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Social Network Usage and the Risk of NEET Status: Exploring Gender as a Moderator

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ABSTRACT

The increasing prevalence of social network usage has raised concerns among educators and policymakers regarding its potential impact on young people's employment and education status. This study examines the relationship between active social network usage (ASNU), passive social network usage (PSNU), and the risk of being Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET) among undergraduates, with a focus on gender differences. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 523 undergraduates from universities in Vietnam using both online (Google Forms) and paper-and-pencil data collection methods. Data were analyzed to explore correlations and moderation effects. The findings indicate that higher ASNU and PSNU are associated with an increased risk of NEET status. While gender did not significantly moderate this relationship among male students, a moderating effect was observed among female students. These results highlight the importance of understanding social media consumption patterns in addressing NEET risk. Policymakers and educators should consider gender-specific interventions to mitigate the potential negative impacts of social network usage on students' career and educational outcomes.

Keywords: Active Social Network Usage, Passive Social Network Usage, NEET Risk, Gender Differences, Undergraduates, Social Media Consumption

INTRODUCTION

Daily online usage is important in human lives, and its steadily increasing prevalence worldwide has changed the manner in which humans interact and renewed their communication methods. Many social media platforms have millions of daily users, especially in Asia (Dixon, 2022a, 2022b). Of all the worldwide social media users in 2022, 26% resided in Eastern and Southeast Asia, with Vietnam making up 11.02% (Dixon, 2022a). The number of daily active users on Facebook hit 1.98 billion in the third quarter of 2022, a slight increase from the previous quarter (Dixon, 2022b).

As social media becomes increasingly embedded in daily life, understanding how individuals engage with these platforms is crucial. Different patterns of usage may have varying effects on users' well-being, productivity, and psychological outcomes. Social network usage (SNU) can be categorized into two types: active social network usage (ASNU) and passive social network usage (PSNU). Research has explored the links between these types of usage and psychological outcomes, such as depression and negative emotions (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Sharifian et al., 2022; Thorisdottir et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). However, the impact of these usage types on job-related concerns, such as job satisfaction, learning outcomes, or risk of Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET) among undergraduates, remains underexplored.

Schooling and education play a crucial role in preparing students for the future. As a result, many educators and professionals prioritize equipping students with the skills

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necessary for employment, workplace success, and achieving career goals. However, the transition from school to the workforce can be challenging, especially for young people who may struggle to avoid becoming NEET. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines NEETs as individuals aged 15-29 who are not engaged in employment, education, or training (OECD, 2016, 2021). NEET status is associated with negative outcomes such as increased mental health problems, alcohol use, and exposure to bullying (Baggio et al., 2015; Henderson et al., 2017; Mawn et al., 2017; OECD, 2016; Rodríguez-Modroño, 2019; Rodwell et al., 2018; Tayfur et al., 2022; Veldman et al., 2024). Addressing the root causes of NEET status and developing policies to promote youth engagement in the economy are essential. Early intervention is key to preventing at-risk youth from becoming NEET.

A pressing research question is whether increasing media usage contributes to rising NEET risk. Studies (e.g., Cheng et al., 2023; Junco, 2012; Junco & Cotten, 2012) indicate that social media negatively impacts academic performance, which is in turn linked to NEET status (Sadler et al., 2014). However, no explicit findings have established a direct relationship between social media usage and NEET risk. These research findings could inform policies and interventions aimed at reducing NEET risk and promoting responsible media use, ultimately leading to improved educational and employment outcomes for young people.

While previous research has examined ASNU and PSNU, little attention has been given to how these forms of SNU may differently affect males and females. However, prior studies suggest that demographic factors, including gender, shape online behavior and its consequences (Ayalew & Zewdie, 2022). Research on social networking sites has often controlled for gender(i.e., Tandoc et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019) or failed to differentiate findings by gender (i.e., Hanna et al., 2017; Thorisdottir et al., 2019), leaving gaps in understanding how SNU, including ASNU and PSNU, might predict NEET risk differently for males and females. Additionally, limited research has explored how gender roles within academic environments may influence the relationship between SNU and the risk of being NEET. A comprehensive understanding of how ASNU and PSNU relate to NEET risk among males and females is essential for effectively addressing these issues.

