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## SOFT SKILLS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: A STUDY ON ITALIAN RURAL AND URBAN NEETS<sup>1</sup>

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**S**oft skills retain a certain importance in fully understanding the NEET phenomenon: however, only few researchers have focused on them specifically. The aim of this work is two-fold: a) to detect the differences in terms of soft skills and psychological well-being between urban and rural NEETs; and b) to evaluate which of the soft skills analysed may be predictors of psychological well-being. A sample of young 6998 18–34 years old representative of the Italian population was used. Although gender and educational attainment play a key role in determining NEET status, the degree of urbanisation must be considered because it appears to influence the well-being and perceived soft skills of a group of NEETs. The present study shows that females with low educational attainment residing in rural areas have lower levels of well-being than females with low educational attainment residing in urban areas. A similar influence exists in relation to one particular soft skill: positive vision. Furthermore, soft skills predict psychological well-being wherein degree of urbanisation and gender seems to play a determining role. Policies should, therefore, consider these issues in their design and implementation phases.

**Keywords:** NEETs; rural; urban; soft skills; psychological well-being.

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## INTRODUCTION

The emergency arising from the Covid-19 pandemic has further highlighted the differences between those who benefit from a wide range of socio-economic opportunities and those who do not. In this context, education represents a fundamental tool for emancipation, especially for those young people who come from disadvantaged family backgrounds. However, when the opportunities offered within a given territory are more limited, both at the educational level and in terms of future inclusion in the labour market, situations such as neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) can much more easily occur. These are young people who do not work, but have also given up on undertaking any sort of training. The pandemic has further complicated this situation. In fact, in the second quarter of 2020, the proportion of NEETs throughout the European Union has increased by 11.6% compared to the same period of the previous year (Eurostat 2021). Italy ranks first in this regard. In Italy, the number of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 who are neither working nor studying has reached 20.7%. The issue becomes even more alarming if the upper age brackets are considered: it is now worryingly well known that in Italy that the NEET condition affects young people up to 34 years of age (Ellena, Rosina and Sironi 2021). Indeed, 30.7% of young people aged 25–34 years old are NEETs (Eurostat 2021). In turn, according to Eurostat (2021), young NEETs aged 15 to 34 years represent precisely 25.1% of their demographic. This paper presents an overview of the main psychosocial characteristics of Italian NEETs and the relevant associated risk factors. A focus is made on the differences between rural and urban contexts, especially in terms of psychological well-being and soft skills, essential to complete the transition to adulthood and to which policies and interventions should be directed. This paper is innovative, since there is very little literature which focuses on the relationship between social skills and psychological well-being of rural NEETs.

## NEETs: CHARACTERISTICS AND PROFILES

Since its emergence, the NEET status has proven to be a powerful tool for improving understanding of young people's vulnerabilities in terms of labour market participation and social inclusion. As an indicator, it has helped redefine policy objectives around youth. However, despite the speed with which it has gained traction in the policy arena, the concept of NEET has sometimes been criticised due to the heterogeneity of the population it captures (Rosina 2015). Whilst all NEETs share the common characteristic of being young people who are not accumulating human capital, nor are experiencing themselves in the labour market, the various groups within this category have very different characteristics and needs. This has important consequences for policy responses.

Identifying subgroups not only enables increasingly targeted and effective social policies to be implemented, but also helps to identify those who are most vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. In this regard, Eurofound (Mascherini and Ledermaier 2016) identified seven main groups: a) **re-entrants**: this category captures those young people who will soon re-enter the labour market, education, or training, and begin or resume accumulating skills through formal channels. These are individuals recently employed or enrolled in education or training; b) **short-term unemployed**: this category consists of those who have been unemployed for less than a year and looking for a job. A short period of unemployment during the transition from school to work can be considered as normal, and the level of vulnerability amongst people in this category can be expected to be moderate; c) **long-term unemployed**: this category consists of all young people who have been unemployed for more than a year and are looking for work. People in this category are at high risk of social exclusion, since prolonged unemployment gradually precludes new job opportunities, thereby placing them in a vicious cycle which could (and often does) create lifelong psychological and/or professional damage; d) **unavailable due to illness or disability**: this category includes those who are not looking for work, or are unavailable to start work in the short term, due to illness or disability; e) **unavailable due to family responsibilities**: this group includes young people who are not looking for a job, or are not available to start a new job because they are caring for children or incapacitated adults (or have other, less specific family responsibilities). Youth in this group may include both vulnerable and non-vulnerable individuals; f) **inactive discouraged**: this group encompasses all young people who have stopped looking for work, because they believe there are no job opportunities for them. They are mostly vulnerable young people, at high risk of social exclusion, and who are likely to have employment problems throughout their working lives; g) **other inactive**: this group contains all NEETs whose reasons for being NEET do not fall into any of the previous six categories. This group is a residual statistical category. It is likely to be an extremely heterogeneous mix, that includes people at all ends of the vulnerability spectrum: the most vulnerable, the hardest to reach, those at risk of being deeply alienated, the most privileged, and those who are holding out for a specific opportunity, or are pursuing alternative paths.

