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Navigating Urban Livelihoods: The Role of Social Networks in the Lives of Young Workers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

RESEARCH ARTICLE
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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Young workers (YWs) play a critical role in the socio-economic development of Ho Chi Minh City amid rapid urbanization and industrialization. However, they face multiple challenges in work, living conditions, and social adaptation. This study investigates the role of social networks—particularly the distinction between strong and weak ties—in supporting YWs' community integration, coping with workplace difficulties, and maintaining emotional well-being. **Methods:** This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. A structured questionnaire was administered to 390 YWs working in direct production sectors in industrial zones across Ho Chi Minh City. In addition, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted to capture nuanced experiences. The study draws on Granovetter's theory of the strength of weak ties as its theoretical framework. **Results:** Findings reveal that while strong ties (e.g., with close friends) provide emotional support and psychological security, weak ties (e.g., with coworkers, neighbors, supervisors) serve as important conduits for accessing information, solving work-related problems, and expanding opportunities. Social engagement is moderate, with frequent digital interaction but relatively limited participation in community and developmental activities. Weak ties are particularly prominent in the workplace and residential settings, contributing significantly to YWs' adaptation and resilience. **Discussion:** The study confirms the complementary functions of strong and weak ties in migrant adaptation. Weak ties—despite their lower emotional intensity—facilitate broader social connectivity and are essential for navigating fragmented urban environments. However, limitations in leisure time use and underinvestment in self-development activities reflect structural constraints that hinder the potential of social networks. **Conclusion:** This research reinforces the theoretical significance of weak ties and provides practical insights for improving the social inclusion of YWs. It recommends that policymakers, unions, and employers foster environments that support informal social interaction, skill development, and inclusive participation. Future studies should explore longitudinal shifts in migrant workers' networks and include broader labor groups beyond direct production sectors.

Keywords: Young workers; social networks; weak ties; strong ties; urban integration; industrial labor; Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid urbanization of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) has triggered a significant influx of young rural migrants seeking employment opportunities in industrial zones and export processing areas. These young workers play a pivotal role in the city's socio-economic development by contributing to its manufacturing and service sectors. However, despite their essential labor, this group continues to face multiple challenges related to precarious housing conditions, unstable incomes, and limited social security (Nguyen & Tran, 2020; Pham, 2019). The transitional nature of their urban integration, coupled with long working hours and limited institutional support, places them at risk of social exclusion and emotional distress.

While a number of studies have explored the working conditions and livelihoods of migrant workers, limited attention has been paid to the role of social networks in shaping their adaptive capacity, well-being, and social integration in urban environments. This study addresses this gap by investigating how young workers utilize both strong and weak social ties to navigate the complexities of urban life in HCMC.

Drawing on Social Network Theory and Granovetter's (1973) seminal concept of the "strength of weak ties," this research examines how different forms of social relationships assist migrant workers in resolving work-related challenges, adjusting to urban life, and maintaining emotional well-being during their limited leisure time. Specifically, the study is guided by two key research questions:

1. What are the types and characteristics of social networks currently accessible to young workers in HCMC?
2. How do these networks influence their ability to integrate into local communities, cope with workplace difficulties, and sustain their psychological and social well-being?

By combining a quantitative survey of 390 young workers with in-depth interviews and secondary data analysis, this paper contributes to both the theoretical and empirical understanding of social capital in the context of rural-to-urban migration. It also offers practical policy recommendations for enhancing the quality of life and promoting the social inclusion of young migrant labor in the context of industrialization and urban transformation in Vietnam.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods design to examine how social networks support young workers in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) in navigating urban life. The research combined quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, allowing for both statistical analysis and in-depth understanding.

The quantitative component was based on a structured questionnaire administered to 390 young workers aged 16–30, employed in direct production roles in industrial zones across HCMC. The survey explored the structure and function of their social networks, including relationships with coworkers, neighbors, and friends, as well as their access to social support and participation in community and leisure activities.

