

Amotivation, Career Engagement, and The Moderating Role of Career Adaptability of Youth Not in Education, Employment, or Training

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Abstract: NEET youth who are not in education, employment, or training are characterized by heterogeneity, dynamic experience, and different levels of vulnerability. This study examined the impact of amotivation and career adaptability on NEET youth's career engagement and the moderating role of career adaptability in the relationship between amotivation and career engagement. A total of 2,677 valid pre-intervention questionnaires were collected from NEET youth participants aged 15-21 all over Hong Kong. The findings showed that amotivation had a negative association with career engagement, whereas career adaptability had a positive association with career engagement. We also identified an interaction effect between career adaptability and amotivation on career engagement among NEET youth. Our results revealed that a higher level of career adaptability and its four dimensions (i.e. concern, control, curiosity, and confidence) changed the direction of association between amotivation and career engagement of NEET youth. Implications for developing career support services to NEET youth were discussed.

The term NEET (not in education, employment, or training) originated in the 1990s in the UK (Furlong, 2006) is now widely used in adolescent and youth studies all over the world (Holte, 2017). In 2018, there were 65,068 NEETs in Hong Kong, accounting for 8.9% of the youth population aged 15-24 in the second quarter of 2018 (Office of Government Economist Financial Secretary's Office, 2018). The corresponding rate in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries is 11.9% in 2018 (World Bank, 2019). Although the unemployment rate in Hong Kong shows a relatively 'better' image in a numerical sense, this has concealed many difficulties, risks, and challenges confronted by youth in the labour market, such as low pay, poor job prospects, precarious working conditions, working poverty, and a lack of job autonomy (Wong & Au Yeung, 2019).

Under the umbrella of NEETs, there are many marginalized groups of NEET youth such as young caregivers, young mothers,

ethnic minorities, youth secluded at home, school dropouts, youth with a disability, youth with incarceration experience, to name a few. NEETs are diverse and heterogeneous in terms of many sociodemographic variables such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, educational level, and locality of residence (Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016). The antecedents leading to the NEET status are also complex, which include micro-level sociodemographic factors mentioned above, and more macro-level factors, such as cyclical conditions, structural variables, social policy pathways, and institutional framework (Marelli & Vakulenko, 2016). Moreover, the dynamics of NEETs are characterized by their moving in and out of education, employment, or training at a rapid pace, either voluntarily or involuntarily (Vancea & Utzet, 2018).

Studying the career engagement of NEET youth in their transition to work is an important research topic for examining their heterogeneity, dynamics, and vulnerability.

Career engagement comprises a group of proactive career-related behaviors, such as career planning, career self-exploration, career environment exploration, networking, voluntary human capital/skill development, and positioning behaviors (Hirschi et al., 2014). Prior studies showed positive career outcomes of career engagement, such as positive feelings in vocational development and exploration processes (Neault & Pickerell, 2011), job and career satisfaction (Hirschi & Jaensch, 2015), and career decision self-efficacy (Kim et al., 2014). However, these prior studies on career engagement or distinct proactive career behaviour were focused on students or employees but not on NEETs.

Compared with students, employees, or trainees, NEET youth are less likely to be linked up with career related information since attending school or going to work is not their routine. However, the status of being a NEET does not necessarily imply the absence or low level of proactive career behaviours or abilities for the following reasons: (a) some NEETs still show intention for job seeking by searching for relevant job information or attending job fairs; (b) some NEETs are actively networking with others for their future career by their participation in unpaid work experience such as volunteering and job attachment; and (c) some NEETs are still actively engaged in informal learning to enhance their transferable skills for improving their chance of entering or re-entering the labour market (see, e.g., Gaspani, 2019; Wong & Yip, 2019). Identifying factors for accounting for the variation of career engagement of NEET youth is a research gap to be filled in. This research is the first-ever study aimed to examine the influence of amotivation and career adaptability, and their interaction effects, on career engagement among NEET youth characterized by diversity and differences.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

This research seeks to examine the ways in which amotivation and career adaptability interact to affect career engagement of NEET

youth, aged 15-21, after controlling for sociodemographic variables in terms of gender, age, educational attainment, and length of being NEET. Our basic premise is that NEET youth's different levels of amotivation exert different effects on their career engagement. Furthermore, it is predicted that the career adaptability shown by the NEETs would moderate the negative association between amotivation and career engagement among NEET youth. The literature and hypotheses supporting this premise are discussed below.

Amotivation and Career Engagement

Amotivation is one of the three forms of motivation along the self-determination continuum, which is the least self-determined form of motivation without having intention to act (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Amotivation, a dynamic concept, refers to the state of a lack of purpose or expectation concerning one's ability to change the course of events (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Guay et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), or the inability to perceive any congruence between their actions and outcomes (Noels et al., 1999). Amotivated people usually encounter difficulties in understanding or evaluating the purpose or meanings for what they are doing, as they find it difficult to foresee positive outcomes in relation to their behaviors.