### MAIN RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH THE NEET STATUS

The factors that can be defined as risk are multiple and they include numerous aspects. Some of the most relevant elements are presented below.

## **Gender**

It is well known that there is a considerable difference between males and females concerning the proportion of young adults who were neither in employment nor in education and training. According to Eurostat (2021), it is interesting to note how this gap is closely correlated with age. In fact, in the EU, the percentage difference between males and females is minimal in the 20–24 age bracket (1.1 percentage points), increasing in the 25–29 age bracket (8.5 percentage points), and widening considerably in the 30–34 age bracket (12.6 percentage points). In Italy, however, the data is alarming. Considering the 20–34 age group, the difference between the two genders is around 11 percentage points, with males accounting for 24% and females for 35%. The causes of this phenomenon are not singular. Firstly, we can consider the social pressure of the role, which still forces men to think of themselves as those who take care of work, and women of the home. Another point could be the labour market, where employers generally prefer to hire men rather than women. Finally, the issue of motherhood: undoubtedly, the difficulties encountered in reconciling work and family life leads many women to choose the latter. At the same time, the fact that this phenomenon occurs in the older age brackets is linked to the increasingly upward trend of postponing the age at which the first child is born.

## **Educational attainment**

Another important point when considering the NEET condition is the level of education. The trend in recent years shows us that those with low levels of education are much more likely to become NEET than those with higher levels of education. In 2020, the NEET rate for young people aged 20–34 in the EU was 40.0 % amongst those with a low level of education. This is compared with 15.6 % amongst those with an intermediate level of education, and 10.6 % amongst those with a high level of education (Eurostat, 2021).

## **Immigration background**

An important determinant for entering NEET conditions is immigration background, which increases the likelihood of joining this group by 70% (Mascherini 2017). According to the annual report on immigrants and the labour market of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2020), in proportional terms, the percentage of NEETs in Italy is highest amongst young people from non-EU countries, followed by those from other EU countries, and finally Italians. Here, gender plays a substantial role: the percentage of young women from non-EU countries who are unemployed or inactive is almost double that of Italians. This condition is mainly due to the cultural nature of immigrants, where the role of

women is predominantly that of taking care of the home and other family members (not just children).

### **Economic background**

Living in a low-income household increases the likelihood of becoming NEET. Furthermore, having parents who have been unemployed raises the likelihood to 17%, whilst those whose parents have a low level of education see their odds double (Mascherini 2017).

### **Degree of urbanisation**

Finally, a last fundamental theme which has recently become the focus of attention of European Union projects is the degree of urbanisation in which people live. Young people who live in rural contexts are at greater risk of becoming NEETs than their urban peers. However, this finding is complex when analysing the different European states. In Italy, we find a percentage of NEETs of 30.2% in cities, 29.2% in small towns and 28.2% in rural areas. In conclusion, there is no apparent quantitative difference between the regions and the degree of urbanisation (Eurostat 2021). Nonetheless, the rural – urban issue which forms the central analytical category of this paper is of great concern from a qualitative point of view: in several contexts, the rural – urban (issue) seems to be key to understanding NEETs. It is evident how urban and rural contexts are very different, with the latter lacking both training and employment opportunities. Living conditions are indeed diverse, and this can only have an impact upon NEETs. It is therefore essential to understand which social and psychological differences there are between these two groups, in order to be able to build more targeted policies that, in turn, allow for a more efficacious impact within a given territory.