To complement the survey findings, 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants. These interviews focused on the emotional, informational, and instrumental support provided by both strong and weak ties, and how these relationships influence workplace adaptation and social integration.

In addition to primary data, relevant secondary sources—such as academic research and policy documents—were analyzed to contextualize the findings. The survey data were processed using SPSS for descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns and insights.

The study adhered to ethical research principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity was preserved. This research was supported by the Youth Science and Technology Incubation Program (Contract No. 22/2024/ HĐ-KHCNT-VƯ), under the management of the Ho Chi Minh City Communist Youth Union and the Department of Science and Technology.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PRACTICAL CONTEXT

3.1. Conceptualizing Social Networks

Social networks are a foundational concept in contemporary sociology and social sciences, capturing the ways individuals and groups are interconnected through social ties. A network is typically conceptualized as a structure comprising nodes (individuals or social units) and ties (relationships), which collectively shape the flow of information, resources, and support within and across communities (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011).

Social network analysis enables scholars to examine the influence of network structures on individual behaviors and social outcomes. McPherson et al. (2001) highlighted three key features of social networks: hierarchy (the layered structure of ties), transitivity (the degree to which connections form bridges), and homophily (the tendency for similar individuals to cluster). Unlike bounded "groups," networks are dynamic and often lack rigid boundaries. Borgatti and colleagues categorized networks into three forms: (1) core networks—tightly

connected within-group ties; (2) bridging networks—links that connect across different groups; and (3) independent networks—initially separate networks that evolve into interconnected structures over time.

3.2. The Strength of Weak Ties

Granovetter's (1973) theory of the "strength of weak ties" revolutionized the understanding of informal social networks. He posited that weak ties—characterized by infrequent interaction, lower emotional intensity, and limited mutual exchange—are more effective than strong ties in transmitting new information and opportunities, particularly in contexts such as job searches.

Granovetter distinguished between *strong ties* (close friends and family) and *weak ties* (acquaintances, coworkers, neighbors) based on five dimensions: duration of interaction, emotional intensity, trust, reciprocal exchange, and content diversity. These distinctions are summarized in Table 1:

While weak ties may appear less significant, Granovetter demonstrated that their looser structure allows individuals to access resources beyond their immediate circle, bridging otherwise disconnected social clusters. In his empirical study involving 266 job seekers in Boston, he found that 69% of successful job placements were facilitated by weak ties, as opposed to only 31% through strong ties. This evidence underscores that weak ties serve as crucial connectors, facilitating broader information flow and enhancing opportunities for mobility.

3.3. Analytical Framework for Migrant Workers' Networks

The application of social network theory to migration studies reveals how migrants utilize relational strategies to adapt to unfamiliar urban environments. Siu and Unger (2020), in a comparative study of migrant workers in Guangdong (China) and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam), noted that Vietnamese migrant workers tend to settle permanently and sustain community cohesion, while Chinese workers often remain in cyclical and fragmented migration systems. These differences reflect varying institutional frameworks, especially regarding household registration and local integration policies.

Myerson et al. (2010) and McKay & McKenzie (2020) highlighted how migrant women, in particular, face social isolation, limited access to support networks, and long-term emotional strain in urban settings. These studies underscore the dual pressures of economic necessity and constrained social embeddedness.

In Vietnam, Thoi (2013) documented how young rural migrants rely initially on family or hometown networks to stabilize their urban lives. However, their limited engagement with formal institutions—such as unions or local associations—along with long working hours, restricts their access to broader social capital. These workers often form informal support groups but remain marginal to official social infrastructure.

Based on this literature, this study examines three critical dimensions of social network utilization among young workers in Ho Chi Minh City's production sector:

1. integration into local communities,
2. navigating workplace challenges, and
3. emotional and social support during leisure time.

