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The NEET economy. Economic and moral practices among vulnerable young people

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ABSTRACT

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the NEET phenomenon has been the focus of international attention among researchers and politicians. And yet, despite extensive research into these young people, little is known today about their daily economic and moral activities. The present article addresses this knowledge gap by examining NEETs' daily economic practices and their normative modalities. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach in Switzerland, it demonstrates that NEETs are not economically inactive, but rather engage in a wide range of circuits of commerce which include various actors, objects and services. Furthermore, it highlights that their economic activities are not anomic but governed by social and moral conventions based on the values of love, friendship, cooperation, solidarity and compassion. Consequently, the main contribution of the article is to challenge the stigmatizing public stereotypes of these young people as inactive and immoral by shedding light on their economic agency and their economic and moral rationality. Finally, based on these empirical findings, our article invites researchers to embrace a theoretical paradigm shift, namely, to cease conceptualizing NEETs as entrepreneurial selves according to a homo economicus model, and instead to conceptualize them as fully fledged socio-economic and moral actors within a homo socialis and moralis model.

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The agency and economic and moral rationality of NEETs

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the NEET phenomenon has been the focus of increased attention among researchers and politicians worldwide (Eurofound 2022; ILO 2024; OECD 2017). These concerns arise from the unprecedented scale of the phenomenon and what the specialist literature refers to as the particularly high individual and social 'costs' that it generates. Indeed, this situation is widely perceived as highly correlated with a host of negative individual and social factors, including physical and psychological problems, elevated risks of social exclusion, low competitiveness on the job market and

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affiliation with extremist political movements. In view of the scale of the phenomenon, comprehending it and reducing the number of young people affected by it ranks high on the European political agenda and is a top priority for international organizations like the ILO, the OECD and the UN.

While there is a great deal of research on this phenomenon in Europe and internationally, but still very little in Switzerland, much of this work suffers from being rooted in a negative, stigmatizing definition of NEETs in terms of ‘what they are not’ (Yates and Payne 2006). Accordingly, current work on NEETs does not provide a clear and detailed picture of their various economic and moral activities. Unlike studies that tend to gloss over this dimension of their actions, our research aims to describe the full range of economic and moral practices of vulnerable NEETs outside the formal job market. In contrast to approaches based on these young people’s deficits, the main interest of our study is to take into account both their economic agency and the economic and moral rationality that they implement on a daily basis.

In our article, we begin with a review of the literature on NEETs in order to identify its contributions and limitations. We then present our findings and analysis of the economic and moral practices of NEETs in Switzerland. This will allow us to demonstrate that these young people are involved in a wide range of circuits of commerce, whereby they engage in economic transactions governed by specific social and moral conventions. In conclusion, we will summarize our results and discuss their significance. This closing section will illustrate that the economic action of young NEETs within different circuits of commerce warrants a reassessment of current approaches, which view their agency exclusively in terms of the ‘entrepreneurial self’ model, a contemporary form of *homo oeconomicus*. Instead, we argue in favor of an approach that does justice to social and moral dimensions, based on the model of *homo socialis* and *moralis*.

The literature on the NEET phenomenon and its shortcomings

Our review of the literature reveals that research on NEETs approaches the phenomenon from three different angles. While an initial, relatively limited series of theoretical studies focuses on discussing the concept, a second, by far the most extensive, offers a statistical analysis of the general characteristics of the phenomenon, and a third, also limited, describes the subjective experience of NEETs in a qualitative or multi-methodological manner. For the sake of brevity, we will limit ourselves here to a brief overview of the main findings of these studies.

The NEET concept

Theoretical research on the NEET concept shows that it is inherently descriptive and normative due to the specific academic and political context in which it emerged (Furlong 2006; Holte 2017). Its creation dates back to the late 1980s, when the British government decided to abolish the right to social benefits for young people under the age of 18, thereby denying them access to both state financial assistance and recognition of their status as unemployed (Cuzzocrea 2014). Faced with this decision, certain members of the academic community and the British government sought a new indicator to measure the extent of *vulnerability* among young people aged 16–18. Initial categories

such as *Status A* and *Status 0* were gradually abandoned in favor of NEET, officially introduced into the academic and political arena in 1999 with the seminal report by the Social Exclusion Unit, *Bridging the Gap*, commissioned and prefaced by Tony Blair (SEU 1999). This study, and the associated report presented by the Secretary of State of Education and Employment, *Learning to Succeed* (Blunkett 1999), are based on the following definition of NEETs: '16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training'. Their distinctive feature is the *normative* definition of the NEET issue as a *social problem* that is liable to give rise to individual and social *risks* and *costs*, and which requires expert and governmental management if it is to be resolved. Based on a neoclassical conception of the individual as the sole owner and entrepreneur of their human capital (Foucault 2010), these texts argue in effect that in an international economic and political context of heightened *competition*, marked by the emergence of an information and knowledge-based economy, young people must *invest* in the development of their *skills* and *employability* in a bid to reduce the risks of *vulnerability* and *social exclusion* that they face. Without actually defining it as such, studies on the NEET concept clearly indicate that the normativity of the above-mentioned relationships is that of *the projective city* – also known as *project-based capitalism* – as coined by Boltanski and Chiapello (2018), which values adaptability, flexibility, autonomy, self-control and the ability to move from one project to another.