Amotivation characterized by the lack of self-determined motivation is a spectrum construct rather than a dichotomous one. Prior studies using a single-dimensional factor of amotivation emphasized the level of unclear ambition/goals towards a specific sphere of activity (Alexandris et al., 2002; Mullan et al., 1997; Pelletier et al., 1997). Some typical example items for measuring amotivation are, "I have no ideas about what I am doing" or "I don't care what I am doing." The free time motivation scale for adolescents (FTMS-A) conceptualizes amotivation to be a single-dimensional factor and measures the research participants' amotivation towards the sphere of free-time activities with four items (Baldwin & Caldwell, 2003). As NEET youth are free

from doing any schooling or vocational tasks, to measure their amotivation in the use of free time for their own career purpose is considered important.

There are many demotivating factors, structural and individual, which may spiral the NEET youth down into the state of amotivation. The mainstream, if not dominant, discourses tend to blame the NEET youth for their negative status and overlook their own agency accordingly (Evans, 2007; Suttill, 2017), and some NEETs may even internalize self-blaming for their resultant NEET status (Carrasco et al., 2018). For some youth groups categorized under the umbrella of NEET, vulnerable factors such as lower socio-economic status, low educational attainment, disability, mental health challenges, immigrant status, etc. would likely undesirably affect their prospect to make a breakthrough against their NEET status. Prior empirical studies also highlighted the scarring effects on long-term NEET youth under the age of 24 in particular, which may predict future long-term unemployment, bring a wage penalty, and deprive their career-related skills development (Brandt & Hank, 2014; Mojsoska-Blazevski et al., 2017). Taking into consideration their own perceived structural conditions and individual experiences, young people would come up with different levels of amotivation towards their future career.

As the least self-determined form of motivation, amotivation may lead to negative outcomes such as learned helplessness, negative affect, impaired performance, and low self-esteem (Abramson et al., 1978; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). In addition, previous studies indicated that amotivation played a role in the positive prediction of occupational indecision, and in the negative prediction of occupational interest/enjoyment and expectancy for occupational success (Jung, 2013; Jung & McCormick, 2010). It is suggested that amotivation may impair NEET youth's engagement in proactive career behaviors (Ose & Jensen, 2017; Popham, 2003). Empirical evidence supporting the positive relationship between amotivation

and occupational indecision can shed light on the formulation of the first hypothesis:

H1: amotivation will negatively associate with the career engagement of NEET youth.

Career Adaptability

Career adaptability is one of the core constructs in the career construction theory and refers to self-regulation resources that individuals use to cope with various tasks, transitions, and traumas as fostered by the changing conditions with growing awareness and information seeking, and decision making, capability (Savickas, 2005, 2013). Savickas (1997) proposed the 4C-factor structure of career adaptability: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, which was validated across different countries and cultures (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The emphasis of career construction theory on individuals' agency in managing their career behaviors and career adaptability is deemed important for their own career development (Savickas, 2013). Perceived as a psychosocial resource, career adaptability helps individuals to cope with their transition from school to work and succeed in mastering vocational or life transitions (Buyukgoze-Kavas, 2016). Training graduates with career adaptability resources can raise their chances of finding a good job (Koen et al., 2012). A substantial amount of literature supports the positive role of career adaptability in predicting career planning, proactive skills development, career networking (Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015), career exploration (Li et al., 2015), and career competencies (Dumulescu et al., 2015).

However, no studies have investigated the impact of career adaptability on marginalized NEET youth. The negative, if not stigmatizing, status of NEET does not necessarily imply that NEET youth are necessarily confined to a low level of career adaptability and are not able to develop their career competence and career adaptability. In spite that many NEET youth may move in and out of education, employment, or training over a protracted period of time, they may

still be able to reflect on and enhance their career concern, control, curiosity, and confidence developed from their prior paid work experience, whether full-time or part-time, and other unpaid work endeavours such as volunteering, carer work, and domestic/community provisioning (see, e.g., Watts, 2015; Wong & Yip, 2019).

The Moderating Role of Career Adaptability

Amotivation is used to describe the absence of motivation or the non-motivated state, which falls into the nethermost extreme of the continuum of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Stauber and Walther (2006) argued that individuals go through motivation careers throughout their life journey, which are characterized by ups and downs. The state of amotivation is subject to the undesirable influence of two time perspectives: one's negative view of past experiences and one's negative expectations of the future (Gaupp, 2013). The lack of a legitimate social status as a student, employee, or trainee may lead to NEETs' negative assessment on their own experiences, and may demotivate them to engage in meaningful self-determination for their future career. Depending on the interaction and tension between individual assessment on the one hand, and structural conditions such as the deprivation of or access to opportunities, resources, and networks on the other, NEETs may be feeling demotivated to the extent of feeling no drive to make efforts to change current situations or the range of possibilities that accompany them, and casting doubts on their abilities to make a change with their life or future career.