These dimensions are analyzed through the dual lens of strong and weak ties, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how social networks mediate urban adaptation processes among youth migrants. In addition to the analytical goal of examining the role of social networks in the adaptation of young workers, the distinction between strong and weak ties also provides a roadmap for designing interventions in both workplace and community contexts. For example, promoting casual peer exchanges (e.g. lunchtime chats, mutual aid groups) can enhance the formation of weak ties among workers. Similarly, neighborhood clubs or informal gatherings can expand workers' access to local resources and social support.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Characteristics of Young Workers in the Direct Production Sector in Ho Chi Minh City

4.1.1. Definition of Young Workers in the Direct Production Sector

The term *young workers in the direct production sector* reflects a context-specific classification rooted

Table 1. Distinguishing Strong and Weak Social Ties.

Characteristic	Weak Ties	Strong Ties
Duration	Short-term contact	Long-term interaction
Emotional intensity	Low	High
Trust	Low	High
Reciprocity	Low mutual exchange	High mutual exchange
Content diversity	Diverse and novel information	Repetitive and less varied content

Source: *Granovetter (1973)*
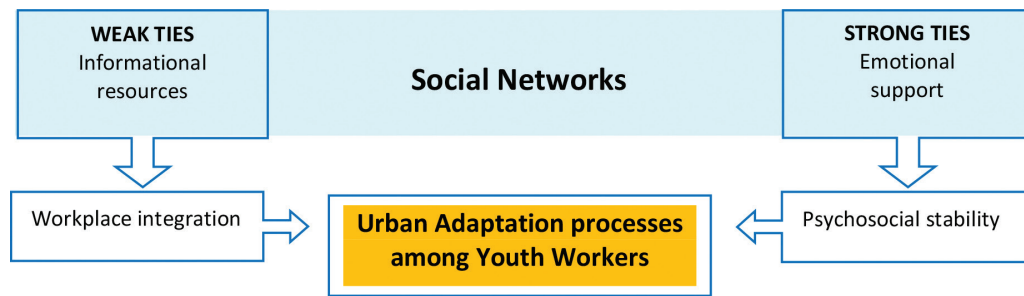
Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Social Networks in Urban Adaptation among Youth Workers.

Source: *Authors (2025).*

in Vietnam's legal and socio-economic framework. According to the Youth Law of Vietnam (2020), "youth" refers to individuals aged 16 to 30. The concept of "workers," as articulated by President Hồ Chí Minh in his foundational political writings, refers to laborers who do not own means of production and are compelled to sell their labor, regardless of occupation.

In this study, the target population includes youth who are directly involved in production, business, or service delivery in industrial zones and export processing zones in Ho Chi Minh City. This definition excludes managerial or support staff and instead focuses on those performing hands-on tasks such as assembly, quality control, and customer service. These individuals typically operate within manufacturing lines or service functions in large-scale, labor-intensive environments.

4.1.2. Demographic and Socioeconomic Features

Young workers in this sector are in a critical stage of physical and psychological development. Typically aged 16 to 30, they possess relatively good physical health suited to the demands of high-intensity and endurance-based labor. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, this life stage involves identity exploration, the pursuit of life goals, and the formation of intimate relationships.

Socioeconomically, these workers are characterized by their dependence on wage labor, lacking ownership of productive assets. Their roles in industrial or service-based enterprises require adherence to strict procedural norms, labor discipline, and productivity standards. Although they often aspire to upward mobility—seeking better living conditions and professional advancement—many face persistent challenges due to labor market fluctuations, rising urban living costs, and limited access to social services. These challenges complicate their efforts to integrate into urban life and achieve long-term stability.

4.1.3. Sample Description

The study draws on survey data from a research project funded under contract number 22/2024/

HĐ-KHCNT-VƯ. A total of 390 respondents were surveyed, of whom 63.1% were women. Educational backgrounds varied, with 40.3% having completed vocational training, college, or university-level education. Most participants originated from the Mekong Delta (49.5%), followed by the North Central, South Central Coast, and Central Highlands regions (26.2%). This demographic distribution reflects the continuing trend of rural-to-urban migration for employment opportunities.

