life, informal and precarious jobs and family caregiving responsibilities, highlighted in the studies of Akkan and Serim (2018) and Özdemir *et al.* (2024), are also reflected in digital discussions in our study. Our study shows that family attitudes and traditional norms significantly contribute to women's continued NEET status. The *Being a NEET Male* category has two dimensions: 1) toxic, misogynistic discourse and 2) tendency to other NEET men by insisting all men must work, creating psychological pressure and symbolic violence. These comments clearly reflect traditional patriarchal dynamics.

Conclusion

Most digital discussions focus on experience sharing, empathy-building, and exploring factors behind the rise in NEET numbers. Exclusionary or discriminatory comments were few, and engagement data shows low user interest in negative or stigmatizing content. Higher engagement with positive comments may boost their visibility through algorithmic structure of social media, supporting NEETs' positive representation and broader societal support. The discussions show that factors behind NEET status are deeply interconnected. Criticism spans politics, systems, social norms and family, revealing a fluid interplay of triggers. Some discussions link rising NEET levels to increased migration in Türkiye. In light of Europe's recent right-wing populism, such narratives may become a broader concern in Türkiye.

The current findings offer opportunities at various levels for institutions, organizations, and NGOs working in the field. Particularly for NGOs engaging in activities such as social behavioural change communication. Future studies should focus on digital fieldwork exploring NEET experiences through a gender lens. Given the tone and engagement patterns observed, this could offer new insights to studies on gender, hate speech, roles, unemployment, and family dynamics. In

addition, it is important to examine NEET youths' perceptions of migrants. Topics such as resource distribution and unemployment are frequently observed to be key triggers in discriminatory and hateful discourse toward migrants. In this context, investigating these issues specifically in relation to NEET youth is essential for identifying the risk of radicalization and developing strategies to prevent it.

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