Social Network Usage and NEET risk

Active vs. Passive Social Network Usage

Researchers have examined the patterns of SNU, distinguishing between users who engage actively or passively (Chen et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 2023; Chhatwani et al., 2022; Thorisdottir et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). ASNU involves actions that directly communicate with or interact with others (e.g., sending online messages, posting on a new feed, commenting on a friend's status), whereas PSNU involves launching social networking sites without interacting with others (e.g., viewing posts, checking a friend's status, seeing available photos or feeds) (Frison & Eggermont, 2016; Krasnova et al., 2013; Verduyn et al., 2021; Verduyn et al., 2015).

ASNU has been shown to correlate negatively with depression, while PSNU shows a positive association (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). Additionally, negative emotions are more strongly linked to PSNU over time (Zhang et al., 2020) and active users often experience higher levels of envy than their passive counterparts (Sharifian et al., 2022).

These distinctions in ASNU and PSNU suggest that they predict various outcomes differently. However, it is unrealistic to view them in isolation; users often engage in passive activities before participating actively. Thus, ASNU and PSNU are interrelated components of social media behavior that should be considered together.

Active Social Network Usage, Passive Social Network Usage, and NEET risk

In addition to their relationships with mental health, ASNU and PSNU may also link to job-related topics. On a positive note, online skill-building and motivational support are crucial for empowering the unemployed to use the Internet effectively in their job search (Müller et al., 2018). Research indicates that social media can help maintain relationships for the unemployed (Feuls et al., 2014) or enhances job satisfaction (Olfat et al., 2023). Online social support plays a crucial role in helping the unemployed cope with job loss and search for new employment (Fieseler et al., 2014). Therefore, social media can be a valuable resource for the unemployed, highlighting the importance of utilizing online tools effectively during unemployment.

However, problematic social media usage has been significantly associated with social anxiety, self-regulation issues, and academic procrastination (Durak, 2020). ASNU can undermine academic performance among those with high levels of PSNU (Cheng et al., 2023) and may contribute to social comparison and social media addiction (Dailey et al., 2020). Additionally, using social media for academic purposes is not a significant predictor of undergraduate academic performance (Alwagait et al., 2015; Lau, 2017).

The NEET status is positively linked to mental health issues (Plenty et al., 2021; Rodwell et al., 2018; Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015), and negatively correlated with learning outcomes (Cheng et al., 2023; Junco, 2012) as well as schooling (De Luca et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2022). Furthermore, while ASNU can adversely affect learning outcomes, passive usage tends to have a more positive impact (Junco, 2012; Junco & Cotten, 2012). The impact of social media on academic performance varies depending on usage purpose; therefore, the relationship with NEET risk may also differ based on whether the usage is ASNU or PSNU.

Gender Differences in Active Social Network Usage, Passive Social Network Usage, and NEET risk

Research on SNU, NEET/NEET risk, and gender has produced mixed results regarding mental health outcomes and other consequences. For instance, males have been found to demonstrate greater resilience in cybersecurity behaviors (Branley-Bell et al., 2022). Variations exist in how males and females use social media (Arafat & Hamamra, 2021; Frison & Eggermont, 2016). In particular, while SNU appears beneficial for girls but detrimental for boys (Frison & Eggermont, 2016), SNU and depressed mood in adolescents were found to be equivalent in boys and girls (Frison & Eggermont, 2017). Furthermore, female adolescents show a stronger correlation between social media use and symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to males (Thorisdottir et al., 2019).

Evidence suggests that while females may experience more negative effects from SNU, they also benefit more from ASNU than males (Frison & Eggermont, 2016). Ding et al. (2017) found that there is a greater negative effect on subjective well-being for females with PSNU compared to males.