Despite the normative dimension of the above-mentioned reports, the NEET concept has attracted growing academic and political interest since the 2000s and has rapidly advanced on the European and international scene right up to the present day. As the concept spread, the 16–18 age bracket used in its original definition was subsequently extended to 15–24 and then to 15–29 – in order, for example, to analyze how students enter the job market – while its embedded normativity, generally adopted unquestioningly or left as implicit, has remained unchanged.

Statistical approaches to the 'NEET problem'

In addition to these theoretical developments, a large body of statistical studies has mirrored, and continues to mirror, the structure of the model report commissioned by the New Labor Party, and sets out to describe the general characteristics of the 'NEET problem' – and the corresponding solutions for solving it – in line with the same technocratic logic. Four dimensions of the phenomenon are generally identified by these studies: the prevalence and profile of the NEETs, the risk factors leading to this status, the associated individual and social costs and, finally, the targeted measures to diminish the phenomenon (Eurofound 2022; ILO 2024).

These studies reveal that, while the phenomenon of youth unemployment is hardly new, its rise during the financial crisis of 2008–2013 was unprecedented. At that time, the NEET rate reached a record high of over 20% in Europe – around 14 million young people – prompting some members of the academic community to consider the NEETs to be the 'most at risk' social category in the region (Eurofound 2022).

These surveys have also helped to refine the subcategories of young people grouped under the NEET concept. The reference typologies drawn up by Eurofound (2022) thus include five subgroups of vulnerable NEETs and two subgroups of non-vulnerable NEETs, arranged in descending order. The first set includes the short-term unemployed

(29.8%), the long-term unemployed (22%), young people with family responsibilities (15.4%), young people with an illness or disability (6.8%) and 'discouraged' young people who are no longer looking for work (5.8%). The second set includes young people about to re-enter the job market (7.8%) as well as opportunity seekers and young people voluntarily carrying out a personal project (12.5%).

The research also identifies risk factors associated with the NEET status. They show that the variable with the greatest impact on the probability of becoming a young NEET is poor scholastic performance, followed by immigration, early parenthood, poor health and delinquency (Coles et al. 2002; Eurofound 2022). These are compounded by social risk factors: the chances of becoming a young NEET increase if individuals have parents from a working-class background, have low levels of education, have a low labor market participation (ibid) and are dependent on public assistance and welfare payments (OECD 2017). Structural factors, such as a non-dual training system¹ or 'illiberal' economic policies, also contribute to increasing the magnitude of the phenomenon (Eurofound 2022).

Quantitative studies also identify a range of 'costs' associated with the NEET status (Coles et al. 2002; Eurofound 2022). These include physical and psychological problems – chronic illness, depression, anxiety, addiction, etc. – but also forms of social stigmatization, marginalization and exclusion. In terms of economic and political difficulties, studies indicate not only low occupational attractiveness and involvement in informal or illegal markets, but also a pronounced lack of interest in – or a distrust of – politicians, as well as support for diverse forms of political extremism (Coles et al. 2002; Eurofound 2022; Furlong 2006).

Given these significant 'costs', these studies have proposed a series of prescriptive and palliative measures based on three strategies to reduce the number of NEETs: motivating young people to seek training or find a job, improving the matching of employers with NEETs, or using 'workfare' policies to compel them to work² (Simmons, Russel, and Thompson 2014).

The subjective experience of NEETs

Finally, a small number of qualitative and multi-methodological studies focus on the subjective experience of NEETs as they become involved in different social spheres. These studies essentially aim to round out the statistical analysis of the reasons why young people become NEETs by highlighting the many family, educational, occupational and institutional difficulties – often of a cumulative nature – that are encountered along the way.

These studies show that the young people in question have had negative family and educational experiences, including poor care from parents who suffer from a wide range of problems – mental illness, addictions, difficult separations, etc. – and have varying degrees of conflictive relationships with them (Archer et al. 2005; Simmons, Russel, and Thompson 2014). These researches also indicate that they may be particularly influenced by the 'anti-school culture' of their parents and peers, and that they may have learning difficulties and problematic relationships with their teachers. According to these studies, most NEETs go on to have negative experiences on the job market and with welfare institutions. Mention is made in particular of the string of unskilled jobs

marked by insecurity and exploitation on the formal and informal markets and of the inefficiency and degrading nature of welfare measures.

Generally speaking, there are two main criticisms of NEET research. First, many authors criticize the NEET concept for lumping together highly heterogeneous social profiles of young people because such groupings undermine the relevance of analyses of the phenomenon and make it difficult to recommend targeted and effective social interventions. Accordingly, many researchers advocate breaking down the concept by identifying subcategories of NEETs according to their degree of vulnerability (Cuzzocrea 2014; Furlong 2006;). Secondly, the 'etic' and negative definition of NEETs as being 'what they are not' (Yates and Payne 2006) is criticized not only because it contributes to their heterodetermination and stigmatization (Furlong 2006; Holte 2017), but also because it does not provide any insights into 'who they are and what they actually do' in their various spheres of life, particularly in the economic arena.

In an effort to overcome some of these shortcomings, our research focuses on analyzing the various economic and moral practices of *vulnerable NEETs*, based on an economic sociology approach and mixed methods research techniques (Creswell 2009). To break down the concept and avoid the pitfall of the normative preconceptions of many previous studies, our inquiry focuses both on the specifics of the economic practices of *vulnerable NEETs* compared with other young people (statistical approach) and on the social and moral conventions underlying their economic practices (qualitative approach). As mentioned earlier, unlike approaches that focus on these young people's deficits, the interest of our study lies in highlighting the economic agency and economic and moral rationality of vulnerable NEETs.