## **URBAN AND RURAL AREAS: THEIR IMPACT UPON NEETS**

For some time now, the theme of territorial inequalities has been considered by many researchers and activists working in the field of public policy. The recent economic crisis highlighted the issue of cohesion between areas that have benefited from globalisation, policies and processes of centralisation of development, and areas that have been disadvantaged. Urban areas have had the upper hand in terms of investment and political attention. On the other hand, inland, peripheral, and rural areas have been further penalised, as they have witnessed an actual strategic, political, and cultural disinvestment (Carrosio 2019). These factors cause urban areas to enter a virtuous circle of development and economic growth, where there is no shortage of educational and job offers. Moreover, immigration from provincial youth in search of a better future is very common. However, in rural areas there is an increasing impoverishment of social and economic capital. An

analysis by Alfieri and Ellena (2020) shows that in periods before the crisis, the Italian youth population was more prevalent in urban areas, whilst during the peak of the economic crisis, the percentage of urban youth decreased. Conversely, the percentage in rural areas increased. This indicated that young people return to their families in times of unemployment, and then begin to migrate back to the cities when the economic situation begins to improve once more. This data is consistent with other research which highlights the alarming depopulation of rural areas (Quaranta et al. 2020) due to a lack of opportunities, but also because of a negative social representation of agriculture and rural jobs amongst young people (Simões and do Rio 2020). It is evident how a stay in rural areas can favour the entry of young people into the NEET condition and, at the same time, once they have entered, hinder their exit due to the very few alternatives to moving to the city existing in the area. Therefore, rural NEETs are more likely to be socially excluded, they are often involved in family demands, with or without income, and this is especially the case for females (Simões et al. 2017). The rural context tends to hinder and not allow the development of lifestyles more typical of urban areas, as it simply does not present the opportunities to do so. In these areas, school achievements are limited and are accompanied by a clearer dissonance between aspirations and actual qualifications. In addition, these young people are more likely to create a dependency on their family of origin, and to perpetuate a condition of poverty.

In addition, the labour market, which tends from manufacturing to tertiary, with a decrease in low-skilled labour supply, seems to be a crucial theme. Therefore, young people tend to face greater competition, particularly in rural areas where situations of deprivation remain evident. In fact, it is well known that living in rural areas implies some disadvantages, such as: increased difficulty in accessing services; limitations in public transport; expenses for maintaining a car as a necessity instead of a luxury; limited recruitment opportunities; and a general lack of choice and information (Sadler, Akister and Burch 2015).

Furthermore, NEET experience also has a massive impact upon self-efficacy (de Almeida and Simões 2020). To that end, repeated experiences of unemployment imply an additional effort in facing obstacles, and thereby increases the likelihood of developing negative beliefs on professional development. All this is accentuated for NEETs in rural areas due to the limitation of opportunities caused by market structure and mobility problems. Furthermore, the NEET condition brings young people more quickly to the cities, thereby worsening the local economy's weakness. In rural areas, young people find more barriers to development, both for training opportunities and for the limits of the labour market. Beyond this, high-level training is not combined with rural conditions, in which meritocracy is more difficult to reify: therefore, university-oriented young people leave their places of origin. Due to lower family incomes, many rural NEETs enter the labour market early, but often in hazardous or seasonal activities. This increases

the possibility of becoming NEETs in areas with a less flexible labour market. Rural NEETs have lower educational and professional qualifications than urban NEETs, and also lower household incomes and greater family dependency. Taken together, this impacts upon the NEET proportion and local community trends, thereby highlighting the need to adapt employment agencies to deprived communities' specific needs.

### SOFT SKILLS, PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND NEETs

The topic of soft skills has increasingly become the focus of NEETs research. Soft skills are essential for both entering and remaining in the labour market. According to Yan and colleagues (2018), hard capacities comprise teachable skills, acquired through means of self-study, work experience, education, or training. These skills are industry-specific, and vary from job to job, e.g., the ability to speak a foreign language, accounting, computing, teaching and research skills, or a certificate or degree (FRS Recruitment 2017). Hard skills are essential to perform the technical specifications of a particular job. However, soft skills encompass a mind-set, characterised by essential human qualities, such as intuition, creativity, responsibility, kindness, courage, and self-awareness.

According to Gabriel-Petit (2014) soft skills are essential to succeed both in private and work life. Additionally, their absence can lead not only to the inability to find a job, but especially the impossibility of maintaining it once found. Wheeler (2016) stated that employers "hire people for their hard skills, but they end up firing people for their lack of soft skills". Soft skills include various abilities: these range from the more relational/social (e.g., emotional intelligence, social intelligence, teamwork) to the more executive ones (e.g., proactivity, task orientation) (Goleman 2009; Wheeler 2016; Whetten and Cameron 2014). Research has shown that in addition to possessing relevant hard skills, it is soft skills that ultimately enable a person to advance, get promoted, and have a successful and happy career (see Wheeler 2016).