While SNU can enhance support networks (Feuls et al., 2014), women and those seeking prestigious jobs tend to benefit more from these networks (Xiong et al., 2017). Early

school leavers significantly influence NEET rates, particularly among men (De Luca et al., 2020). Externalizing problems are linked to increased NEET risk for males, whereas internalizing problems correlate with higher NEET likelihood for females (Plenty et al., 2021).

Overall, based on findings related to gender roles, SNU, ASNU, PSNU, and NEET, we hypothesize that males and females may experience different NEET outcomes based on their active or passive SNU. Thus, we propose that both ASNU and PSNU relate to NEET risk, with these associations varying by gender.

Overview of The Current Study

Active social network usage (ASNU) and passive social network usage (PSNU)—the two components of social network usage (SNU)—have been linked to depression and negative emotions (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2020), as well as to detrimental learning outcomes (Cheng et al., 2023; Junco, 2012; Junco & Cotten, 2012). According to Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), individuals' behaviors and psychological states are shaped through social interactions and environmental factors, suggesting that social media environments may influence academic and career trajectories. Research indicates that excessive or maladaptive SNU can increase the probability of depression and negatively impact learning outcomes, potentially raising the risk of becoming NEET (Cheng et al., 2023; Sadler et al., 2014; Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015).

SNU may have broader implications for media usage behaviors that extend beyond entertainment. Therefore, it is essential to investigate how ASNU and PSNU correlate with NEET risk. This study aims to explore these potential relationships, with a particular focus on how gender moderates them (Figure 1). The following hypotheses will guide the study:

Hypothesis 1: ASNU and PSNU predict NEET risk.
Hypothesis 2: Gender is a moderator of the relationship between ASNU or PSNU and NEET risk.
Hypothesis 2.1: Gender moderates the relationship between ASNU and NEET risk.
Hypothesis 2.2: Gender moderates the relationship between PSNU and NEET risk

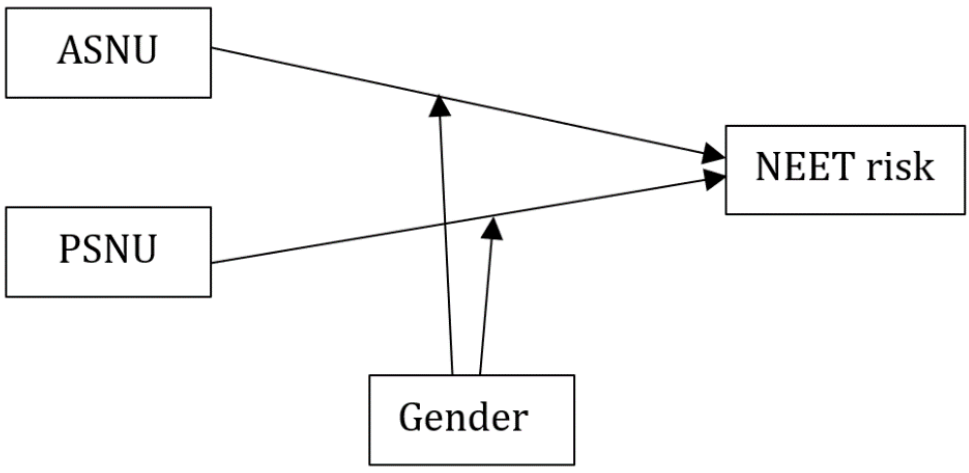


Figure 1 The conceptual framework

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Participants and Procedure

There were 523 undergraduate respondents, including 58.7% males and 41.3% females, who were randomly selected to participate in the survey. After reading the informed consent and study instructions, participants voluntarily completed the survey. The survey administered via Google Forms and paper questionnaires, took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Measures

The questionnaire was revised and translated from English to Vietnamese using a standardized process. This included forward translation by a bilingual expert, back-translation for accuracy, and a review by language and subject matter experts.

Undergraduate students provided self-reported demographic information (e.g., gender, grade, age). The questionnaire also included the following scales:

ASNU and PSNU scales. ASNU scale and PSNU scale were adapted from scales introduced from existing studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2016; Frison & Eggermont, 2016; Nguyen & Cheng, 2022). Participants rated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

In terms of ASNU, eight items were used to gauge agreement with statements such as, "I frequently interact with other people on social networks." The Cronbach's alpha of the ASNU was 0.80.