A mixed methods economic sociology approach

To account for the individual economic actions of these young people, we have adopted a mixed methods economic sociology approach. This approach combines an online questionnaire analysis involving 1,500 young people and a series of 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with vulnerable NEET young people.

Economic sociology and circuits of commerce

From our economic sociology perspective, we view the economic activities of NEETs as 'embedded' in their social surroundings and thus integrated into the social, moral and symbolic systems that give them meaning. To account for the different aspects of these young people's transactions, we use Zelizer's (2011) concept of *circuits of commerce*. In this article, we focus on three elements of this concept, based on the following definition of these circuits:

- (1) *'A distinctive set of social relations among specific individuals*
- (2) *Shared economic activities carried on by means of those social relations [...]*
- (3) *Shared meanings that people attach to their economic activities'* (Zelizer 2011, 304).

Using the concept of circuits of commerce, we focus our analysis on the various 'commercial' partners of young NEETs, their economic practices with them and the meanings

these practices convey. Three types of circuits of commerce are used in our study: interpersonal circuits (family, couples, friends), in which players conduct transactions based on their relational proximities and affinities; economic circuits (formal, informal, illegal), in which they cooperate for their reciprocal economic gain³; and, finally, political circuits (state and charitable), in which they make exchanges based on their membership in a political or social community (Honneth 2014). Before presenting these results, we will describe the methods that we used and their respective objectives.

Statistical approach to the NEET phenomenon

Our quantitative approach aims to identify the specific characteristics of vulnerable NEETs by comparing them with the overall population of young people in Switzerland in terms of their economic and social profiles, their involvement in the interpersonal circuit of commerce with family and friends, their formal and informal economic circuit, and the political circuit of the state. To this end, we have developed a questionnaire on the aforementioned topics and partnered with the YouGov⁴ institute for its operationalization and implementation online. This institute was responsible for constructing a representative sample of young Swiss citizens aged 18–29 and for administering our questionnaire online. The survey was conducted from May 18 to June 19, 2020, in Switzerland.⁵ The number of respondents ($N = 1,528$) and the structure of this sample by sex and region is described in the table below (Table 1).

To situate and socially compare young people and their economic practices, we defined their profiles using four indicators of their economic situation – i.e. their income, degree of material deprivation, financial satisfaction and indebtedness⁶ – and two indicators of their social background – their parents' level of education and their parents' level of financial difficulties. To understand their economic practices, we selected three indicators to measure their involvement in interpersonal, economic and state circuits of commerce: (1) practical/monetary help received from family and friends, (2) participation in the formal and informal labor markets (3) and state support received – subsidies and benefits. We have supplemented these three objective indicators of circuit involvement with three subjective indicators to gauge their correlative experience: (1) their assessment of the recognition of their wishes and needs by family and friends, (2) their assessment of the recognition of their training and skills on the job market and, finally, (3) their assessment of the degree of control and respect demonstrated by those responsible for granting state benefits. We then created four categories of young people on the basis of the two differentiating principles of economic vulnerability and economic inactivity: vulnerable NEETs, non-vulnerable NEETs, vulnerable young working people and non-vulnerable young working people, and compared them based on all of the above indicators. Economic vulnerability was operationalized using the

Table 1. Structure of the sample.

	Men	Women	Total
German-speaking Switzerland	500 (32.7%)	485 (31.7%)	985 (64.4%)
French-speaking Switzerland	201 (13.2%)	208 (13.6%)	409 (26.8%)
Predominantly Italian-speaking Switzerland (Ticino)	64 (4.2%)	79 (4.6%)	134 (8.8%)
Total	765 (50.1%)	763 (49.9%)	1,528 (100%)

four indicators of their economic situation mentioned above: to be categorized as vulnerable, one had to be in a difficult economic situation with regard to two or more qualifying dimensions. Inactivity separates NEETs from young people in education or in the labor market.⁷ The number and percentage of respondents in each of the four categories are described in the table below (Table 2).

In-depth semi-structured interviews with vulnerable NEETs

The data that we generated on the specific involvement of vulnerable NEETs in circuits of commerce was then taken one step further by qualitatively analyzing the involvement of NEETs in a wider range of circuits of commerce along with an analysis of the social and moral dimensions of their economic practices. We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews based on the technique developed by Blanchet and Gotman (1992), lasting an average of 1 h and 15 min, with vulnerable young NEETs aged 15–29 in French-speaking Switzerland. Our qualitative sample was distinct from our quantitative sample and was equally distributed by gender. It was gathered through partnerships with two main Swiss social work institutions. Our interview guidelines probed the modalities of their economic involvement in various circuits of commerce and focused on three interrelated topics: the types of people with which vulnerable NEETs carry out transactions, the types of transactions carried out with these individuals and, finally, the symbolic and moral meanings associated with these transactions. After being transcribed in their entirety and anonymized, these interviews were coded using NVivo software and analyzed thematically according to the three dimensions mentioned here. This analysis ultimately led to the identification of the social and moral conventions that determine the economic practices of vulnerable NEETs.

NEETs profiles and economic practices

As we present in detail below, the results of our quantitative and qualitative surveys are mutually reinforcing, as they demonstrate that vulnerable NEETs are distinguished both from other young people by their membership in the lowest echelons of society and by specific economic and moral practices in the various circuits of commerce.

