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## CONDITIONS EXPOSING STUDENTS OF BAHIR DAR UNIVERSITY TO INTERNET ADDICTION, BAHIR DAR, ETHIOPIA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

MUCHE, Habtamu and ASRESE, Kerebih

### ABSTRACT

*Internet addiction is an excessive-compulsive use of internet that causes psychological, social, family, school, health, and work impairments. Previous studies reported that, there is an increasing rate of internet addiction in colleges and higher educational institutions. But, conditions exposing students of higher educational institutions to internet addiction are not well explored in African context in general and among Ethiopian university students in particular. The purpose of this study was to explore conditions exposing students of Bahir Dar University to internet addiction. To this end, a phenomenological qualitative approach was used as an appropriate method to undertake an in-depth analysis of the issue under study. Data were collected from nineteen purposefully selected internet addicted students using a semi structured in-depth interview guide and the collected data were analysed using thematic analysis method under six themes. The study findings revealed that absence of student friendly recreational centers in the university, peer pressure, low parental control, gender insensitive social environment, feelings of academic seniority, and stress are the most prominent conditions exposing Bahir Dar University students to internet addiction. These findings have an implication for social work education that the pros and cons of internet technology should be part of academic curriculums starting from early grade schools in order to help students have earlier level conscious understanding of the internet service. So that, they can protect themselves from internet addiction when they go to universities.*

**KEY TERMS:** Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, Undergraduate students, Internet addiction

### KEY DATES

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**Author/s details:** Habtamu Muche (MSW), Lecturer, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. Mobile: +251918776032 Email: [habtishmuche@gmail.com](mailto:habtishmuche@gmail.com), [Habtamu.Muche@bdu.edu.et](mailto:Habtamu.Muche@bdu.edu.et). Kerebih Asrese (PhD), Assistant Professor of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. Mobile: +251918782010 Email: [Kerebih2000@yahoo.com](mailto:Kerebih2000@yahoo.com)

## INTRODUCTION

Internet has become an integral part of our day-to-day life. But, along with its positive values internet addiction is a growing problem negatively affecting many aspects of human life in general and youths of university students in particular (Mbatha, 2012). Internet addiction becomes the hub of so many interrelated negative socio-economic, psychological, academic and health effects all over the world especially among college and university students (Kim & Kim, 2002; Singh & Barmola, 2015). University students are more often vulnerable to internet addiction than other groups of people (Wanajak, 2011). However, there are limited studies attempted to understand conditions exposing university students to internet addiction. In the African context in particular, the concept of internet addiction is still in its infancy and professional academic studies are few in number.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore conditions exposing undergraduate students of Bahir Dar University to internet addiction, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. It was a phenomenological qualitative in-depth analysis. Nineteen purposefully selected internet addicted students participated in the study and the collected data were analysed using thematic analysis method. The study explored various socio-economic conditions that exposed undergraduate students of Bahir Dar University to internet addiction. Findings of the study are examined in line with the existing literature and implications for social work education are developed based on major findings of the study.

## BACKGROUND

Having an American origin invented in the early 1960s, internet is a network of networks around the world that allows people to easily communicate online with no any geographic and distance barriers. Its use revolutionized our world and positively transformed humans' life into good in the areas of science, business, education, culture and politics including the life of university students (More & Nalwade, 2012; Kapahi, Ling, Ramadas, & Abdullah, 2013). In its earliest stage internet was limited to be accessed by higher officials mainly for military purpose, but now a days, advancements in the user-friendly computer and mobile technologies provided an easy access to a wide range of internet services like Facebook, Messenger, Twitter, Viber, and Skype for all groups of people all over the world (Wanajak, 2011; Sileshie, 2014). By December 2017, 54.4% of the world population were found internet user whereas in Ethiopia 16,437,811 or 15.3% of its people (Internet World Status, 2017).

If consciously managed, internet can positively transform and make human life easy, but it causes internet addiction if unconsciously managed (Kapahi et al., 2013; Hatami-Zad & Mami, 2014; Singh, 2015). Internet addiction (IA) is a maladaptive emotional attachment to internet and impulse control disorder described in 1996 by the psychologist Rimmerly Young, which causes a number of interrelated socio-economic problems in human life including psychological, social, family, school, health, and work impairments (Frangos, Frangos, & Kiohos, 2009; Wanajak, 2011; Arsad & Shafaat, 2015).

Prevalence of internet addiction among university students varies across the world. The research conducted in Europe showed that, IA is 18.3% in Great Britain (Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005), and 34.7% in Greece (Frangos, Frangos, & Sotiropoulos, 2011). Studies conducted in China showed that internet addiction is 35% in Hong Kong (Mak et al., 2014) and 30.1% in college students (Nie, Zhang, & Liu, 2017).