Regarding the PSNU scale, respondents answered seven questions assessing their agreement with statements such as, "I frequently check my friends' posts." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the PSNU scale was 0.61.

NEET risk scale. The NEET/Hikikomori Risk scale (Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015) was used. The scale has 27 items in total (e.g., "I can not find meaning in work."), including 9 reversed items (e.g., "I think that to work is to fulfill one's duty to society"). Ratings were given on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.85.

All ratings were based on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The Cronbach's α of all scales (ASNU/PSNU and NEET risk scales) was satisfactory (Taber, 2018).

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, are provided. The data met normality assumptions, with no detected multicollinearity or outliers.

Pearson correlation and linear regression were used as inferential statistical tools to examine the relationships between ASNU and PSNU and the risk of being NEET. Pearson correlation assessed the strength and direction of these relationships, while linear regression was employed to determine the predictive value of ASNU and PSNU on NEET risk, accounting for potential moderating effects of gender.

Gender's moderation effect was evaluated using PROCESS Macro for SPSS version 3.5, model 1 (Hayes, 2013) with centered independent variables. Table 2 presents the regression results, while Figures 1 and 2 illustrate moderating effects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations between the study variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. NEET risk	4.00	1.19	—		
2. ASNU	2.83	0.62	.20*	—	
3. PSNU	2.72	0.54	.14*	.29*	—
Male sample					
Age	20.79	1.50			
1. NEET risk	4.01	1.18	—		
2. ASNU	2.87	0.58	.07	—	
3. PSNU	2.95	0.48	.04	.05	—
Female sample					
Age	20.49	1.41			
1. NEET risk	3.90	1.20	—		
2. ASNU	2.77	0.67	.34**	—	
3. PSNU	2.90	0.60	.25**	.51**	—

*Note. ASNU = Active social network usage, PSNU = Passive social network usage, SD = standard deviations, * p < .05, ** p < .01.*

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables. In the overall sample, ASNU and PSNU are significant predictors of NEET risk. However, when analyzed by gender, these relationships are no longer significant in the male sample, whereas they remain significant and positive in the female sample.

Testing the linear regression of ASNU/PSNU on NEET risk.

A regression model including ASNU and PSNU was used to predict NEET risk. The results showed that ASNU and PSNU had a statistically significant effect on NEET risk: F (2, 520) = 12.89, p < .001, R2 = 4.4%. NEET risk was positively and significantly predicted by ASNU (β = .17, p < .001) and PSNU (β = .09, p = .038).

The results indicate that 4.40% of the variance in NEET risk could be explained by ASNU and PSNU. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Testing the moderation effect of gender on the relationship of ASNU/PSNU and NEET risk

A moderation analysis was conducted to assess whether gender influenced the relationship between ASNU and NEET risk (Table 2). The interaction is statistically significant (p = .004), indicating that gender moderates the relationship between ASNU and NEET risk.

Table 2 Gender as a Moderating Effect on the Relationship between ASNU/PSNU and NEET risk