Statistical profiles and economic activities of vulnerable NEETs

Our statistical results show that while vulnerable NEETs differ little from other vulnerable young people in terms of their social backgrounds and economic situations, they do differ significantly from non-vulnerable young people, whether they are employed or not, in

Table 2. Number and percentage of respondents.

	Number	Percent
Vulnerable NEETs	62	4.1%
Non-vulnerable NEETs	57	3.7%
Vulnerable young working people	328	21.5%
Non-vulnerable young working people	1081	70.7%
Total	1528	100.0%

Table 3. Comparison of vulnerable NEETs with other categories of young people according to their social background.

	Social background		
	Mother with only a primary education	Father with only a primary education	Major financial difficulties within the family during adolescence
Vulnerable NEETs (<i>N</i> = 62)	28.6%	20.4%	33.9%
Non-vulnerable NEETs (<i>N</i> = 57)	11.8%	6%	14%
Other vulnerable young people (<i>N</i> = 328)	24.5%	17%	29%
Other non-vulnerable young people (<i>N</i> = 1,081)	12.4%	10.8%	9.9%

When the percentage of vulnerable NEETs is significantly different from other categories of young people, the percentages are shown in bold. T-tests were used to determine significant differences at the $p < 0.05$ threshold.

terms of these two dimensions (see Tables 3 and 4). As the table below shows (Table 3), vulnerable NEETs are more likely to have parents lacking in cultural capital (29% of mothers with only a primary education, compared with around 12% for the two categories of non-vulnerable young people) and economic capital (34% grew up in a family with major financial problems during adolescence, compared with 10–14%). Compared to other young people, vulnerable NEETs have parents with the lowest levels of economic and cultural capital.

For vulnerable NEETs, this modest social background is matched by a more precarious current economic situation, not only in that they are more likely to have low incomes (nearly 90% vs. 45% for the two categories of non-vulnerable young people), but also in that they are more likely to be materially disadvantaged (65% vs. 7–14%), dissatisfied with their financial situation (79% vs. 2–5%) and in debt (23% vs. 0–0.1%). According to these indicators, vulnerable NEET youth represent the most economically disadvantaged segments of the youth population and suffer the most from a lack of financial resources.

With regard to the modalities of involvement in various circuits of commerce, our results indicate that vulnerable NEETs differ little from other categories of young people in terms of their participation in the circuit of interpersonal exchange (see Table 5). Apart from family recognition of needs and desires, which is slightly lower among vulnerable NEETs than among other non-vulnerable young people (mean score 8.1 vs. 8.7), there are no significant differences. This lack of differences should be treated with caution, however, as it may be linked to the way in which the assistance received was contextualized in the questionnaire. Indeed, the support from family and

Table 4. Comparison of vulnerable NEETs with the other categories of young people according to their economic situation.

	Economic situation			
	Low income	Material deprivation	Financial dissatisfaction	Indebtedness
Vulnerable NEETs (<i>N</i> = 62)	88.7%	64.5%	79%	22.6%
Non-vulnerable NEETs (<i>N</i> = 57)	45.6%	14%	5.3%	0%
Other vulnerable young people (<i>N</i> = 328)	93%	76.2%	51.8%	13.7%
Other non-vulnerable young people (<i>N</i> = 1,081)	44.7%	6.4%	1.7%	0.1%

When the percentage of vulnerable NEETs is significantly different from other categories of young people, the percentages are shown in bold. T-tests were used to determine significant differences at the $p < 0.05$ threshold.

Table 5. Comparison of vulnerable NEETs with other categories of young people according to their involvement in the circuit of interpersonal exchange.

	Degree of involvement in the circuit of interpersonal exchange: assistance received				Social recognition within the circuit of interpersonal exchange	
	Practical assistance from family	Financial assistance from family	Practical assistance from friends	Financial assistance from friends	Recognition score received from family*	Recognition score received from friends*
Vulnerable NEETs (N = 62)	71%	50%	22.6%	3.2%	8.10	6.76
Non-vulnerable NEETs (N = 57)	71.9%	36.8%	31.6%	5.3%	8.37	6.74
Other vulnerable young people (N = 328)	70.7%	43.9%	32.9%	6.7%	8.32	6.95
Other non-vulnerable young people (N = 1,081)	65.4%	37.1%	25.3%	2.9%	8.68	7.24

When the percentage of vulnerable NEETs is significantly different from other categories of young people, the percentages are shown in bold. T-tests were used to determine significant differences at the $p < 0.05$ threshold. *Subjective evaluation on a scale of 1–11.

friends, as defined in the survey, did not cover all assistance received, but only what was provided by the most important person according to the respondent.⁸

Once again, the involvement of vulnerable NEETs in the circuit of commerce differs little from non-vulnerable NEETs, except in terms of the recognition of their skills and training on the labor market, which is significantly lower – a difference that can probably be explained by the higher proportion of temporarily unemployed young people among the non-vulnerable NEETs (see Table 6). However, their involvement in this circuit differs greatly from that of both young people who are working and those in education or training, regardless of whether they are vulnerable or not. Vulnerable NEETs engage more often in informal work (26% vs. 11–13% for the two categories of young people employed or in training) and they feel that their skills and training are less well recognized on the job market (average score of 5.7 out of 11 vs. 6.5–7.9). Our results thus indicate that vulnerable NEETs are more likely than other young people to be involved in informal circuits of

Table 6. Comparison of vulnerable NEETs with other categories of young people according to their involvement in the circuit of economic exchange.