Career adaptability as accumulative personal resources, shown in an implicit or explicit manner, may enable individuals to take into consideration the environmental contingencies in order to take reactive or proactive responses (Rossier, 2015). A higher level of career adaptability may mitigate the feelings of fear, self-doubt, and helplessness brought by the state of amotivation, and therefore weaken individuals' amotivation and its negative impact on career engagement.

In contrast, a lower level of career adaptability may amplify the negative feelings brought by the state of amotivation, and increases the amotivation of individuals and therefore exacerbate individuals' amotivation and its negative impact on career engagement. The second hypothesis (H2) and its sub-hypotheses are formulated below accordingly:

H2. Career adaptability and its four dimensions (concern, control, curiosity, and confidence) will moderate the negative association between amotivation and career engagement among NEET youth.

H2a. The negative association between amotivation and career engagement will be weaker when NEET youth display a higher level of career concern.

H2b. The negative association between amotivation and career engagement will be weaker when NEET youth display a higher level of career control.

H2c. The negative association between amotivation and career engagement will be weaker when NEET youth display a higher level of career curiosity.

H2d. The negative association between amotivation and career engagement will be weaker when NEET youth display a higher level of career confidence.

H2e. The negative association between amotivation and career engagement will be weaker when NEET youth display a higher level of career adaptability.

Methods

Participants of the Study

This study targeted to NEET youth was conducted as part of a "Career and Life Adventure Planning Project for Youth" (thereafter "the project") funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust in Hong Kong, which was launched in May 2015 for

five years until August 2020. The community-based team of the project designed a pre- and post-intervention questionnaire for measuring the extent to which the service users aged 15-21 could make a change with their career and life development following career interventions delivered in community settings. Prior to the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University where the first two authors work. The research participants were recruited by social workers or youth work practitioners of five district service teams of “the project,” who provide career support service in five geographical districts all over Hong Kong. The research participants submitted an online questionnaire via the system of Qualtrics, resulting in a total number of 3,380 completed pre-intervention questionnaires. Included in the data analysis were all NEET youth participants with valid data for career adaptability, amotivation, and career engagement ($n = 2,677$).

All of the research participants fell into the age range of 15-21 ($M_{age} = 17.89$, Standard Deviation (SD) = 1.49), 54.5% males and 45.5% females, who have been NEET for one month or more. The education level of the participants was largely 12th grade or below (92.93%) with less than 1 per cent (0.7%) having spent time at university. With regard to major problems they encountered in relation to career and life development, 51.2% of the research participants claimed that they have no clear goals for work, study, and life, and 16.2% reported their limitations of personal abilities.

Measures

The measures used in this research study consisted of three different scales with consent sought from the developers prior to the start of the study. Regarding the two scales on amotivation and career engagement, translation and back-translation work was required for the purpose of cultural adaptation. The original scales in English were translated into Chinese by two bilingual researchers of the project for producing an

initial translation, one is a postdoctoral research fellow and the other is a research associate. A back-translation of all the initial translation was produced by two native bilingual translators. A committee of all researchers, chaired by the principal investigator of the community-based team of “the project,” reviewed all the translations and reached a consensus on all identified discrepancies. The pre-final version worked out by the committee was piloted with 20 youth who were not users of the service before collecting data for the study. Career adaptability was measured by the validated scale of career-adaptability scale-China form.

Amotivation

The four items from the free time motivation scale for adolescents (FTMS-A) (Baldwin & Caldwell, 2003) were modified by replacing the “free-time activity” with “career,” “occupation,” or “work” with a future implication to measure amotivation of NEET in relation to their vocational career. Now the four items read as follows: “I don’t know why I work, and I don’t want to work,” “I don’t have a clear idea of what my occupation will be, and nothing much interests me,” “I don’t know any information about jobs and career, and I have never really thought about my career,” and “I don’t know any career skills but it doesn’t matter because I don’t care about my career.” The research participants were asked to make a response on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A higher score indicated a higher level of amotivation and vice versa. The Cronbach’s alpha of this amotivation scale with NEET sample is .86. The four items of the amotivation scale were subjected to principal components analysis (PCA) with the whole sample ($n = 2,677$) using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Prior to performing the PCA, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, $KMO = .80$, exceeding the recommended value of .6 (Kaiser, 1970, 1974), Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) reached statistical

significance, $p < .001$, indicating that correlation structure is adequate for factor analyses. Principal component analysis revealed the presence of a single factor structure of amotivation with Eigenvalue >1 , which was comprised of four items reported on a 5-point Likert-type scale that explained 70.6% of the variance with factor loadings from .752 to .878. This result was consistent with previous research on the amotivation scale (Baldwin & Caldwell, 2003) with four items loading strongly on the single component, which supported the use of this amotivation scale with NEET youth in the Chinese context.