The data also suggest a transition from strong, place-based social ties—such as family and close friends in their hometowns—to more context-specific networks in urban settings. Upon migration, these young workers often rely on newly formed weak ties, including neighbors, coworkers, and acquaintances in their residential and workplace environments.

Based on this demographic and conceptual foundation, the study proceeds to analyze the relationship between social networks and three key dimensions of migrant workers' urban experiences:

1. community integration,
2. coping with work-related difficulties, and
3. the role of social networks during leisure time.

These dimensions are discussed in the following sections.

4.2. Social Networks and Community Integration

The process of urban adaptation among young workers (YWs) is shaped by a complex interplay of work, housing, and social environments. In this context, social networks—particularly those formed at places of residence and through peer interactions—play a crucial role in facilitating community integration. Drawing on Granovetter's (1973) distinction between strong and weak ties, this section examines how both types of relationships contribute to the sense of belonging and social connectivity in everyday life.

Table 2 below presents descriptive statistics on YWs' social participation within their residential communities.

The results presented in Table 2 reveal a nuanced picture of community-based social engagement among

young workers (YWs) in Ho Chi Minh City. Although the frequency of neighborly interactions is not particularly high, the reported mean scores suggest a moderate level of integration within residential settings. Specifically, the items "I know many of my neighbors" and "I receive help from neighbors when needed" both yielded a mean of 3.37, while "I often interact with neighbors" scored 3.19. These values were found to be statistically significant above the neutral midpoint of 3 (p < .001), indicating the presence of functionally supportive yet emotionally limited relationships—what Granovetter (1973) would classify as weak ties. Such ties offer practical and psychosocial value despite lacking deep emotional intimacy.

These findings are further substantiated by qualitative data. One female respondent (30 years old) shared: "Where I'm renting now, the landlord is really kind. They actually support the workers. The rent hasn't gone up, and they even helped us apply for subsidized electricity and water rates to make it easier for us workers. Other places I stayed before were much more expensive" (Female, 30 years old). This account highlights the informal safety nets embedded within everyday living arrangements and suggests that even non-kin relationships—such as those with landlords—can evolve into supportive weak ties that mitigate economic vulnerabilities.

Notably, the item "I make new friends and socialize with unfamiliar people" received a mean of 3.02, which did not significantly differ from the neutral point (p = .736). This result points to a relative reluctance or limitation in forming new relationships beyond immediate contacts. Several factors may account for this: time poverty, long working hours, or perceived risk associated with engaging new social actors in urban settings.

In synthesizing these findings, we observe a clear alignment with both Research Question 1—regarding the types and features of social networks accessible to YWs—and Research Question 2—examining how such networks support urban integration. The prevalence of weak residential ties plays a vital role in stabilizing the daily lives of young migrants. While not emotionally intense, these ties bridge access to critical resources (e.g., local information, informal assistance), foster a sense of inclusion, and serve as conduits for navigating unfamiliar urban environments. In doing so, they exemplify the theoretical utility of weak ties in fragmented, low-trust urban contexts, as originally posited by Granovetter and extended by subsequent migration and social capital literature.

In contrast, **Table 3** focuses on peer networks, highlighting the emotional dimension of strong ties.

The results presented in Table 3 highlight the critical role of strong social ties—particularly friendships—in shaping the emotional well-being of young workers (YWs). High mean scores for items such as "I feel happy and comfortable when participating in group activities with friends" (M = 3.62, p< .001), "I keep in regular contact with friends" (M = 3.46, p< .001), and "I trust my friends" (M = 3.38, p< .001) indicate the prevalence of emotionally supportive and psychologically meaningful relationships. These strong ties provide continuity, identity affirmation, and a buffer against stress—key elements for psychological resilience amid the precarities of urban labor life.

This pattern is further corroborated by qualitative data. One male respondent (29 years old) emphasized the harmonious and reciprocal nature of his social circle: *"Well, I always try to maintain good relationships with*

Table 2. Level of Community-based Activities at Place of Residence.