	Level of involvement in the circuit of economic exchange		Social recognition within the circuit of economic exchange Recognition score for skills/training on the job market*
	Working in the formal labor market or in training	Informal work	
Vulnerable NEETs (N = 62)	0%	25.8%	5.65
Non-vulnerable NEETs (N = 57)	0%	14%	6.98
Other vulnerable young people (N = 328)	100%	12.8%	6.47
Other non-vulnerable young people (N = 1,081)	100%	10.9%	7.86

When the percentage of vulnerable NEETs is significantly different from other categories of young people, the percentages are shown in bold. T-tests were used to determine significant differences at the $p < 0.05$ threshold. *Subjective evaluation on a scale of 1–11.

commerce and more often suffer from a lack of recognition of their skills and training on the labor market.

Finally, when it comes to their participation in the state circuit of commerce, vulnerable young NEETs once again have similar practices to non-vulnerable NEETs, differing only in that they more frequently receive social assistance – a difference that is nonetheless insignificant due to the small numbers involved. By contrast, the involvement of vulnerable young NEETs in this circuit clearly differs from that of young people in employment or training, as they are more likely to receive benefits from the state (55% vs. 31–43%), particularly unemployment benefits (21% vs. 0–0.4%) and social assistance (14.5% vs. 0–0.9%). They also feel that they receive less respect from the people in charge of allocating state benefits (mean score of 6.3 vs. 7.3–8) and are subject to more scrutiny by them (mean score of 7.1 out of 11 vs. 5.6–5.6). In short, vulnerable NEETs are more likely to receive state benefits than other categories of young people, and particularly the most stigmatizing benefits – unemployment and social assistance. Their negative experience of this circuit also translates into a feeling of being less recognized by the state, with little respect and more stringent controls of recipients of social benefits.

In the light of these results, it appears that the distinctive characteristic of vulnerable NEETs and of their economic practices compared to other young people is that they suffer from a lack of recognition (Honneth 2014). By being excluded from the formal labor market, they are deprived of income from work and the associated occupational and statutory recognition. In order to compensate for the exclusion that they suffer and the associated negative feelings, they participate more often than other young people in informal (see Table 4) and state (see Table 7) circuits of commerce. However, this involvement does not allow them to be recognized as players who are just as valuable as others. The money that they receive from the state and that they earn from odd jobs in the informal sector is not enough to make them the equals of other young people because their economic situation is more precarious in every respect (see Table 3). Furthermore, their greater involvement in the informal circuit of commerce hardly compensates for the

Table 7. Comparison of vulnerable NEETs with other categories of young people according to their involvement in the circuit of state exchange.

	Level of involvement in the circuit of state exchange			Social recognition within the circuit of state exchange	
	Percentage receiving state benefits (all categories)	Percentage receiving unemployment benefits	Percentage receiving social assistance	Respect score*	Scrutiny score*
Vulnerable NEETs (N = 62)	54.8%	21%	14.5%	6.29	7.09
Non-vulnerable NEETs (N = 57)	59.6%	15.8%	1.8%	6.79	6.41
Other vulnerable young people (N = 328)	43%	0%	0.9%	7.31	6.6
Other non-vulnerable young people (N = 1,081)	31.1%	0.4%	0%	8.01	5.6

When the percentage of vulnerable NEETs is significantly different from other categories of young people, the percentages are shown in bold. T-tests were used to determine significant differences at the $p < 0.05$ threshold. *Subjective evaluation on a scale of 1–11.

low recognition of their skills linked to their exclusion from the formal circuit (see Table 5), and their more frequent economic transactions with the state are not a source of positive recognition. In fact, insofar as vulnerable NEETs are more often the recipients of the most stigmatizing benefits, they are more likely to receive a form of negative recognition marked by disrespect and scrutiny⁹ (see Table 7).

The economic and moral agency and rationality of NEETs

Our qualitative results complement and provide a deeper understanding of our quantitative findings by showing that NEETs are involved in a greater number of circuits of commerce and by shedding light on the social and moral conventions that regulate their transactions within these circuits. This allows us to specify the various circuits of commerce involving young NEETs by adding three circuits to those identified in the quantitative analysis: the couple's interpersonal circuit, the illegal economic circuit and the charitable political circuit. As noted in the table below, young NEETs are involved in a total of eight key circuits of commerce: the interpersonal circuits of family, friends and couples; formal, informal and illegal economic circuits; and, finally, state and charitable political circuits (Table 8).

Interpersonal circuits of commerce

The economic practices of vulnerable young NEETs in interpersonal family, conjugal and friendship circuits are governed by social and moral conventions based on closeness and mutual affinity. Within these circuits, NEETs engage in transactions according to the strength of the established ties, with relationships that range from strong, highly valued ties with close friends and loved ones – the immediate family, the lover, 'the best friend'¹⁰ – to casual and diminished relationships with individuals who are generally situated on the fringes of their social network – distant family, 'exes' and acquaintances. The terms and conditions of their economic interaction with these partners are determined by structured, hierarchical normative conventions that place the values of filial and romantic 'love' and 'friendship' at the top end of the scale, while, based on a dichotomous logic, dislike and antipathy are at the lower end of the scale.