Many definitions of soft skills exist in the literature (Cimatti 2016). A first distinction can be made between Self-oriented/Intrapsychic and Other-oriented/Interpersonal skills. The first category refers to what the person must understand and develop by her/himself; the second category gathers what the person can develop by relating with other people (Cimatti 2016). This distinction can also be made in terms of Personal and Social Skills. Personal Skills mainly correspond to cognitive skills, such as knowledge and thinking skills, whilst social skills refer to relationships with other people. Let us consider some: a **knowledge skill** is the capability of elaborating information; a **thinking skill** is the ability of exercising critical judgment; **personal skills** are the capacity and desire to continue to learn and the ability to plan and achieve goals; **main social skills** can be identified in communication, listening capability, negotiation, networking, problem



solving, decision making and assertiveness (Engelberg 2015). This paper considers and groups soft skills in a way that breaks them down into those that are necessary and useful for young people and their approach to the workplace. It includes a) Positive vision, which refers to a positive approach that a person can adopt towards themselves and life in general; b) Executive skills, encompassing discipline, consistency, and attention to detail in achieving goals, thus referring to a responsible and correct attitude of approaching things, but also the ability to set goals and work with reliability and accountability to achieve them; c) Social skills, consisting of the ability to relate to others in a positive and appropriate way, with effective communication, and encompasses emotional and social intelligence, as well as team working; d) Leadership skills, defined as the ability to be a leader, to make decisions for oneself and others, to solve problems effectively and to stand for one's ideas without giving in to the peer pressure; e) Self-control and conflict management skills, outlined as the ability to control and govern emotions to manage divergences with others. Hence, as can be clearly seen, soft skills encompass a multiplicity of different skills but which are nonetheless vital to long term career success in the labour market.

Soft skills allow people to acquire versatile and positive behaviour, and thus help them to: adapt better to change; make more conscious choices that match one's expectations; and perceive a general sense of well-being dictated by the appropriateness of their actions (Capogna 2019). It is therefore very important to consider the relationship between soft skills and psychological well-being. In fact, a few studies (Palumbo 2013a; Chiteji 2010) have shown that having an excellent command of soft skills allows people to better manage daily work and personal life, and this promotes the perception of greater well-being. Moreover, operational, and executive difficulties can increase stress and reduce psychological well-being, whilst low social skills can impair different areas of private and professional life leading to a decrease in overall psychological health (Salmela-Aro, Savolainen and Holopainen 2009)

Various researchers have already accentuated and focused on how NEETs in general possess lower levels of soft skills than their non-NEET peers (Marta 2012; Marzana and Poy 2019). Low self-esteem and low self-efficacy seem to be particularly negative and foster the risk of entering this category. The specific role it plays depends upon the fact that people with low self-esteem have a negative view of themselves, and this can, in turn, have repercussions on future aspirations. Low self-esteem combined with an external locus of control makes subjects more at risk of entering this condition and remaining in it for a long time. The locus of control causes people to think that their choices do not determine their future, which thereby leads them to make less constructive decisions. Effort and diligence, on the other hand, seem to reduce the risk of joining the NEET group. These individuals appear to be more persevering and able to meet challenges. Therefore,

those with high levels of effort and diligence are less likely to be NEET than those with low levels and external locus of control.

It is for this reason that the main measures implemented to counteract the NEET phenomenon have focused on soft skills. We define soft skills (or transversal skills) as the basic cognitive, emotional, and relational skills which render the individual able to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, both on an individual and social level (Carlotto 2015). Specifically, they refer to those capabilities which bring together the personal qualities, attitude in the work environment and knowledge in the field of interpersonal relationships that are essential to produce professional behaviours capable of transforming a technical “knowledge” into an effective work and organisational performance.

In light of this, the Youth Guarantee schemes were intended to provide young people with opportunities to acquire and/or enhance skills that are employable and useful in life. A fundamental point in this regard concerns the relationship with/between people and organisations (Poy and Scaratti 2021). In this regard, it is extremely enriching to understand how levels of soft skills and consequent psychological well-being are manifested in rural NEETs compared to urban NEETs. Understanding this more fully will help to pave the way for more targeted and consequently more impactful policies and interventions. Therefore, it is apparent that there is a gap in the literature both in terms of studying rural NEETs in general, but also focusing upon the role which those soft skills can play in their life. Furthermore, very few studies have related soft skills to psychological well-being more generally.