Indicator	N	Mean	SD
I know many of my neighbors	389	3.37	1.019
I receive help from neighbors when needed	389	3.37	1.031
I often interact with neighbors (e.g., chatting, dining, playing together)	389	3.19	1.034
I make new friends and socialize with unfamiliar people	388	3.02	1.055

Source: *Author's survey, Project 22/2024/HĐ-KHCNT-VƯ*

Table 3. Level of Social Activities with Friends

Indicator	N	Mean	SD
I feel happy and comfortable when participating in group activities with friends	389	3.62	.958
I keep in regular contact with friends	390	3.46	.942
I trust my friends	390	3.38	.972
I meet my friends regularly	390	3.35	.968
I feel comfortable sharing personal issues with friends	390	3.23	1.062
I participate in group activities with friends	390	3.21	1.085

Source: *Author's survey, Project 22/2024/HĐ-KHCNT-VƯ*

friends around me. There's always harmony, constant communication, and a sense of connection—whether as coworkers or friends. There hasn't been any conflict; it's mostly social but meaningful. My circle of friends mostly consists of colleagues." (Male, 29 years old)*.* His narrative reflects not only a sense of emotional closeness but also the conscious maintenance of friendship ties that overlap with work-based networks, thereby blending strong affective connections with shared occupational contexts.

However, the results also show some limitations in social expressiveness. Mean scores for "I feel comfortable sharing personal issues with friends" (M = 3.23, *p*< .001) and "I participate in group activities with friends" (M = 3.21, *p*< .001) were relatively lower, suggesting a degree of emotional restraint or social fatigue. These limitations may stem from time constraints, privacy concerns, or a lack of safe, supportive environments for deeper disclosure and collective engagement—factors that have been noted in existing research on migrant workers' emotional coping mechanisms (Myerson et al., 2010).

Taken together, the findings address both Research Questions 1 and 2. They demonstrate that while strong ties are accessible and actively maintained among YWs, their expressive potential remains contextually bounded. Nevertheless, such ties play an indispensable role in fostering emotional security, promoting social belonging, and supporting the psychosocial adaptation of migrant youth in an increasingly fragmented urban environment. In complementarity with weak ties, these emotionally rich connections anchor YWs in stable social identities and strengthen their capacity to navigate urban life with resilience.

4.3. Social Networks and Coping with Work-related Challenges

Workplace social networks represent a vital domain of informal support for YWs. Within the labor-intensive production sector, collaboration, trust, and mutual aid among colleagues become crucial in managing workloads and navigating job-related difficulties. Drawing again on Granovetter's typology, this section investigates how "weak ties" in the form of collegial relationships function as adaptive resources in industrial settings.

Table 4 illustrates YWs' perceptions of cohesion in the workplace.

Table 4 highlights the critical function of workplace-based weak ties in supporting young workers' (YWs') adaptation to industrial environments. The high mean scores for statements such as "My colleagues and I always support each other at work" (M = 3.95, p< .001) and "My colleagues and I trust each other in work-related matters" (M = 3.88, p< .001) reflect a strong culture of professional collaboration and mutual support. These patterns suggest that while emotional closeness may be limited, coworkers form dependable networks that facilitate practical problem-solving and reduce the sense of isolation in high-pressure, task-oriented work settings.

Rather than fulfilling affective needs, these relationships function as instrumental weak ties—consistent with Granovetter's (1973) theoretical framework—which enhance daily task performance, knowledge sharing, and informal mentoring. The recurring presence of trust and cooperation indicates a cohesive social structure within the workplace, contributing not only to job efficiency but also to workers' perceived sense of integration and competence within the organizational context.

These findings address Research Question 1 by confirming that the workplace serves as a key domain where weak ties are formed and sustained, especially among coworkers operating in similar roles. They also address Research Question 2 by showing that such ties are essential for coping with occupational challenges, enabling YWs to access informal support, maintain morale, and achieve a sense of belonging in the industrial environment. In this way, weak workplace ties serve as stabilizing forces, offering continuity and predictability amid the broader precarity of urban migrant labor life.