In the wake of research on the domestic economy (Zelizer 2011), in the eyes of those interviewed it is indeed 'feelings' and above all 'love' that govern transactions within the family:

Interviewer: What were the reasons for exchanges in your family?

Interviewee 1: I think it boils down to love. (Ketia, 29)

Interviewer: What were the reasons for exchanges in your family?

Table 8. Involvement of vulnerable NEETs in circuits of commerce.

	Interpersonal circuits	Economic circuits	Political circuits
Quantitative analysis	Family, friends	Formal, informal	State
Qualitative analysis	Family, friends, couple	Formal, informal, illegal	State, charitable

Interviewee 2: I'd say love, [...]. In my family, we're not very materialistic, we're more sentimental. Even though I know that my mother and I won't see each other for two or three months, we'll always have that bond. Whereas with my father, it's not at all like that [...]. When we see each other, there's always tension because there were things when I was younger that were never dealt with. (Gino, 26)

By drawing on the ideal of filial love, these young people value and carry out transactions in this circuit with their relatives in accordance with their *lineage* and the *strength of the ties* that they maintain with their families. The majority of their economic partners are parents, followed by grandparents, older siblings and uncles and aunts with whom they 'get along well'. Because of their young age and statutory role as descendants within this circuit, these young people are mainly recipients and more rarely givers. As such, regardless of their gender, their main economic practices consist of receiving material resources from their parents in the form of 'support', sharing and 'gifts' to cover basic needs ('rent', 'food', 'clothes') and, more rarely, certain secondary desires ('sneakers' and fashionable 'clothing', 'a bicycle', etc.). To a lesser extent, their parents also give them small sums of money when requested, amounting to around CHF 20, and occasionally provide them with certain services (giving them 'a lift' in their car, 'baby-sitting', etc.).

Transactions within a given couple are governed by the value of 'love' in contrast with the values of disenchantment and indifference. The love experienced in this circuit is distinguished from filial love by the *sexual desire* that these young people feel for their partner and the importance that they attach to their partner's 'good looks'. As the following two interview excerpts show, it is because they 'are attracted' to each other and 'love' each other that NEETs engage in transactions with their partners.

I have an absolutely gorgeous girlfriend, [...] I never really thought I'd have a girl I felt so attracted to. Everything a man could wish for. She's got such a great body, such a face, in short, everything a man could ask for. (Francesco, 20)

Interviewer: What are the reasons for exchanges with your boyfriend?

Interviewee: It's because we love each other. (Emma, 21)

By embracing this normative convention, NEETs engage in transactions that range from the most valued with their 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend' to the very rare or non-existent and less valued with their 'exes'. Unlike the asymmetrical economic relations prevailing in the family circuit, these young people have the status of equals in this circuit, implying symmetrical and reciprocal transactions.

In a relationship, in a couple, I mean, well, you give me love, I'm going to give you love, too. For me, it's a bit like that. I find one-way relationships pretty pointless, where you've got one person who's kind of up against a wall and then they give it all they've got and the other person doesn't really give a shit. (Maria, age 21)

The love these young people feel for their partners is mainly expressed and conveyed by selfless, reciprocal gifts in the form of 'little gestures' and 'gifts', and to a lesser extent by money and favors. As this interview excerpt illustrates, these transactions are influenced by a traditional division of labor, with young women providing 'their boyfriend' with necessities such as housing and meals at home (reproductive work), and young men buying 'their girlfriend' non-essential items and 'gifts' (meals in restaurants, etc.):

[The main thing] is that we do nice things for each other, make these little gestures, which rekindles the flame. [...] Sometimes I'll see something that I know she really likes, so I'll buy it and give it to her. Yesterday, I said, 'I'm really craving a burger'. She looked at me, ordered some food, and said, 'Here, have a burger'. (Gino, 26)

The transactions that these young people enter into with their peers, meanwhile, are governed by the social and moral convention of *friendship*, which underscores the importance of having deep feelings for the other and the associated 'strong ties' ranging from 'really getting along' and 'appreciation' to forms of 'love'. These ideal values stand in contrast to the enmity felt for certain other young people, who are strongly disliked and are a source of 'trouble'. The transactions these young people conduct are based on the quality and strength of the ties that they maintain with their peers, and range from long-standing 'best friends' who 'you can count on the fingers of one hand', to simple 'friends', then more numerous acquaintances, while 'spongers', enemies and rival groups are excluded from the circle of exchange.

My girlfriends, well, we've been friends for 20 years now. [...] My real girlfriends, I have five of them and, yeah, they're like my sisters. They know everything about me. They're there in bad times, we give each other presents, yeah, they're sweet [...]. They each have their own personality, they're not all the same. There are things I'll say to one rather than to another [...]. But I love them all, every one of them. (Ketia, 29)

In this circuit, young people perceive themselves as symmetrical and readily give material items to their peers, regardless of their gender, as a spontaneous, selfless and reciprocal act ('alcohol', 'pieces of kebab', 'cigs', 'dope', etc.). To a lesser extent, always following this non-gendered logic, they may also give each other small amounts of money (between CHF 5-20) or, less often, do small favors for each other ('moving house', transportation, etc.).