## **THE PRESENT RESEARCH**

Given the literature on the topic previously mentioned, and the relevance of the issue considered here, the aim of this paper is twofold: firstly, to detect the differences in terms of soft skills and psychological well-being between urban and rural NEETs in a sample of young people between 18 and 34 years old that is representative of the Italian population (possible differences between rural and urban NON-NEETs will also be taken into account); and secondly, to evaluate which of the soft skills analysed may be predictors of psychological well-being, and the role of gender, degree of urbanisation and educational attainment thereof.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

This study involves the secondary analysis of data collected by the Osservatorio Giovani of the Istituto Toniolo di Studi Superiori (Milan, Italy). Since 2012, the Osservatorio conducts yearly computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) surveys regarding topics related to young people, such as the social and economic

inclusion of people that are Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET), as well as healthy behaviours, cultural issues, and participation. The authors contributed to the design of the major study. Sampling and data collection were conducted by Ipsos s.r.l. The representative sample of the Italian population is composed of 6 998 young adults, 51.3% of whom are male. 50.7% of the participants have a 4–5-year high school diploma, whilst 27.1% have a lower qualification, and 22.2% have a degree. Most of the participants involved were in employment (37.2%), 22.6% instead were studying and working, 22.2% were studying, whilst 18% of the subjects were not studying, not working and not training, and therefore have been identified as NEETs. Finally, most of the young people involved live in the South or the Islands (38.2%), a good portion live in the Northwest (24.8%), followed by those who live in the Centre (19.2%) and those who live in the Northeast (17.8%). To carry out the analysis for the present paper, the sample was divided into NEETs and NON-NEETs, which in turn was subsequently divided into rural and urban, thus resulting in a total of 816 Urban NEETs, 438 Rural NEETs, 4433 Urban NON-NEETs and 1279 Rural NON-NEETs.

## MEASURES

**Soft skills:** a soft-skills questionnaire consisting of 23 items, and currently under validation process (e.g., “Positive vision”; “Executive skills”; “Social skills”; “Ability to be a leader”, “Self-control and conflict management”. Response options ranged from 1 – very little to 4 – a lot).

Confirmatory factor analysis suggested five factors: positive vision (4 items e.g., “Positive vision of life”;  $\alpha$ : 0.82); executive skills (7 items e.g., “Sense of responsibility”;  $\alpha$ : 0.85); social skills (6 items e.g., “Ability to understand other's emotions”;  $\alpha$ : 0.85), Ability to be a leader (4 items “Decision making”;  $\alpha$ : 0.80); and, Self-control and conflict management (2 items e.g., “Ability to manage conflicts”;  $\alpha$ : 0.60).

**Psychological Well-being:** this is assessed by Greminigni and Stewart-Brown's WEMWBS mental well-being scale, consisting of 12 items, asking you to indicate how you felt in the last two weeks (“I felt useful,” “I felt in a good mood”), with response modes from 1 (never) to 5 (always) ( $\alpha$ : 0.91).

## ANALYSIS

To address the research objectives, statistical analyses were conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.27). With reference to the first aim, it was possible to investigate through multifactorial ANOVAs, the differences between rural and urban NEETs, and about soft skills and levels of well-being. The

same analyses were conducted in the sample of Non-NEETs, also taking into account the rural – urban subdivision. Subsequently, in order to address the second aim, a step-wise linear regression was conducted, using a NEET sample. Psychological well-being was considered as the outcome variable, whilst all the soft skills factors were included in the model as predictors. Gender, Degree of Urbanisation and Educational attainment, as dummy variables, were also included in the model.

## RESULTS – AIM 1

The data was submitted to a multi-factorial ANOVA with Gender (male – female), Educational attainment (below upper-secondary education – upper secondary education – tertiary education) and Degree of urbanisation (urban area – rural area) as independent variables. The numerical ratings of perceived psychological well-being and the different softs skills (“Positive vision”; “Executive skills”; “Social skills”; “Ability to be a leader”; “Self-control and conflict management”) were the dependent variables. The two samples of NEET and NON-NEET were obtained by using split file. Significant results obtained for each dependent variable will be presented below.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

#### Non-NEET sample

In this sample, gender ( $F_{5663, 1}=40.172$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) and the interaction between gender and educational attainment ( $F_{5663, 2}=5.232$ ;  $p=0.005$ ) were significant. Pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between men with below upper secondary education ( $M=3.54$ ) on the one hand, and men with upper secondary education ( $M=3.46$ ) and tertiary education ( $M=3.41$ ) on the other. No statistically significant differences were found between the latter two groups.