Table 5 expands on these findings by detailing concrete behaviors indicative of workplace bonding.

These results reinforce the centrality of peer support in the workplace. While material and emotional support from coworkers is moderate, behavioral markers such as frequent help (M = 3.86, p< .001) and after-hours socialization (M = 3.76, p< .001) suggest that workplace ties go beyond task-based collaboration. Furthermore, trust from supervisors (M = 3.71, p< .001) illustrates the potential role of hierarchical relationships as structurally weak ties that nevertheless yield developmental benefits.

Table 4. Perceived Cohesion Among Coworkers.

Indicator	N	Mean	SD
My colleagues and I always support each other at work	390	3.95	.797
My colleagues and I are bonded	390	3.88	.818
My colleagues and I trust each other in work-related matters	390	3.88	.849

Source: *Author's survey, Project 22/2024/HĐ-KHCNT-VU'*

Table 5. Workplace-based Social Support and Interaction.

Indicator	N	Mean	SD
I am regularly helped by colleagues when facing difficulties	390	3.86	.795
I socialize with colleagues outside working hours	390	3.76	.948
I feel listened to and understood by my colleagues	390	3.74	.819
I am trusted with responsibilities by my supervisors	390	3.71	.890
My colleagues support me emotionally	390	3.55	.927
My colleagues support me materially	390	3.34	1.046
I socialize with colleagues during work hours	390	3.30	1.154

Source: *Author's survey, Project 22/2024/HĐ-KHCNT-VU'*

Table 6. Frequency of Participation in Leisure and Recreational Activities Outside Working Hours.

Activity	N	Mean	SD
Browsing the internet, social media	390	3.70	0.924
Resting	390	3.56	0.849
Returning to hometown	390	2.88	0.918
Going out	390	2.80	1.010
Religious activities	390	2.46	1.015
Playing sports	390	2.31	1.191
Traveling	390	2.25	0.871
Studying, reading books	390	2.12	1.128

Source: Author's survey, Project 22/2024/HĐ-KHCNT-VU'

A respondent elaborated on this dynamic in a qualitative interview:

"Life is difficult for everyone now. The company I'm working for is doing its best to maintain jobs. Many other places are laying off workers. We help each other out—we're all in the same situation."*(Male, 30 years old)*

While interaction during work hours is more limited (M = 3.30, p< .001), likely due to production constraints and formal regulations, the emphasis on after-hours engagement reflects workers' efforts to sustain social connectedness beyond the workplace structure. These relationships, although not deeply emotional, play an essential role in daily coping, task performance, and morale.

In sum, YWs' social networks in the workplace—primarily composed of weak ties—provide significant functional value. As industrial modernization accelerates, policies and company practices should focus on maintaining and enhancing these relational structures through structured peer programs, informal gathering spaces, and cross-shift collaborations.

4.4. Social Network Utilization During Leisure Time

Leisure time plays a significant role in shaping the social experience and psychological well-being of young workers (YWs), yet this dimension remains underexplored in labor research. Data presented in Table 6 reveal that

the most common leisure activities among respondents include browsing the internet and social media (M = 3.70; p< .005) and resting (M = 3.56; p< .005). These high-frequency activities are largely solitary or digitally mediated, offering immediate relaxation with minimal social investment. While these forms of leisure provide convenience, they also reflect a tendency toward social withdrawal and limited physical interaction. This is partly attributable to the demanding nature of industrial work, which often leaves workers with little energy or flexibility to engage in communal or enriching activities.

Qualitative narratives support these findings. One 27-year-old female respondent commented: "Most workers here just go to work and then go straight home. It's a cycle—wake up, work, come home, sleep. Very few families even have children with them here." This account highlights the repetitive, isolating nature of daily routines, leaving little room for building or maintaining meaningful social relationships. Another worker noted that the scarcity of leisure options often leads to emotional stagnation and lack of romantic or long-term companionship development.