Career Engagement

The extent of career engagement of the research participants was measured by the career engagement scale (Hirschi, 2011; Hirschi et al., 2014), which assesses the general degree to which a person has demonstrated various proactive behaviors to develop his or her career in the past six months. The career engagement scale consists of nine items: three items describe career management activities in general terms (e.g. worked to advance one's career), while the other six tap into career management behaviors in terms of career planning, self- and environmental-exploration, networking, positioning behavior, and voluntary training. Answers were provided on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The Cronbach's alpha of this scale with NEET sample is .92. The nine items of the career engagement scale were also subjected to PCA with the whole sample ($n = 2,677$). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, $KMO = .94$, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance, $p < .001$, indicating that correlation structure is adequate for factor analyses. PCA revealed the presence of a single factor structure of amotivation with Eigenvalue >1 , which was comprised of nine items reported on a 5-point Likert-type scale that explained 62.48% of the variance with factor loadings from .670 to .838. This result was consistent with previous research (Hirschi et al., 2014) on the

career engagement scale with nine items loading strongly on the single component, which supported the use of this scale with NEET youth in the Chinese context.

Career Adaptability

The validated Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS)-China Form (Hou et al., 2012) was used to measure the career adaptability of the research participants. The research participants were asked to indicate their career adaptability on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A higher score indicated a higher level of career adaptability. This is the first ever attempt to apply the CAAS to the target group of NEET youth. The results of confirmatory factor analysis for the CAAS with NEET sample are satisfactory (i.e. $RMSEA = .067$, $SRMR = .036$, $CFI = .93$, & $TLI = .92$). The Cronbach's alpha of CAAS-China form with NEET sample is .95.

Data Analyses

Two forms of data analyses were conducted for hypothesis testing, bi-variate Pearson tests and hierarchical regression analyses. Bi-variate Pearson tests were conducted to show the correlations of study variables in order to gain a preliminary understanding of how the study variables are related to each other. To test the moderation effects of career adaptability in the relationship between amotivation and career engagement, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted. Five sets of hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to predict career engagement respectively. In each set of the analysis, sociodemographic variables, including gender, age, and highest educational attainment were entered in Step 1, the length of being NEET in Step 2, amotivation in Step 3, a specific dimension of career adaptability (concern, curiosity, control, confidence) in Step 4, and an interaction term (i.e. amotivation X a component of career adaptability) in Step 5. A significant moderating effect was detectable by plotting the regression equation at two levels ($\pm 1 SD$) of each of the four dimensions of career adaptability.

Amotivation and career adaptability (including its four dimensions) were mean-centered before creating the interaction term in order to avoid multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). Finally, regression equations were plotted at two levels of career adaptability and its four dimensions (i.e. 1 *SD* below the mean as the low level and 1 *SD* above the mean as the high level) for a significant moderator in order to demonstrate its moderating effect (Aiken & West, 1991).

Results

Table 1 shows the results of the inter-correlations or inter-associations among the variables in the sample of NEETs. These results showed a preliminary understanding of how the study variables are related to each other. In terms of gender difference, male NEETs showed significantly higher level of amotivation, and lower level of career adaptability and engagement than females. This showed that male NEETs were more amotivated than their female counterparts in relation to career-related exploration and activities. Age was significantly and positively correlated with career adaptability and engagement, but not significantly correlated with the level of amotivation. In other words, the level of amotivation held by NEETs may not decrease as they reach beyond 21 if career support services are not readily available or accessible. Educational attainment was significantly and positively correlated with career adaptability and engagement but negatively correlated with amotivation. That means, a higher level of educational attainment is more conducive to scaling down the level of amotivation. But for those NEETs who had a poor record of educational qualifications and previous school failure and bullying experience, it is not easy for them to regain the momentum to pursue study or find a job at all. The findings showed that amotivation was negatively correlated with career engagement, career adaptability, and the four dimensions of career adaptability as a whole.

The hypotheses were further supported by a hierarchical regression analysis, which is presented in Table 2. First, the results supported Hypothesis 1 by indicating a negative association between amotivation and career engagement after ruling out the effects of gender, age, educational attainment, and the length of being NEET. Second, regarding Hypothesis 2 and its sub-hypotheses, the results presented in Table 2 also indicated an interaction effect between amotivation and career adaptability dimensions on career engagement respectively. The results reflected that the directions of influence of amotivation on career engagement differed according to the level of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, and that of career adaptability. Figure 1 shows that the association between amotivation and career engagement differed according to the level of career adaptability (the figures in relation to the moderation effects of the four dimensions of career adaptability can be provided upon request). When career adaptability was at a lower level (i.e. one *SD* below the mean), the relationship between amotivation and career engagement was moderately and negatively correlated ($r = -.29, p < .001$); whereas when career adaptability was at a higher level (i.e. one *SD* above the mean), the relationship between amotivation and career engagement was weakly and positively correlated ($r = .11, p < .05$). Furthermore, the results presented in Table 2 also indicate positive associations between career adaptability dimensions and career engagement after ruling out the effects of gender, age, educational attainment, the length of being NEET, and amotivation.

