

## *Grit: a psychological predictive factor among NEET youth*

### BACKGROUND

Grit is essential to favour perseverance and passion to achieve long-term goals. Our study aimed to explore the features of individual aspects of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) as personal attributes.

### PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Participants numbered 159, were in the age range 18-35, and 54.1% were female. A structured web-based interview was conducted using a dedicated online form.

### RESULTS

We investigated the self-perception of NEET regarding the learning and practical abilities. NEET were found to

be confident in practical activities. The working interest of NEET seemed to be very high for public employment, but not smart working.

### CONCLUSIONS

NEET youth needs to be more involved in a developmental perspective to discover their own cognitive and behavioural abilities in order to be confident and focused on achieving personal growth in social engagement and the labour market.

### KEY WORDS

youth; soft skills; NEETs; psychological dimensions; grit trait

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## BACKGROUND

The current economic and pandemic crises have affected young adults more than other age groups. Youth unemployment has been increasing at a faster and higher rate compared to the average European population (EUfund, 2012). NEET is an acronym for young people who are not in employment, education or training (Furlong, 2006) for four or more weeks (Eurostat, 2019). NEET has become a label for designating heterogeneous groups with different characteristics, needs, and experiences. Five types of NEET labels are used to depict the group heterogeneity: 1) unemployed NEETs include those with long-term and short-term unemployment; 2) unavailable NEETs include young people who are limited in their professional or educational/training choices due to family duties (e.g. young care givers); 3) unoccupied NEETs who are not actively seeking work and are not restricted by other obligations or impairments; 4) NEETs seeking opportunities include those actively seeking a job or education/training, but who are waiting for offers that match their competences and status; 5) voluntary NEETs include those who are in this situation by choice because they are traveling or engaged in activities such as voluntary work (Stain et al., 2019). Unemployed and unoccupied NEETs constitute the largest proportion of the group (Eurostat, 2019). A large number of NEETs have fewer chances of accumulating educational and social resources for professional development than the youth in general (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). The underlying assumption is that NEET refer to young adults who are at a high risk of social exclusion. The NEET indicator includes, for example, young adults who withdraw from the labour market due to hopelessness. Individual and familial characteristics seem to interact with socioeconomic factors in delineating the risk of becoming a NEET and the possibility of entering the labour market (Caroleo et al., 2020). Recent literature has highlighted the psychological risk factors for NEET: internalising problems at age 11 were identified for early and late NEETs, whereas low parental socioeconomic status, lower intelligence scores and exposure to three or more negative life events were identified as risk factors for persistent NEETs (Veldman et al., 2024). Some studies have reported associations between NEET and negative social and health outcomes, an increased risk of social exclusion, and crime or violence (Manhica et al., 2022). The mental health of young adults could be negatively influenced toward weakness or pathology; mental illness can be a risk factor for becoming a NEET as well as a consequence of NEET status. Young people with prior mental illness, especially those with conduct disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, are likely to terminate school early (Benjet et al., 2012).

Several studies have investigated the social and economic aspects of NEET (Arnett, 2000; Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Eurostat, 2019; Furlong, 2006; Hendry & Kloep, 2010). The transition between school and work is a critical period in the lives of young adults because their entry into the labour market can have a significant impact on their trajectory and NEET status. Particularly, education is the most important factor and has the strongest effect on the probability of never being a NEET, a short-term NEET or a long-term NEET (Giret et al., 2020). Studies have highlighted that a large proportion of these NEETs were homemakers, and NEET homemakers had less substance use, substance use disorders and suicidal behaviours in comparison with their age-group peers. However, NEET non-homemakers displayed greater substance use, substance use disorders and suicidal behaviours compared to their age-group peers (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018). Moreover, previous research suggests that youth can be negatively influenced by structural and social factors (Hegelund et al., 2020) such as reduced employment and educational opportunities (Bynner, 2005).

*NEET and grit*

An individual factor required for achieving life-long goals is grit as a personal resource or as a condition or energy that supports the attainment of work and life goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit is essential for long-term passion and dedication to achieving one's aims to ensure sustainable performance. According to the literature (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Van Zyl et al., 2023), grit represents a personal resource toward oriented achievement of long-term goals despite obstacles and adversity. This framework has been applied to exploit employment and worker productivity. In our opinion, the grit factor could be salient in analysing the population of young people who are not employed, educated or trained (NEET). To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has investigated grit in the context of NEETs.

Considering the above scientific scenario, individual factor analysis is lacking. Therefore, the present study explored the individual features of NEETs such as personal attributes and resources that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people and be oriented to one's aim and perspective.

It was hypothesised that being a NEET is related to individual factors that influence early employability; reduced individual resources could be related to scarce achievements.

## PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants included 168 individuals aged between 18 and 35 years. Nine participants dropped out. Con-

sequently, the final sample comprised 159 young adults, among whom 54.1% were female. The participants were divided into three groups: a) NEET: the group comprised 27 young adults (mean age: 25.40,  $SD = 5.80$ ) with high school level education; b) Students: the group comprised 74 undergraduates (mean age: 21.00,  $SD = 3.87$ ); c) Workers: the group comprised 42 young adults (mean age: 28.20,  $SD = 5.46$ ). All the participants lived in middle Italy (Abruzzo Region).

The inclusion criteria were as follows: a) aged between 18 and 35 years, b) no chronic diseases, c) no substance abuse, and d) no signs of psychiatric pathology. The exclusion criteria were as follows: a) employment in the last six months and b) no educational course.

MEASURES

*Ad hoc questionnaire.* An experimental questionnaire was administered to determine the self-perception of young adults regarding their learning and practical abilities and desired career path.

*Grit-S Scale* (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). This scale measures the extent to which individuals maintain focus, interest, and perseverance in achieving long-term goals. Grit is a personality trait defined as passion for and perseverance toward long-term goals despite adverse conditions. This 12-item scale is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very much like me*) to 5 (*not like me at all*). The final score ranges from 1 (*not at all gritty*) to 5 (*extremely gritty*). The total Grit-S score displayed good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The Qualtrics XM software (Qualtrics, 2021) was used to conduct the survey including demographic and NEET status questions. Additionally, the participants were inquired about their intra- and interper-

sonal skills, professional skills and personality traits using validated measures (see Measures section). The survey was anonymous and required 15 minutes for completion. Each participant’s informed consent was obtained.

PROCEDURE

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of L’Aquila approved the present study protocol (code 44/2022). Participants were enrolled via institutional e-mail by the Psychological Counsellor of the Laboratory of Clinical Psychology (Prof. Dina Di Giacomo), Department of Clinical Medicine, Public Health, Life, and Environmental Sciences (MeSVA), University of L’Aquila (IT). The institutional mail was provided by an employment centre. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2008). The data were collected and elaborated in an aggregated form.

STUDY DESIGN

The study sample was stratified into three groups (NEET, Students and Workers) according to sex. Participants’ characteristics were analysed using descriptive statistics. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to compare behavioural performance, followed by Tukey’s post-hoc test. Statistical analyses were performed using the Jamovi software (Jamovi Project, 2022). Statistical significance was defined as  $\alpha < .05$ .

RESULTS

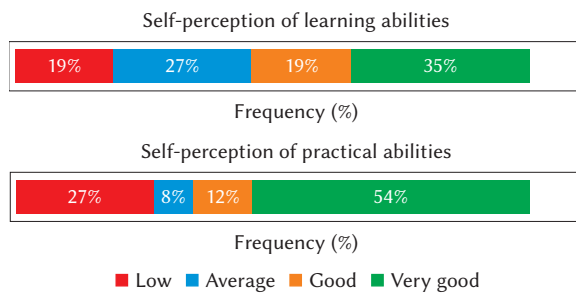
Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic data of participants in the study*

Scale combination	NEETs <i>n</i> = 32 (21.5%)	Students <i>n</i> = 75 (50.3%)	Workers <i>n</i> = 42 (28.2%)	Total <i>N</i> = 159
Age ( <i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i> )	25.40 ± 5.81	19.00 ± 3.87	28.30 ± 5.46	23.20 ± 6.31
Female				
Male	17	43	22	86 (54%)
Male	15	32	20	73 (46%)
Living area				
Rural	17	36	19	81 (50.9%)
Urban	15	39	23	78 (49.1%)

**Figure 1**

Representation of participants' distribution for self-perception index (ad hoc questionnaire)



According to the analysis, the percentage of distribution was lower than the Italian national rate. Our sample comprised 21.5% of NEET young adults, compared to the 23% Italian rate (Ministero del Lavoro, 2022).

The average time taken to complete the survey was (in seconds)  $893.8 \pm 6738$  (median: 184.5). Missing data were zero and dropouts were nine.

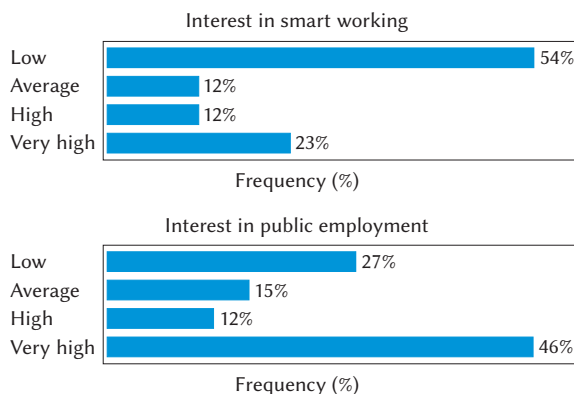
First, we investigated the self-perception of NEETs regarding their learning and practical abilities: 54% of NEETs were confident in their practical activities and 36% of them showed high confidence in their learning abilities. Figure 1 presents the data.