Less frequent activities, such as returning to one's hometown (M = 2.88, p< .005), going out (M = 2.80, p< .005), or engaging in physical or religious activities, were associated with lower scores. These forms of social participation often require more time, resources, or flexibility—barriers that many workers cannot overcome. Intellectual pursuits such as studying and reading received the lowest engagement score (M = 2.12, p< .005), suggesting underinvestment in long-term personal development.

This pattern is further confirmed in Table 7, which measures the average time spent per week on various leisure activities. Again, resting (M = 4.12, p<.005) and internet use (M = 3.67, p<.005) dominated, while self-improvement and group-based activities remained low. Notably, the high standard deviation in activities such as returning home (SD = 3.053) and social media use (SD = 1.936) indicates divergent usage patterns depending on individual circumstances and access.

Table 7. Average Weekly Time Spent on Leisure and Recreational Activities Outside Working Hours.

Activity	N	Mean	SD
Resting	390	4.12	1.106
Browsing the internet, social media	390	3.67	1.936
Returning to hometown	390	3.55	3.053
Going out	390	3.01	1.220
Traveling	390	2.52	1.541
Religious activities	390	2.27	1.128
Playing sports	390	2.27	1.186
Studying, reading books	390	2.11	1.182

Source: *Author's survey, Project 22/2024/HĐ-KHCNT-VU'*

Table 8. Perceived Benefits of Leisure Activities

Perceived Benefit	N	Mean	SD
Enhancing connection with others	390	3.85	0.847
Personal development	390	3.81	0.844
Feeling respected	390	3.78	0.798
Stress relief	390	3.74	0.807
Increased life satisfaction	390	3.67	0.766
Restoring labor capacity	390	3.67	0.836

Source: Author's survey, Project 22/2024/HĐ-KHCNT-VU'

Another respondent (female, 29 years old) reflected on the prioritization of overtime labor over skill development: *"Workers rarely study. Maybe two or three out of ten have the ambition to move into management. Most just try to work as much overtime as possible. After a few years, they go back to their hometown with some savings".* A supervisor added: *"There are free vocational training programs, but few attend. Companies also hesitate because they fear trained workers might leave or demand higher wages."*

Despite the constraints on participation, Table 8 demonstrates that YWs clearly recognize the **value of leisure activities**, particularly in terms of strengthening social connections (M = 3.85, *p*> .005), personal development (M = 3.81, *p*> .005), and enhancing feelings of respect (M = 3.78, *p*> .005). These functions correspond closely with the benefits of weak ties, especially in providing access to new information, emotional reinforcement, and perceived social inclusion. Nevertheless, the structural barriers that limit actual engagement present a significant disconnect between recognition and action.

Taken together, the data suggest a critical contradiction: while YWs value the interpersonal and developmental benefits of leisure, their lived realities constrain them to solitary, low-effort activities. If left unaddressed, this pattern may contribute to a progressive erosion of social capital and a narrowing of weak ties—reducing workers' access to new information, social mobility, and emotional resilience. Ultimately, such trends could result in the marginalization of a vital labor force and stagnation in broader urban development.

To address these concerns, targeted interventions are needed. Stakeholders—including employers, unions, and local authorities—should prioritize investment in inclusive, low-cost, and easily accessible leisure programs. Initiatives such as on-site sports clubs, reading corners, cultural excursions, and peer-learning groups can help foster informal social networks, broaden knowledge

horizons, and strengthen workers' physical and mental well-being. In this way, leisure becomes not just a matter of recovery, but a platform for **sustained social inclusion and long-term worker empowerment**.

4.5. Recommendations

4.5.1. Leveraging Existing Weak Ties

The survey findings reveal that YWs frequently engage with coworkers both during and outside of working hours, suggesting the presence of substantial weak-tie networks. These ties—though not emotionally intense—form a practical support system that can be strategically nurtured. Employers and organizations should actively facilitate peer interaction by organizing team-building activities, such as sports, cultural events, or interest-based clubs. Creating shared social spaces—canteens, rest areas, and informal gatherings—can also encourage daily conversations, informal mentorship, and trust-building among workers.