Discussion

The findings of this study filled up the research gap by presenting the different levels of amotivation, career adaptability, and career engagement of a sizable group of hard-to-be-reached NEET youth. Firstly, the findings of this study suggested another way to facilitate the career engagement of these marginalized youth. Prior studies tended to emphasize the

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Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations or Interassociations for the Variables Under Study (n = 2677).

Variables	Mean (SD)/ N (%)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Amotivation	2.46 (.85)	1									
2. Gender (0= female)	1219 (45.5)	.08***	1								
3. Age	17.89 (1.49)	-.03	.01	1							
4. Educational attainment (1-10)	6.27 (1.60)	-.09***	-.04	.41***	1						
5. Length of being NEET	3.92 (5.75)	.07***	-.05*	.12***	-.33***	1					
6. Concern	3.45 (.67)	-.28***	.02	.07**	.12***	-.05**	1				
7. Control	3.64 (.69)	-.26***	.01	.07***	.11***	-.04*	.61***	1			
8. Curiosity	3.55 (.66)	-.24***	.01	.05**	.07***	-.06**	.71***	.67***	1		
9. Confidence	3.60 (.70)	-.25***	.00	.06**	.09***	-.05**	.62***	.79***	.69***	1	
10. Career adaptability	3.56 (.59)	-.29***	.01	.07***	.11***	-.06**	.84***	.88***	.88***	.89***	1
11. Career engagement	3.15 (.72)	-.23***	-.01	.07**	.08***	-.09***	.59***	.52***	.55***	.59***	.64***

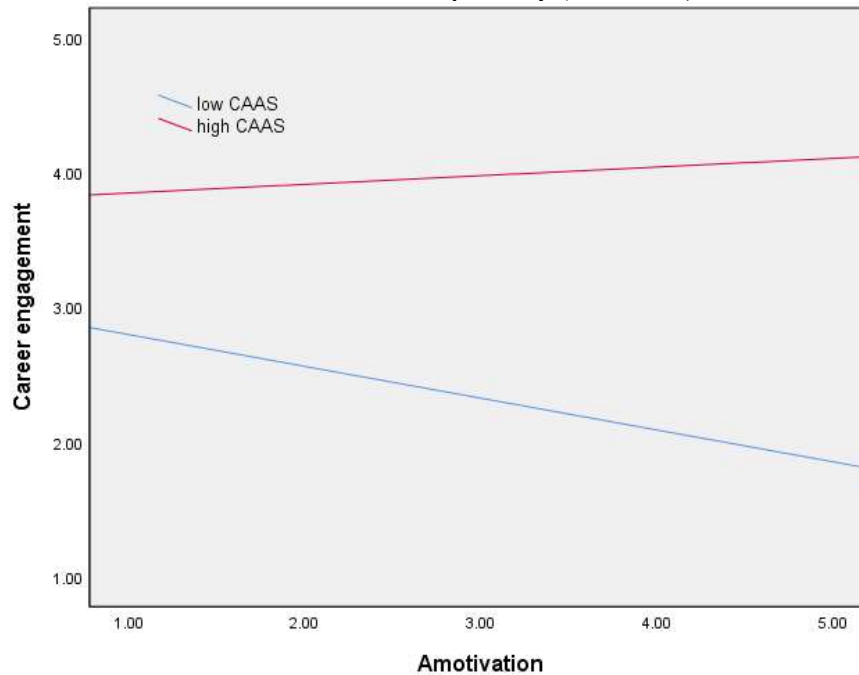
Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2
Hierarchical regression analyses predicting career engagement from amotivation, concern, control, curiosity, confidence, and career adaptability among NEET youths (n = 2677).