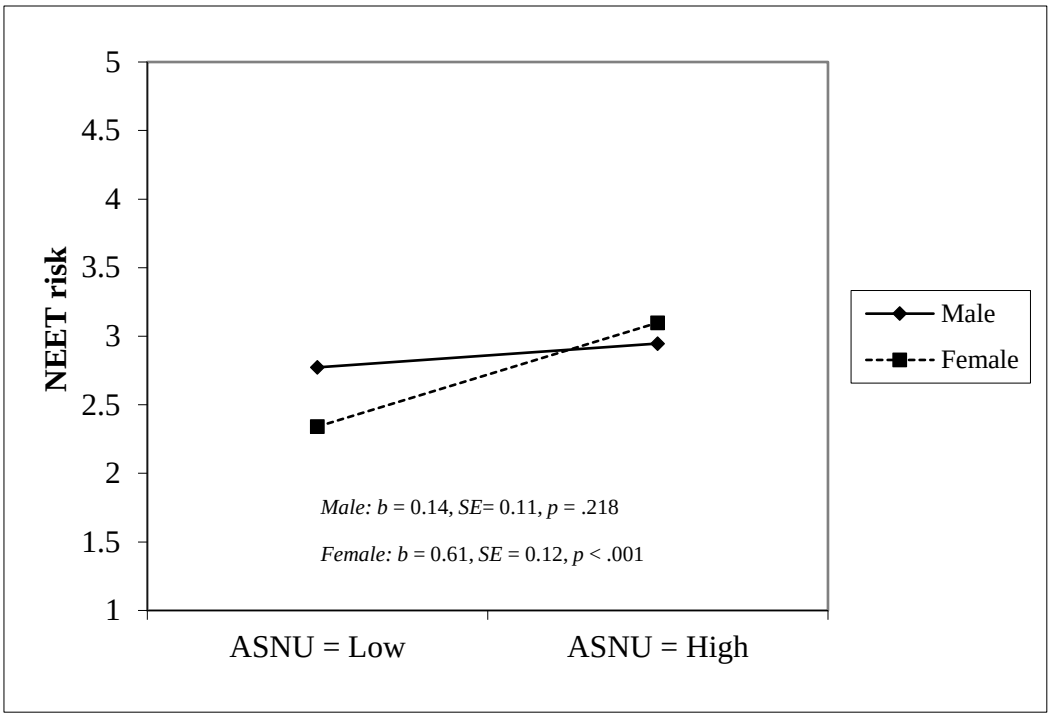
	b	***seb***	***t***	***p***
ASNU	-0.33	0.26	-1.28	.202
Gender	-0.14	0.10	-1.34	.181
ASNUx Gender	0.47	0.16	2.87	.004
PSNU	-0.28	0.31	-0.90	.367
Gender	-0.16	0.10	-1.55	.123
PSNUx Gender	0.39	0.19	2.00	.046

Note. ASNU = Active social network usage; PSNU = Passive social network usage. Dependent variable: NEET risk.

Moreover, the results showed that for females, a higher level of ASNU was associated with a higher level of NEET risk. However, for males, there was no significant relationship between ASNU and NEET risk (Figure 2 and Table 3).

Table 3 Gender as a Moderating Effect on the Relationship between ASNU/PSNU and NEET risk

Gender	b	se	p-value	Significance
		ASNU – NEET risk		
Males	0.14	0.11	.218	Not significant
Females	0.61	0.12	<.001	Significant
		PSNU – NEET risk		
Males	0.11	0.14	.441	Not significant
Females	0.49	0.13	<.001	Significant