#### NEET sample

In this sample, educational attainment was found to be significant ( $F_{1230, 2}=3.130$ ;  $p=0.044$ ). Furthermore, the interactions between educational attainment and gender ( $F_{1230, 2}=3.568$ ;  $p=0.029$ ), and the interaction between educational attainment and degree of urbanisation ( $F_{1230, 2}=6.246$ ;  $p=0.002$ ) were significant. Finally, the interaction between all the three variables considered as independent was significant ( $F_{1230, 2}=5.628$ ;  $p=0.004$ ). Pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between females with below upper secondary education residing in urban areas ( $M=3.22$ ) and those residing in rural areas ( $M=2.70$ ).

### **SOFT SKILLS: POSITIVE VISION**

#### **Non-NEET sample**

In this case, only gender was significant ( $F_{5663, 1}=29.292$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). Females ( $M=2.16$ ) had lower levels of positive vision than males ( $M=2.33$ ).

#### **NEET sample**

The situation is not the same for NEETs, where differences regarding educational attainment are significant ( $F_{1230, 2}=6.126$ ;  $p=0.002$ ). Additionally, the interaction between gender and degree of urbanisation ( $F_{1230, 1}=4.156$ ;  $p=0.042$ ), and between gender and educational attainment ( $F_{1230, 2}=3.764$ ;  $p=0.004$ ) were significant. Finally, the interaction between all three variables examined was also significant ( $F_{1230, 2}=8.680$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). Pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between females with tertiary education in urban areas ( $M=1.94$ ), and those residing in rural areas ( $M=2.46$ ). At the same time, there were differences between females with below upper-secondary education in urban ( $M=1.99$ ) and rural areas ( $M=1.62$ ).

### **SOFT SKILLS: SOCIAL SKILLS**

#### **Non-NEET sample**

Statistical significance was found for differences in educational attainment ( $F_{5663, 2}=7.618$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), and in particular the interaction between the latter variable and gender ( $F_{5663, 2}=3.244$ ;  $p=0.039$ ). Pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between females with below upper-secondary education ( $M=2.76$ ), and those with upper-secondary education ( $M=2.91$ ) and tertiary education ( $M=2.92$ ). The latter two groups had no statistically significant differences between them.

#### **NEET sample**

For the NEET sample, the situation is very similar. Differences in educational attainment were found to be statistically significant ( $F_{1230, 2}=6.745$ ;  $p=0.001$ ), as was the interaction between the latter and gender ( $F_{1230, 2}=6.106$ ;  $p=0.002$ ). Pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between females with below upper-secondary education ( $M=2.61$ ), those with upper-secondary education ( $M=2.81$ ), and those with tertiary education ( $M=3.11$ ).

## SOFT SKILLS: EXECUTIVE SKILLS

### Non-NEET sample

For this sample, there are statistically significant differences in gender ( $F_{5663, 1}=5.506$ ;  $p=0.019$ ), educational attainment ( $F_{5663, 2}=19.898$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), and degree of urbanisation ( $F_{5663, 1}=4.719$ ;  $p=0.030$ ). As a result, males have a lower level of executive skills ( $M=3.00$ ) than females ( $M=3.05$ ). At the same time, those residing in urban areas ( $M=3.05$ ) have higher levels than those in rural areas ( $M=3.01$ ). With regard to educational attainment, pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between those with below upper-secondary education ( $M=2.93$ ), and those with upper-secondary education ( $M=3.06$ ) and tertiary education ( $M=3.09$ ), respectively. These latter two groups had no statistically significant differences between them.

### NEET sample

The situation is different for NEETs, where only educational attainment ( $F_{1230, 2}=7.715$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) and its interaction with gender ( $F_{1230, 2}=4.828$ ;  $p=0.008$ ) are statistically significant. Pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between females with below upper-secondary education ( $M=2.81$ ), those with upper-secondary education ( $M=2.99$ ), and those with tertiary education ( $M=3.27$ ).