Predictors	Model 1: concern			Model 2: control			Model 3: curiosity			Model 4: confidence			Model 5: career adaptability		
	ΔR^2	β	<i>t</i>	ΔR^2	β	<i>t</i>	ΔR^2	β	<i>t</i>	ΔR^2	β	<i>t</i>	ΔR^2	β	<i>t</i>
Demographics	.01***			.01***			.01***			.01***			.01***		
Gender		.02	.81		.02	.81		.02	.81		.02	.81		.02	.81
Age		.07	2.94**		.07	2.94**		.07	2.94**		.07	2.94**		.07	2.94**
Edu. attainment		.03	1.18		.03	1.18		.03	1.18		.03	1.18		.03	1.18
Length of being NEET	.50***	-.08	-3.92***	.50***	-.08	-3.92***	.50***	-.08	-3.92***	.50***	-.08	-3.92***	.50***	-.08	-3.92***
Amotivation	4.60***	-.22	-11.47***	4.60***	-.22	-11.47***	4.60***	-.22	-11.47***	4.60***	-.22	-11.47***	4.60***	-.22	-
Concern	29.30***	.57	34.71***												11.47***
Amotivation × concern	.60***	.08	5.00***												
Control				21.90***	.49	28.41***									
Amotivation × control				0.30***	.06	3.64***									
Curiosity							25.70***	.52	31.67***						
Amotivation × curiosity							0.30***	.06	3.52***						
Confidence										29.3***	.56	34.72***			
Amotivation × confidence										0.40***	.06	3.77***			
Career adaptability													35.6***	.63	40.31***
Amotivation × career adaptability													0.20***	.05	3.12***
Total Adjusted R^2		.36			.28			.32			.36			.42	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 1
Association Between Amotivation and Career Engagement as a Function of Career Adaptability (n = 2,677)



Note. 1 *SD* below the mean as the low level and 1 *SD* above the mean as the high level of career adaptability. The figures showing the moderation effects of the four dimensions of career adaptability can be provided upon request. Color should be used for printing.

positive impact of enhanced self-determination or motivation on career development. There is a lack of study on the impact of amotivation in predicting career behaviors. Amotivation is conceptualized as a state of feeling the least self-determined, as amotivated people perceive a lack of contingency between their behaviors and actions. The findings of this study indicated that amotivation is negatively associated with career engagement, which can shed light on evaluating career interventions designed for marginalized youth who lack a legitimate social status as a student, worker, or trainee. A reduction of the level of amotivation may then enhance their career engagement.

Secondly, in comparison with amotivation, career adaptability is a significant predictor of career engagement.

This result is consistent with findings from a prior study on the positive impact of career adaptability on career engagement of college students (Nilforooshan & Salimi, 2016). A possible explanation for the impact of career adaptability on career engagement is that the former makes it easier for NEET youth to adapt themselves to the change of career and life development, and thus they are more willing to search for new possibilities or alternatives and change their current negative status to a more positive one. Another possible explanation for the findings is that when the NEET youth are able to establish their concern for their future career, develop their curiosity to seek for something new and exciting lying ahead of their uncertain career and life development journey, feel and exercise a better sense of control on their own,

and develop a higher level of confidence about their future, they will be empowered to face up to the likely challenges confronting them in their transition to work, study, and/or training.

Furthermore, the moderation effects of career adaptability and its four dimensions in the relationship between amotivation and career engagement are antagonistic, suggesting that career adaptability appears to reverse the effect of amotivation on career engagement of NEET youth. This finding provides empirical evidence to support the career construction theory that career adaptability conceptualized as self-regulation resources may help individuals to cope with various tasks, transitions, and traumas as fostered by the changing conditions with growing awareness and information seeking, and decision-making capability (Savickas, 2005, 2013). In regards to the four dimensions of career adaptability, of which concern is about hope and optimism, control about the belief in responsibility for constructing one's career, curiosity about the world of work, and confidence about optimism in striving and persistence towards a career goal (Savickas, 2005; Savickas & Profeli, 2012), their strengthening will reverse the incompetent feelings caused by amotivation, and therefore facilitate individuals' career exploration, networking, and other proactive career behaviors.

To engage marginalized youth in a better preparation for stepping into the world of work is a big challenge. However, the current NEET status may not deprive all their access to paid/unpaid work opportunities, and some NEETs may be involved in various kinds of proactive career behaviors, such as job seeking, networking, and informal learning. However, many NEETs are still facing barriers in relation to career engagement. Psychologically, their lack of explicit and well-recognized personal resources for work has discouraged them from taking further actions to make a breakthrough with their current situation. Most of the participants of this study reported no clear goals/ambitions for their work and study ahead. The key

question for career practitioners is how to design career interventions that can help motivate NEET youth to take a step further to make a small change with their current situation, which can enhance their career adaptability and career engagement.

As discussed beforehand, amotivation is a spectrum construct rather than a dichotomous one. Although NEET youth are confronted with many demotivating factors, both individual and structural, which can prevent them from taking proactive actions for developing their future career, some of them may still be able to develop their own meanings of life, such as serving the community on a voluntary basis or engaging in serious leisure pursuit conducive to developing transferable skills.

The positive influence of career adaptability on career engagement suggests the strategic importance of recognizing and enhancing the personal agency of youth for designing, implementing, and evaluating career interventions on an individual or a program basis. Career adaptability emphasizes the balance that the youth are to seek between the world of work and their personal environment (Savickas, 1997, 2005, 2013), and thus the personal agency of youth should never be overlooked in their career engagement. It can be seen from the aforementioned research findings that NEET youth are not totally deprived of any potential for developing their career adaptability. Prior studies indicated that small success experience, both current and past, may lead to enhanced career adaptability (Krumboltz et al., 2013); therefore to effectively involve NEET youth in career engagement may start from engaging them in a variety of activities which may provide them a beginning taste of success and an evolving sense of personal agency.