Economic circuits of commerce

The involvement of vulnerable NEETs in formal, informal and illegal economic circuits of commerce is governed by the normative convention of cooperation for profit. Within this convention, the main reference value is mutual economic 'profit', as opposed to a situation in which the interests of one of the stakeholders are more or less totally disregarded ('exploitation', 'theft', 'robbery', etc.). As stated by this interviewee, who occasionally moonlights as a waitress at a nightclub, mutual economic 'profit' is the basis for her dealings with her boss:

Well, my employer hired me because he needed someone, but he didn't want to do things by the book. He's perfectly aware that if you declare someone, you have to put them on the payroll and all that, but he just wants to make a bit of profit, the employer, I think that's it. [...]. Now, I'm well aware of the risks involved. If the police turn up, I might be in trouble too, but I get paid in cash. So, actually, we both kind of benefit. (Maobi, 29)

By embracing the normative convention of commercial cooperation, these young people carry out and add value to transactions with companies, freelancers, individuals, dealers and customers who reward them for their efforts and treat them with consideration and 'respect' – in other words, who pay them or supply them 'properly' and recognize their skills and human dignity. On the other end of the spectrum, they deride the 'bosses' who

‘exploit’ them and treat them like ‘commodities’ in the informal economic circuits, not to mention the ‘thieves’ and ‘robbers’ who steal the ‘hash’ or ‘weed’ that they sell in the illegal circuits. Their transactions are regarded as non-contractual commercial exchanges in the form of ‘working off the books’ and ‘arrangements’ in informal economic circuits, where both genders invest equally, and as ‘dealing’ in illegal economic circuits, in which men are primarily active. These activities primarily allow them to acquire some ‘cash’ – around CHF 20 per hour for their informal activities and between CHF 50–2,000 per month for dealing drugs – or, in some cases, a particular quantity of ‘dope’ in the form of a material ‘margin’ or for ‘personal consumption’.

Political circuits of commerce

Finally, in the state and charitable political circuits of commerce, NEETs establish economic transactions with social workers and passersby in the name of the values of ‘solidarity’ and ‘compassion’, which stands in contrast to various forms of contempt for their human dignity (Honneth 2014). These range from belittlement to indifference to reification (being treated like an object, a number, etc.).

I think there are people in these agencies who feel a sense of solidarity toward their fellow man and who exercise it in their job as a social worker, or by working at [a food bank]. Yes, that also exists, it really does. That’s also something that works, I’d say. (Martin, 29)

Interviewer: When it comes to panhandling [...], in your opinion, why do people give you something?

Interviewee: Because I think that some people are aware that we don’t necessarily all have a settled life. It’s mostly, I think, out of compassion. (Dolores, 29)

The main stakeholders who provide resources to NEETs are the staff of welfare organizations and charitable passersby in the public arena who are asked to give them ‘help’ or ‘spare change’. These players are ranked according to the quantity and quality of the aid provided, ranging from social workers and people who ‘lend a hand’ to employees of welfare agencies who ‘treat them like numbers’, ‘dogs’ or ‘shit’, and passersby who despise them or act as if they are ‘invisible’. In the words of this young NEET who asks for handouts from passersby:

Some are less open than others. In general, it’s these people who don’t give me anything and even throw in little barbs like: ‘Yeah, get a job’ [...]. There are also those who don’t see me [...]. They look at me, they’ve seen me, but they haven’t seen me. There’s also that behavior. (Dolores, 29)

In this circuit, NEETs mainly receive money in the form of a welfare ‘budget’ (CHF 824 minimum per month in 2022) and ‘change’ from passersby (between CHF 5–100 per day, with an average of CHF 20 per day). If these transactions, regardless of gender, are mainly determined by sheer necessity in both the charitable and the state circuits, we must also emphasize the strong influence of the traditional gendered division of labor and the economy of care in the latter. A significant proportion of our respondents in the state circuit are indeed single mothers who apply for social assistance to support their children and themselves. In such cases, in accordance with conventional gendered schemes, interviewees state that social workers typically recognize the moral legitimacy of

Table 9. The economic practices of NEETs in circuits of commerce.

	Interpersonal circuits	Economic circuits	Political circuits
Moral conventions	Love, friendship	Cooperation for mutual profit	Solidarity, compassion
Social conventions	Family, couple, friends	Businesses, freelancers, individuals, dealers, customers	Social workers, passersby
Economic practices	Gifts, support, sharing	Arrangements, illegal work, dealing	Budget, spare change
Purpose of transactions	Material items, small amounts of money	Money	Money

their demands and offer single mothers relatively compassionate support to ‘take care of their children’ and ‘rebuild themselves’, while young men receive a ‘budget’ and are requested to participate in workfare programs.

In summary, our qualitative interviews reveal that vulnerable NEETs are engaged in a multitude of circuits of commerce governed by social and moral conventions based on the values of love, friendship, cooperation, solidarity and compassion. Their exchange partners range from family, friends and couples (interpersonal circuits), to businesses, freelancers, individuals, dealers and customers (economic circuits), to social workers and charitable passersby (political circuits). The table below provides an overview of the social and moral conventions governing the economic practices of NEETs in the various circuits of commerce (Table 9).

Rethinking the NEET phenomenon beyond the narrow prism of *homo oeconomicus*

To conclude our analysis, our survey appears to make three main contributions to the field of NEET research.