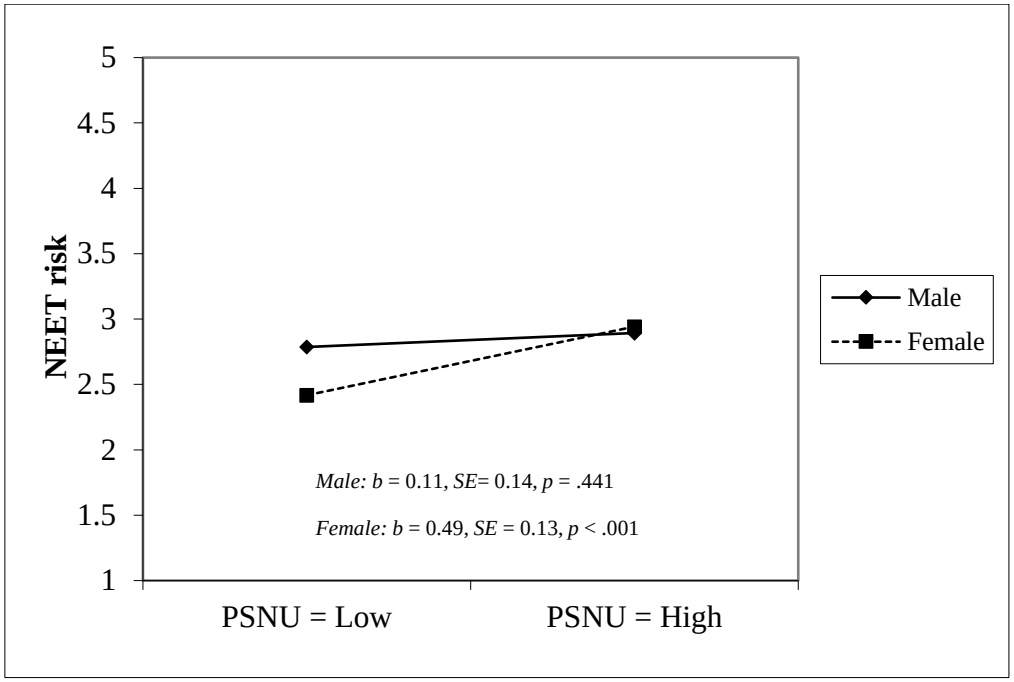


Note. ASNU = Active social network usage.

Figure 2 Gender as a Significant Moderator of the ASNU-NEET Risk Relationship

Similarly, an evaluation was conducted to investigate how gender affects the connection between PSNU and NEET risk (Table 2). This interaction is also statistically significant (p = .046), suggesting that gender moderates the relationship between PSNU and NEET risk.

The outcomes also revealed that, for females, a higher degree of PSNU was correlated with a greater level of NEET risk. On the other hand, no significant association was seen between ASNU and NEET risk for males (Figure 3 and Table 3).



Note. PSNU = Passive social network usage.

Figure 3 Gender as a Significant Moderator of the PSNU-NEET risk relationship

In summary, ASNU/PSNU positively correlated with NEET risk for females, but not for males. Females with high ASNU/PSNU scores reported greater NEET risk, thereby supporting Hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2.

Discussion

This study confirms a link between social network usage (SNU)—both active (ASNU) and passive (PSNU)—and NEET risk, with negative outcomes tied to SNU offering a possible explanation.

While SNU users may use social media to maintain existing relationships, they frequently miss opportunities to form new ones (Feuls et al., 2014) and tend to spend more time online, particularly among undergraduates (Tandoc et al., 2015). This excessive online presence, driven by a heightened need for social connection, can become problematic (Seabrook et al., 2016). As a result, they reported more severe mental health issues and difficulties in daily functioning (Bosmans & Van der Velden, 2018; Takahashi et al., 2015).

Beyond mental health concerns, problematic social media use has also been linked to academic challenges. ASNU, in particular, has been shown to negatively impact academic performance, especially when coupled with high levels of PSNU (Cheng et al., 2023). This suggests that while social media can serve as a valuable tool for career development (Müller et al., 2018) and job-related networking (Feuls et al., 2014), excessive engagement—particularly when it interferes with academic responsibilities—may contribute to poorer learning outcomes (Junco, 2012) and increase the likelihood of NEET status.

The relationship between PSNU and academic performance is more complex. While some studies suggest that PSNU have a more positive effect on learning outcomes (Junco & Cotten, 2012), its potential to lead to social comparison and lower subjective well-being (Verduyn et al., 2015) further complicates its relationship with NEET risk.

In essence, social network users, particularly college students, may often prioritize maintaining existing relationships online, which can lead to excessive use driven by a need for connection. This behavior is linked to reduced well-being, increased depression, and higher NEET risk.

Moreover, gender differences emerge in these patterns. Men tend to achieve life satisfaction through both active and passive online behaviors, a trend not seen in women. Consistent with Xiang et al. (2020), men report higher life satisfaction and are better able to balance learning and entertainment. Kocsel et al. (2022) found that boys report significantly higher subjective well-being than girls, partly due to girls' feelings of inferiority toward others (Ding et al., 2017). Women, however, are more likely to use social media problematically compared to men (Chae, 2018; Ding & Xu, 2023; Samra et al., 2022; Yue & Tang, 2024). Research suggests that this pattern is associated with more frequent upward social comparisons and negative self-assessments (Samra et al., 2022). Social media use, particularly among women, has been linked to increased comparisons with others, which may contribute to negative feelings (Chae, 2018; Yue & Tang, 2024). Additionally, studies indicate that SNU is correlated with higher levels of depression in women (Block et al., 2014), which may be a factor in NEET risk.