Implications for Practice

Subsumed under the acronym of NEET is indeed a heterogeneous group of young people with diverse social backgrounds, dynamic experience, and different levels of

risk and vulnerability. In spite of their heterogeneity, NEET youth share one thing in common: the deprivation of a legitimate social status as a worker in the labor market, or as a student/trainee in the educational and training institutions of various types. In the eyes of the public, NEET youth with a lower level of socioeconomic status and educational attainment in particular are largely imagined to be susceptible to delinquent culture, antisocial behavior, and differential association with delinquent peers (Rodger, 2013). However, there are also many other hidden groups of NEET youth such as young mothers, young caregivers, young hermits secluded at home, youth with chronic illness, those with disabilities or mental health challenges, all of whom are silently disengaged from social support and public attention (Matthews, 2017; Wong et al., 2019). If NEET youth are characterized as 'status zero' youth (Williamson, 1997), and if engagement in education, employment, or training (EET) is set as a condition for giving due social recognition to young people, then the acronym NEET would end up as a stigmatizing label biased against their readiness and efforts to make a transition to work.

The findings of the present study offer insights for social workers and youth work practitioners to rethink the direction of intervention on facilitating NEET youth to make a change with their social status as a worker, student, or trainee on both casework and program levels. It is recommended that the focus of professional intervention should not be merely placed on enabling and empowering NEET youth to gain or regain a positive social status as EET as soon as possible, but to pay equal emphasis on showing positive social recognition to them irrespective of whether they are in their transition journey to achieving a positive social status. That is, with or without the enjoyment of a positive social status legitimized by the labor market or a variety of educational/training institutions or programs, young people should be given due social recognition. The NEET label therefore

should not be taken as a stigmatizing symbol to justify the marginalization of social status or the deprivation of social recognition of youth who are disengaged from social institutions.

The state of amotivation, spanning from low level to high level, which can generate negative effects on taking actions for the future, may be caused by individual factors such as school bullying, school failures, unemployment, precarious work experience, etc., and other structural factors such as class, gender, age, disability, race, and ethnicity evident in the restructuring of the economy taking place in the turbulent age of globalization and neoliberalism which has not generated resources and opportunities for improving the life chances of marginalized youth in particular. The state of amotivation may be exacerbated by the lack of a legitimate social status, which can lead to NEET youth's negative assessment of their experiences. Their personal psychological resources in terms of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence as measured by the career adaptability scale may become obscured or implicit particularly when NEET youth are given no social recognition or social support at all.

Youth transition to work is deemed central to youth transition to adulthood (Sherif, 2017). The conventional notion of work is widely understood as paid work or employment. As the cornerstone of social inclusion, decent work provides not only a work status, a stable income to secure a living, and a foundation for improving life chances (Kaufmann, 2008), but it also provides a favorable social structure for time management, regular activity, and social interactions (Jahoda, 1982). However, out of employment of paid work cannot be simply read as doing nothing at all. Portraying unemployed people as being passive would overlook their proactive behaviors and unleashed talents (Fryer & Payne, 1984). Likewise, NEET youth may not necessarily be trapped in social isolation, social exclusion, and disengagement if their unpaid work activities could enjoy being recognized and

acknowledged by others. A systematic review and meta-analysis of interventions used to engage NEET youth into the labor market has shown beginning evidence that effective interventions are of multiple elements including training, work placement, advice, support, and incentives flexibly tailor-made to each individual (Mawn et al., 2017). In the case of Activity Agreement (AA) implemented in the UK, for example, youth participants are encouraged to negotiate with their personal advisor the kind of activities and goals they want to pursue (Hillage et al., 2008). Along this logic, NEET youth participants would most benefit from engagement interventions if they would not simply jump into the labor market without understanding their own interests and concerns, as well as their own intentions and aspirations.

The lack of a legitimate social status recognized by the mainstream society following young people's disengagement from EET should not be used to justify the deprivation of social recognition. The delivery of career support service targeted to NEET youth in their transition to work and career has to address their lived experiences where unpaid work activities constitute an important part. Arguably, marginalized forms of labor such as unpaid work, notably volunteering (Taylor, 2004) and domestic/neighborhood provisioning for the sake of self-care or tending care to others (Williams, 2008) undertaken in formal or informal settings, can be conceptualized as part of the total social organization of labor encompassing both paid and unpaid work endeavors (R. F. Taylor, 2004; R. Taylor, 2015). While earlier conceptualizations drew clear lines between work and leisure, more recent studies in the discipline of leisure studies examine the delicate relationship between work and leisure. Unlike 'causal leisure,' simply undertaken for relaxation and entertainment, Stebbins (1982, 2007) argues that 'serious leisure' can offer 'leisure careers' which allow the acquisition and expression of unique ethos, knowledge, skills, and experience. Various trend setting cultural

styles such as graffiti, online gaming, cosplay, x-games, fashion, and different kinds of theatre and dancing performance may give young people the space to move back and forth between paid work and play, whether paid for performing to an audience, or playing for no pay in a volunteering event (Henderson & Spracklen, 2014). In spite of the precariousness of 'twilight' jobs in cultural and media productions in particular (Taylor, 2015), all these serious leisure pursuits may promise to give NEET youth an alternative pathway to making a transition to employment with the application of transferable values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Wong & Yip, 2019).