First, it fills the data gap on the social and economic characteristics of vulnerable NEETs in Switzerland. Our study shows that – from a quantitative point of view, and in line with international research – vulnerable NEETs are distinguished from other young people by their working-class background and their more precarious economic situation. We have also observed that these young people are excluded from the formal labor market, are more often involved in informal channels, and are more often beneficiaries of the least valued social benefits. Second, our study shows, unlike much research on this youth, that vulnerable NEETs do not live in an economic no-man’s-land, but are actually engaged on a daily basis in a diverse array of interpersonal, economic and political circuits of commerce. We have established that to compensate for their exclusion from the formal labor market, and their corresponding lack of material and symbolic resources, these young people engage in a multitude of circuits that operate according to rationalities ranging from proximity and formality to impersonality and illegality. However, their involvement in these various circuits does not allow them to be fully recognized. While NEETs do manage to obtain material resources, these are generally modest and irregular, and the symbolic resources they acquire receive little or no recognition according to our society’s dominant evaluation criteria. Building on these analyses, our third contribution is to clarify that their economic activities are by no means anomic. On the contrary, they draw on specific social and moral conventions that specifically apply to each activity.

Hence, the economic transactions of vulnerable NEETs in the diverse circuits of commerce are governed by normative systems underpinned by the values of love, friendship, cooperation, solidarity and compassion.

These findings have a wide range of implications in the field of NEET research. First of all, the distinct and distinctive social and economic profile of vulnerable NEETs confirms the validity of appeals by experts to break down a concept that is far too socially amorphous and calls for socially targeted research. Furthermore, given the social characteristics of these young people and their specific involvement in circuits of commerce, priority should be given – based on a social and reformist approach – to supporting the most vulnerable groups in the population and to targeting measures to provide them with appropriate assistance. Finally, since their economic activities are of a moral nature, we are now called upon to more fundamentally and radically question the way in which the NEET phenomenon has been construed and envisaged as a social problem, in accordance with the normative model of contemporary *homo oeconomicus* as the ‘entrepreneurial self’. Whereas this etic and idealistic perspective in no way allows us to account for the ways in which these young people act economically, our results show that the approaches of these individuals become intelligible when viewed in the light of the anthropological model of a *homo socialis* and *moralis* (Fraser and Honneth 2003), for whom the economy is not reduced – far from it – to the logic of utility maximization, but rather plays out based on a multitude of social and moral conventions. In this sense, our results suggest an alternative interpretation of the NEET phenomenon, by which it is necessary to proceed from the heuristic model of *homo oeconomicus* to one that postulates an economically active *homo socialis* and *moralis*. It is a matter of substituting the economic will attributed to the NEETs, externally and from above – essentially the maximization of their human capital within the logic of competition – and replacing this with their *actual* economic and social will to be cherished by their loved ones, to participate on the labor market, and to have their free will and dignity fully recognized within society. In our opinion, it is only by embarking on this theoretical revolution that the concept of NEET, if it is still to be used despite its embedded normativity, could be put to *positive* use – in both the social and moral sense of the term¹¹ – by those concerned with the plight of one of the most marginalized groups of young people today.

Notes

1. For instance, the low NEET rate in Switzerland has been consistently linked to the importance and effectiveness of its dual training system, which serves over two-thirds of Swiss young people. At approximately fifteen years of age, young Swiss people, according to their scholastic performances will either enter the workforce with low-skilled jobs or they will pursue a dual training (66.9%) or an academic training (33.1%) (Lamamra and Moreau 2016).
2. In Switzerland, for example, the welfare state plays a central role in addressing the NEET problem through the implementation of public training and activation policies, which ensure that vulnerable NEETs have access to education and training programs, as well as conditional social benefits (health, disability, and unemployment insurances) or universal welfare benefits (social assistance).
3. In the present article, in line with the work of Portes and Castells, formal circuits are defined as a licit “production and distribution process” of a “licit product”; informal circuits as an illicit “production and distribution process” of a “licit product”; and illegal circuits as a more or less illicit “production and distribution process” of an “illicit product” (Portes and Castells

- 1989, 14). In accordance with these authors, we emphasize the role of the state in constructing the definitions and distinctions between formal, informal and illegal economies and, consequently, their changing, non-essentialist characters.
4. YouGov institute: <https://business.yougov.com/fr/entreprise/yougov-suisse>.
 5. Due to its electronic nature, data production was not affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
 6. For all these indicators, dichotomous variables have been constructed to distinguish difficult economic situations. For more detailed information on how these indicators were constructed and our methodology, please refer to our article: <https://arodes.hes-so.ch/record/12073?ln=de&v=pdf>.
 7. According to our categorization, vulnerable NEETs are thus both inactive and experience financial difficulties on at least two of the following items: income, financial satisfaction, degree of material deprivation and indebtedness.
 8. As we have demonstrated in another article (Jacot, Curty, and Plomb 2023), it is important to note here that by aggregating vulnerable NEETs within the broader category of vulnerable youth their economic practices are significantly different from those of non-vulnerable youth, with a longer duration of essential assistance received from family and friends.
 9. As our qualitative analysis will show, in line with Honneth's work (2014), NEETs express their lack of recognition through moral denunciations of the absence of love, friendship, cooperation, solidarity, and compassion that they experience in interpersonal, economic, and political circuits.
 10. In this section, we have placed the terms used by the interviewees in quotation marks.
 11. We argue here that use of the NEET concept based on the *homo socialis* and *moralis* model is both more scientific and more rewarding for young people who are referred to in this manner than the current concept based on the model of *homo oeconomicus*.

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