In summary, men generally experience greater life satisfaction and well-being, while women are more vulnerable to the negative emotional effects of problematic SNU. These gender differences make the relationship between SNU (both ASNU and PSNU) and NEET risk particularly significant for females.

Implications and Limitations

These findings have important implications for intervention strategies and policy development, particularly in addressing mental health, social media use, and gender differences.

To the best of our understanding, this study is among the limited research that identifies a positive relationship between ASNU/PSNU and NEET risk. This relationship—especially among women—highlights the need for tailored mental health programs addressing SNU. Counseling should focus on reducing harmful comparison behaviors and promoting healthier social media habits.

Particularly, given the link between SNU and NEET risk, mental health programs should integrate strategies to reduce problematic social media behaviors. Counseling services could actively address harmful social comparisons, social media addiction, and anxiety related to online engagement. Women, who are more vulnerable to the negative psychological effects of social media, may benefit from structured self-esteem-building programs that promote positive online interactions. Meanwhile, men may require interventions that focus on balancing online activities with offline responsibilities, reducing the risk of disengagement from academic or career pursuits.

Moreover, career and academic counselors should integrate social media literacy into their guidance frameworks. Educators can emphasize the productive use of social media—such as networking, job searching, and skill development—while discouraging excessive use that may lead to procrastination and academic decline. Targeted workshops or counseling sessions can help individuals manage their online behavior, ensuring that social media engagement supports rather than hinders their career and educational goals.

Finally, policymakers and educators may implement nationwide digital literacy programs that explicitly address the risks of excessive ASNU and PSNU, particularly among young people at risk of becoming NEET. These initiatives should support individuals how to engage with social media in ways that enhance their career prospects rather than contribute to mental health struggles and economic inactivity. Schools and universities should also integrate training on digital well-being, equipping students with the skills to regulate their social media use effectively.

By implementing these targeted mental health, educational, and policy-based interventions, stakeholders may help mitigate the risks associated with ASNU and PSNU, ultimately reducing NEET rates and fostering healthier online behaviors.

However, the study's cross-sectional nature limits its ability to establish causal relationships. Longitudinal research is needed to track how social media use and NEET risk evolve over time. Moreover, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential bias, as participants may misreport their behaviors. Future studies should use objective measures of social media use and professional mental health assessments. Moreover, the study does not account for other key factors like socioeconomic status, family support, or access to education, which may influence NEET risk or mental health outcomes. Grouping all social media use together overlooks the different impacts of various platforms. Future research should explore how specific platform features contribute to mental health and NEET risk. Variables such as personality traits, coping mechanisms, and offline social support were not fully explored but may play a role in moderating the effects of social media use. Additionally, the relatively low Cronbach's alpha (0.61) for the PSNU scale, which suggests potential concerns regarding its internal consistency. Future studies may consider revising or refining the scale items to enhance reliability.

These findings underscore the need for gender-sensitive mental health interventions, educational programs that promote balanced social media use, and a more mindful approach to online behavior to reduce the risk of NEET status and enhance overall well-being.

CONCLUSIONS

While daily online usage has become an integral part of human life, little research has explored its relationship with negative outcomes such as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) risk; this study addresses that gap by examining the association between active and passive social network usage (ASNU and PSNU) and NEET risk among Vietnamese undergraduate students, with particular attention to gender differences. The findings revealed that both ASNU and PSNU are associated with increased NEET risk, especially among women. The study contributes to the understanding of how digital engagement patterns, differentiated by gender, may influence educational and career outcomes. However, its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported data, and limited control over factors like socioeconomic status and platform-specific usage present notable limitations. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches, use objective measures of social media activity and mental health, and examine moderating variables such as personality traits or offline support systems to better understand the mechanisms linking social media use to NEET risk.

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