As argued by Honneth (1992, 1995), the struggle for self-recognition as the source of individual autonomy, and for mutual recognition as the source of sociality and solidarity in social life, is both reciprocal and intersubjective. When working with young people in NEET situation, showing recognition is not a matter of being polite and courteous to them, but a matter of showing recognition of the equal dignity of young people and their right to be treated with respect (Gavrielides et al., 2018). To show recognition to NEET youth in the rapport-building phase of career support services, social workers and youth practitioners are to be familiar with them in their lived realities. Thus, the mundane life of young people in NEET situation could serve to be recognized as a talking point for showing them recognition. To take a step further, engaging young people in activity or program-based interaction, either one-off or serial, whether others-initiated or self-initiated, provides another favorable social context for identifying and acknowledging their interests, abilities, and strengths in an informal yet friendly manner, which can help provide the base for linking up their present findings with their past experiences in a new angle favorable for promoting self-recognition and mutual recognition. This can help turn their hidden career adaptability more explicit for them and others, and to witness their transition journey to work and career. The

involvement of NEET youth in decision making to counteract their lack of self-determination throughout the course of intervention is also deemed important, as it is conducive to reducing their state of amotivation and even empowering them to witness changes they are able to make with their own actions. Again, the groundwork for practitioners to start promoting the self-determination of young people is to be familiar with their mundane life routines and interests, and acknowledge their implicit strengths and experiences. This could help establish the base for implementing autonomy-supportive interventions that emphasize self-regulated explorations, negotiations, decision-making, goal setting, reviewing, and attainment (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In today's increasingly complex, fast-changing, and uncertain societies, young people need to be given recognition, support, and opportunities conducive to their development of intrinsic motivation and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Social support in terms of tangible resources, opportunities, and networks are necessary alongside with unconditional social recognition. However, recognizing the equal dignity of young people does not imply that helping professionals have to feel obliged to accept their anti-social or self-harming behaviors. Echoing the motto of narrative therapy – the problem is the problem; the person is not the problem (White & Epston, 1990) – young people are not problems themselves, but they may be engaged in undesirable or harmful behaviors that have alienated their values and aspirations for enhancing their wellbeing and that of others. Young people are free to externalize the problems they encounter and figure out how their inherent psychological resources and social resources available can address their state of amotivation and enhance their career adaptability and career engagement accordingly. To start where young people are, actions taken by helping professionals to familiarize with and acknowledge their under-recognized, if not misrecognized, unpaid work experiences in

particular are considered helpful for driving them to venture out of their comfort zone into the growth zone, where young people would feel empowered to enhance career adaptability, and then enjoy meaningful engagement and fulfilment. In an increasingly globalized, neoliberal world characterized by a widening gap between rich and poor and growing social inequalities, social workers and youth work practitioners have to work with young people and their intimate others to assure the rights, recognition, resources, opportunities, and networks they need to access irrespective of whether they are in NEET situation or not.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

Although this article has addressed the research gap with important findings, several limitations of the study should be highlighted. First, although the targeted participants were all NEET youth, the sampling strategy was limited to recruiting the service users of “the project” but without widening the sampling net to include those who are not users of “the project,” and thus the discussion drawn from the findings should not be over-generalized. Second, the use of a self-reported survey may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly for those research participants who were not able to complete the questionnaire without the help of social workers because of encountering difficulty in understanding each of the questionnaire items or going through a long questionnaire of a total of 74 items. Third, the cross-sectional research design of the study might have weakened the level of the evidence for the causal relationships between the variables. With data collected only at one single time point, the correlations shown in this study among amotivation, career adaptability, and career engagement should be further evaluated on a longitudinal basis.

Despite the limitations, the study offers insights into future research in three important areas. First, it shows that amotivation is one predictor for adversely

affecting the level of career engagement of NEET youth. The study can provide an entry point for initiating future research on the relationship between amotivation and the career and life development of marginalized youth. Second, researchers should further examine the effects of career interventions in accordance to the 4 Cs of career adaptability designed for working with youth who are pushed to the margin of society, as the four dimensions of career adaptability were supported by the study as significant moderators in the relationship between amotivation and career engagement.

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