The work interest of NEET seemed to be inclined toward public employment (46%) and not smart working (low = 54%). Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the five levels of interest (low to very high).

Then, the extent to which individuals were able to maintain their focus, interest and perseverance in obtaining long-term goals was analysed by analysing the grit performance of the three subgroups using ANOVA (3 groups  $\times$  3 test). Statistical analysis showed a significant difference between groups ( $p = .021$ ) and Tukey's post hoc test showed a significantly lower grit performance of the NEET group

**Figure 2**

Representation of distribution of NEET groups for 'interest in smart working' and 'interest in public employment' indexes



NEET and grit

compared to the student group (consistent with interest index;  $p = .016$ ). There were no differences between sexes or living areas (urban vs. rural). Table 2 presents the results of the statistical analysis.

As shown in Figure 3, the NEET group showed lower performance in both indices of grit, although one of them was significant.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Considering the positive research perspective, the present study investigated the grit dimension as a psychological trait among NEET young people to identify key protective dimensions. Our finding is interesting: NEETs showed lower consistency in the interest dimension than the student group. This result explains their higher confidence in their practical abilities than in their learning competence. Moreover, NEETs reported a low interest in smart working and high interest in public employment.

**Table 2**

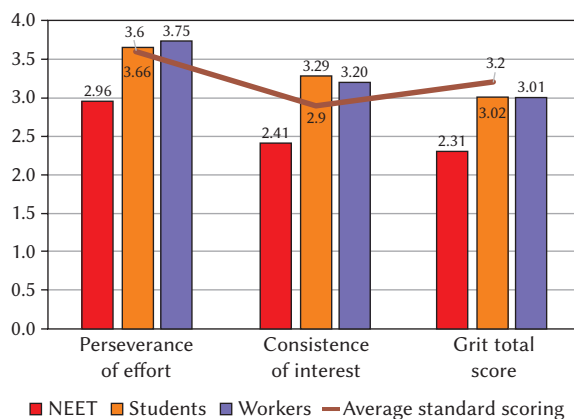
ANOVA test and post hoc statistical analyses on the sample

ANOVA – consistence of interest						
	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	$\eta^2$
Groups	18.00	2	8.98	3.95	.021	0.05
Post hoc comparisons – groups						
Comparison						
Groups	Groups	Mean difference	SE	df	t	$p_{\text{Tukey}}$
NEET	– Students	–0.89	0.32	146	–2.79	.016
NEET	– Workers	–0.71	0.35	146	–2.01	.113
Students	– Workers	0.18	0.29	146	0.61	.816

Note. Comparisons are based on estimated marginal means

**Figure 3**

*Representation of grit performance of sample*



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From a personal growth perspective, the NEET generation seems to need support in individual dimensions to develop indicators of employees' capacity to meet targets. The impact of mental illness on NEETs (Benjet et al., 2012) shows the need to build social environments and individual contexts to boost personal growth from a positive perspective. Therefore, it is in the best interests of both educational and organisational establishments to understand the effects and identify individuals with high grit, as they can maintain their determination and motivation over long periods regardless of failures or adversities. The association between poor mental health and NEET status, above and beyond social disadvantages, suggests that mental health may be an important factor in the successful transition from school to work. Psychopathology may contribute to the likelihood of entering NEET status, may be inversely related to NEET status or may only be related to a third variable that is a risk factor for both.

As highlighted in a previous study (Duckworth et al., 2007), individual traits could lead to the achievement of personal aims from a long-term perspective. Our findings showed that educational programmes should favour and enhance the individual trait of grit during early childhood. Additionally, the risks for low grit should be identified in the developmental trajectory of children and adolescents and addressed to reinforce psychological resilience (Manhica et al., 2022), long-term passion and dedication to ensure sustainable performance (Arnett, 2014; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Van Zyl et al., 2023).

In conclusion, a developmental perspective is required for NEET young people to discover their cognitive and behavioural abilities to be confident and achieve personal growth in social engagement and the labour market. NEET is not an economic and organizational issue; primarily, NEET means being young and needing development from a personal perspective and then social, economic, and organisation-

al perspectives. Communities should better address the risks in childhood, detect behavioural risks and reinforce educational and social actions.

The limitations of this study are as follows: a) sample size and b) non-homogeneous distribution of the sample. The sample size was small; therefore, sophisticated statistical analyses could not be used to address our topic. Additionally, the distribution of participants in the three groups was not homogeneous; therefore, we performed a few statistical elaborations to avoid violation of assumptions.

#### DISCLOSURES

This study was supported by Comune di Castel di Sangro (L'Aquila, Italy) by 'Valore Giovani' Project of Abruzzo Region.

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of L'Aquila (Approval No. 44/2022).

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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