In addition, fostering local community integration is essential. Workers should be encouraged to participate in neighborhood-level activities, such as community meetings, cultural festivals, or volunteer programs. These engagements can help workers establish supportive ties with neighbors and local residents, enhancing their sense of belonging and access to information, resources, and mutual assistance in daily life.

4.5.2. Expanding Social Networks Through Community Involvement

Beyond leveraging existing relationships, YWs should be supported in expanding their social networks through formal affiliations and public engagement. Involvement with mass organizations such as youth unions, workers' associations, or neighborhood clubs can broaden their exposure to diverse social circles. Participating in volunteer programs or group events centered on shared interests provides a platform for forging meaningful connections while simultaneously contributing to community development.

In the digital era, social media can also be a valuable tool for sustaining and broadening networks.

Online platforms facilitate the exchange of information, emotional support, and professional advice, particularly for workers with limited time or mobility to engage in in-person activities.

4.5.3. Enhancing Communication and Relationship-building Skills

The effectiveness of social networks is not only determined by access but also by interpersonal skills. Training programs on communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution should be integrated into workplace development efforts. These soft skills can empower workers to initiate and sustain connections across different contexts. Providing practical opportunities for workers to apply these skills—through group discussions, role-playing, or social events—can further reinforce their relational confidence and capacity.

Equally important is the creation of a safe and inclusive environment—both at work and in residential areas—where workers feel comfortable expressing themselves, sharing experiences, and forming connections.

4.5.4. Respecting Cultural and Personal Diversity

A sustainable social network must be grounded in respect for individual differences in culture, preferences, and personality. Activities designed to foster interaction must consider these dimensions to ensure relevance and inclusivity. Workers should be given the autonomy to choose their level and type of participation, avoiding forced engagement that might deter openness. This approach will allow for the emergence of genuine and enduring relationships, built on mutual understanding and shared values.

4.5.5. Monitoring and Adaptive Evaluation

Social network development is a dynamic and ongoing process. Regular assessment and feedback mechanisms are crucial to ensuring the relevance and impact of interventions. Employers, local authorities, and civil society actors should collect worker feedback on social programs and monitor changes in social connectivity over time. Periodic evaluations can guide the adjustment of activities to better align with worker needs and contextual changes, ensuring that interventions remain effective and inclusive.

By systematically investing in social connectivity—through both formal and informal channels—stakeholders can empower young workers not only to survive, but to thrive within urban-industrial environments. Stronger social networks will enhance resilience, promote emotional well-being, and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the labor force.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the multifaceted role of social networks in the lives of young workers (YWs) in Ho Chi Minh City, particularly in three key areas: community integration, coping with workplace challenges, and maintaining emotional well-being during leisure time. The findings underscore the importance of both weak ties (e.g., with neighbors, coworkers, and supervisors) and strong ties (e.g., with close friends) in supporting urban adaptation.

While strong ties provide emotional bonding and psychological comfort, it is the weak ties—often overlooked—that offer access to diverse information, opportunities, and indirect forms of social support. These findings empirically reinforce Granovetter's theory on the "strength of weak ties," particularly in the context of internal rural-to-urban migration in developing urban-industrial environments.

Beyond theoretical validation, the study also offers practical insights into how social networks are formed, activated, and maintained within the structural constraints of industrial work and urban living. The proposed recommendations—ranging from enhancing informal interaction spaces to improving communication skills and fostering inclusive participation—serve as guidelines for policymakers, trade unions, and employers seeking to improve the living and working conditions of migrant workers. By strengthening social connectivity, stakeholders can help build a more resilient, engaged, and sustainable young workforce.

Future research should broaden the scope to include migrant workers outside the direct production sector and explore longitudinal changes in their social networks. A deeper understanding of how social ties evolve over time would offer a more comprehensive foundation for designing inclusive urban integration policies and long-term development strategies for migrant populations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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