## SOFT SKILLS: ABILITY TO BE A LEADER

### Non-NEET sample

The theme of leadership in NON-NEETs shows statistical significance in: educational attainment ( $F_{5663, 2}=5.858$ ;  $p=0.003$ ); gender ( $F_{5663, 1}=10.879$ ;  $p<0.001$ ); and its interaction with degree of urbanisation ( $F_{5663, 1}=6.643$ ;  $p=0.010$ ). Pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences in educational attainment between those with below upper-secondary education ( $M=2.68$ ), and those with upper-secondary education ( $M=2.76$ ) and tertiary education ( $M=2.78$ ), respectively. These latter two groups had no statistically significant differences between them.

### NEET sample

Regarding this sample, no statistically significant differences are found in any group.

## SOFT SKILLS: SELF-CONTROL AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

### Non-NEET sample

In this sample, differences in gender ( $F_{5663, 1}=26,320$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), educational attainment ( $F_{5663, 2}=15,049$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), and their respective interaction ( $F_{5663, 2}=3,843$ ;  $p=0.021$ ) were found to be statistically significant. Pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between females with below upper-secondary education ( $M=2.49$ ), and those with upper-secondary education ( $M=2.71$ ) and tertiary education ( $M=2.74$ ). The latter two groups had no statistically significant differences between them.

### NEET sample

Concerning NEET, educational attainment ( $F_{1230, 2}=6.414$ ;  $p=0.002$ ) and its interaction with gender ( $F_{1230, 2}=9.773$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) is statistically significant. Pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between females with below upper-secondary education ( $M=2.42$ ), those with upper-secondary education ( $M=2.70$ ), and those with tertiary education ( $M=3.02$ ).

## RESULTS – AIM 2

There are positive and significant correlations between the selected variables in the NEETs sample. A linear regression was performed using the soft skills variables as predictors. In addition, the dummy variables of gender, degree of urbanisation, and educational attainment were also tested.

The best model obtained is composed of positive vision, ability to be a leader, and social skills as predictor variables. The degree of urbanisation seems to play a role in the well-being of NEETs, as well as gender. In this case, being a woman and/or living in rural areas decreases the probability of experiencing psychological well-being. Educational attainment did not seem to have an impact upon psychological well-being.

Table no. 1

### Bi-variate correlations

Variables	1	2		3	4	5	6
1. Psychological Well-being	—						
2. Positive vision	.451***	—					
3. Executive skills	.337***	.267***	—				
4. Social skills	.394***	.417***	.764***	—			
5. Ability to be a leader	.413***	.383***	.741***		.760***	—	
6. Conflict management and self-	.346***	.364***	.616***		.684***	.659***	—

control							
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Note: Correlations for NEETs sample.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*  $p < .05$ .

Table no. 2

**Multiple linear regression analysis (stepwise) with Psychological Well-being as dependent variable and selected independent variables amongst the NEETs sample**

Model	$\beta$ coefficient	95% CI	Standard error
Positive vision	0.313***	0.246 – 0.345	0.025
Ability to be a leader	0.214***	0.162 – 0.328	0.042
Degree of urbanisation_Dummy (1=Rural)	-0.098**	-0.241 – -0.085	0.040
Gender_Dummy (1=Female)	-0.077**	-0.198 – -0.047	0.039
Social skills	0.092*	0.021 – 0.193	0.044
Model adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.287***		

Note: Dependent variable: Psychological well-being, CI: confidence interval.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*  $p < .05$ .

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to describe the levels of soft skills and psychological well-being from amongst a sample of young Italian NEETs and Non-NEETs between the ages of 18 and 34. The variables analysed were those most considered as having an impact upon the NEET phenomenon within the literature i.e., gender and educational attainment. It is known that females and those with low educational qualifications tend to have higher percentages of NEETs (Eurostat, 2021). Consequently, there are several researches that describe psychological factors using these variables. This study's contribution to the literature lies in having added the variable degree of urbanisation to these descriptions. Regarding psychological well-being, we find that in the Non-NEET sample, the degree of urbanisation does not contribute to determining differences between groups. The situation is distinct amongst the NEETs, where there is a marked difference in the levels of psychological well-being observed between women with low educational qualifications residing in urban areas and those residing in rural ones. The latter display decidedly lower values: this result is interesting because it makes it possible to identify a group particularly at risk of social distress with greater specificity. This phenomenon may be due to several factors. Firstly, the perception that rural areas offer few opportunities for young people who have interrupted their studies compared to urban areas, leading them to fall into a condition of disempowerment and pessimism. Secondly, rural areas tend to have more contact with community members, thereby exposing themselves more to comparisons with



others who succeed in their lives, and thus increasing their perceptions of failure and impossibility. These differences are not present in the sample of Non-NEETs.

Concerning the soft skills of NEETs, the degree of urbanisation seems to play an important role only regarding positive vision. Again, women with low educational qualifications in rural areas appear to have lower levels of positive vision than those residing in urban areas. This result is consistent with what was discussed in the previous section. This group of NEETs appears to be in a state of disillusionment regarding themselves and their surroundings. The ability to look at oneself and the world is, in fact, a capacity that underlies any active movement a person wants to make, the starting point that gives direction to one's actions. Interestingly, NEET women with tertiary education in rural areas appear to have higher levels of positive vision than those residing in urban areas. It could be that these rural women who achieve a high level of education feel much more empowered for having succeeded in achieving that goal in a negative and critical rural context. Hence, a more positive vision than their peers in urban settings can be observed.

This study contributes to the literature in that it relates soft skills and mental well-being from within a sample of NEETs. The positive predictors of well-being in NEETs are positive vision, ability to be a leader and social skills. These skills are related to the sphere of relationships with others. If these skills are lacking, young people risk losing a whole series of social interactions that inevitably lead to exclusion and social avoidance, as well as not being able to maintain a job, thereby perpetuating the NEET condition. Furthermore, this study allows us to understand that living in rural areas can have a negative impact in terms of well-being if the NEETs factor is taken into account, as well as the factor of simply being a female.

### **LIMITATIONS**

The present study contains some limitations that are noteworthy, the most important being its cross-sectional nature. Further research with longitudinal designs is required to more accurately examine both the causal relationships and mediation effects.

### **CONCLUSION**

This work confirms how educational attainment and gender are fundamental when studying the NEET phenomenon. However, it is interesting to note that an analysis which considers the degree of urbanisation allowed for the emergence of a specific group: females with below upper-secondary education in rural areas. This fact leads us to an important insight upon how crucial it is to construct effective programs and policies that consider the specific sub-groups and characteristics of

this macro group, namely NEETs overall. Concerning these findings, we have young women mainly in a state of disquietude, impotence, and disillusionment. In this regard, it would be desirable to intervene with ad hoc projects which, on the one hand, work on women's empowerment in these areas and, on the other, allow the creation of conditions for self-entrepreneurship such that where the territory does not seem to provide opportunities, young people will nonetheless have the tools to create them without migrating to urban areas.

Furthermore, and more generally speaking, focusing upon policies that promote and emphasise soft skills intervention is essential. In this way, it is possible to act with a threefold purpose: firstly, to prevent young people from entering the NEETs condition; secondly, to allow those who are already NEETs to have the possibility to overcome this status; and finally, to increase psychological well-being in young NEETs. Some projects that can be considered best practices have demonstrated with their outcomes the truth of these statements (e.g., NEET work, Marzana and Poy 2019). The goal, however, is that these programs stop being isolated cases, and become guidelines for accurate policy directions which, in the long run, may (and in our opinion, should) be subject to systematic and constant evaluation.

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**A** bilitățile psiho-sociale (descrise sub această denumire în articol) au importanță în înțelegerea fenomenului NEET (tineri care nu lucrează și nu se află nici în cadrul sistemului educațional – NEET – l. engl.); cu toate acestea, puțini cercetători s-au concentrat pe aceste abilități.

Scopul acestui studiu este împărțit în două: a) să determine diferențele în termeni de abilități `soft` și bunăstare psihică între urban și rural în rândul NEET și b) să evalueze care dintre aceste abilități ar putea fi predictorii ai bunăstării psihologice. S-a folosit un eșantion de 6998 tineri între 18 și 34 de ani, reprezentativ pentru populația din Italia. Deși genul și educația joacă un rol important în determinarea statutului NEET, gradul de urbanizare trebuie luat în considerare, deoarece se pare că influențează bunăstarea și abilitățile psihice ale grupului de NEET. Prezentul studiu arată că femeile cu educație mai puțină, din mediul rural, au un nivel mai scăzut de bunăstare decât femeile de acest fel din mediul urban. O influență similară există în relație cu o anumită abilitate `soft`: viziunea pozitivă. Mai mult, abilitățile `soft` prognosticând bunăstarea psihică, gradul de urbanizare pare să joace în această ecuație un rol determinant.

Așa că politicile sociale ar trebui să ia în considerație aceste elemente în cadrul aspectelor legate de design-ul acestora și în procesul de implementare.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** NEET; rural; urban; abilități `soft`; bunăstare psihică.

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