The following selected studies have reported the prevalence of internet addiction in Africa mainly among university students: In their study about determinants of internet addiction among Egyptian university students, Abdelgahni et al. (2018) found out that the prevalence of internet addiction is 41.5%. Also, Missaoui, Brahim, Bouriga, & Abdelaziz (2015) revealed internet addiction among adolescents in Tunisia was 11.6%. In their study about internet addiction among students in Mauritius, Smita and Azhar (2018) showed 5.1% severe internet addiction and 32.8 mild internet addiction rate. In addition to the above findings Okwaraji, Aguwa, Onyebueke, and Shiweobi-Eze (2015) come up with the finding that 10.2% of Nigerian undergraduate students are internet addicted. Moreover, Lukacs, Tavolacci, Kiss-Toth, Sasvari, and Ladner (2016) reported that internet addiction among Algerian university students was 59.3 % surpassing addicted students in France and Hungary.

Youths use internet more often than anyone else and they are exposed to various socio-economic problems caused by internet addiction (Egbe, Ojewmi, & Olasupo, 2013). Because of less parental control and high peer pressure, there is a widespread internet addiction, in particular amongst college and university students (Wanajak, 2011). The excessive time spent on internet use and lesser attention given to subject matters result in poor academic achievement among university students (Zainudin, Din, & Othman, 2013; Mishra et al., 2014; Akhter, 2013; Singh & Barmola, 2015; Acheaw & Larson 2016).

Undergraduate university students are the most at-risk groups of people than others to internet addiction for the reason that it is the first time in their life to go far away from their families. Following their arrival to universities, parental support and supervision decline in the one hand and peer pressure from their age groups increase on the other hand. In order to be liked by and conform to their close friends, students easily accept encouragements for prolonged participation in online activities using internet (Frangos et al., 2009; Esen & Gundogdu, 2010).

Although there is no exact figurative report about internet addiction among university students in Ethiopia, universities provide a relatively better internet access and at the same time there is a culture of using social media among university students. Hence, undergraduate students are at a higher risk of internet addiction as described in the above study findings. Therefore, it is important to thoroughly understand conditions exposing university students to internet addiction so as to design helpful interventions and positively impact the academic as well as personal life of university students.

Even if previous studies by Kim & Kim (2002) and Bahrainian & Khazae (2014) attempted to identify psychological, social, demographic, and internet related factors as a reason for university students to be exposed to internet addiction, they didn't detail out how it expose them. In addition to that, in African context in general and in the Ethiopian context in particular the issue is not scientifically understood well despite the growing number of internet addicted university students as described above.

Thus, it was found very relevant to conduct this phenomenological qualitative study among internet addicted undergraduate regular program students (URPSs) of Bahir Dar University (BDU), Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. The main objective of the study was to explore conditions exposing undergraduate students of BDU to internet addiction. Understanding the major socio-economic conditions of internet addiction is fundamental to design an evidence-based intervention against internet addiction and its related academic dysfunctions of university students.

## METHODS

This study employed phenomenological qualitative approach since it is the best strategy to well understand how people experienced and give meanings to a particular phenomenon. Also, it helps to properly grasp opinions, subjective meanings and lived experiences of study participants by allowing them to raise all their experiences with no restrictions (Creswell, 2007). Nineteen study participants who were identified to have rich information about the issue under study were selected using purposive sampling technique. Initially the number of study participants were not decided for what it matters in a phenomenological qualitative study is not the number of participants but the required data saturation. In this study the desired data were found saturated at the nineteenth study informant.

In order to identify appropriate study participants who were internet addicted and able to provide detail information about conditions exposing to internet addiction, we used 20 internet addiction test questions locally contextualized and adapted from Young (1998). Using these five-point Likert scale internet addiction test questions, before proceeding to the data collection, we first checked the internet addiction status of all proposed study participants. After checking, those who scored  $\leq 49$  out of 100 were rejected from being participant whereas those who scored  $\geq 50$  preferably those who scored high were selected for the study. Because, highly internet addicted informants are more likely to better understand the issue than mildly addicted internet users.

A semi structured in-depth interview guide was used as a data collection technique to collect the necessary data from the study participants. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis method. After the completion of the field work, by listening voice recorded interviews the collected data were transcribed verbatim, coded, similar terms brought together, themes were developed into meaningful patterns for analysis based on their order of category, and then the data translated from Amharic to English. After all these, the data were analysed through interpretation of meanings and direct quotation of participants' statements.

The study was conducted by taking in to consideration all the no harm ethical principles of social science research. In doing so, we obtained participants' informed consent after briefing them purpose of the study. Participants' anonymity safeguarded by giving pseudonyms and self-determination respected. Also, confidentiality maintained by giving codes instead of individual identities and reporting findings in a composite way than attributing to an individual participant. Moreover, findings of the study made available in Bahir Dar University social science library for its easy access to subjects of the study and all other concerned bodies.

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This study attempted to explore conditions exposing university students to internet addiction. Accordingly, the study found out that absence of attractive recreational centers in the university, peer pressure, absence of parental control, stress, feelings of academic seniority, and gender insensitive social environment are conditions exposing undergraduate students of Bahir Dar University to internet addiction.

### *Background characteristics of study participants*

Totally nineteen internet-addicted BDU URPSs participated in the study, of which 8 were female. The age of study participants ranged from 19 to 24 with a mean age 22. The average addiction score of participants were

75.4. Regarding their year of study 2(10.5%) 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 5(26.3%) 3<sup>rd</sup> year, 5(26.3%) 4<sup>th</sup> year and 7(36.85%) 5<sup>th</sup> year students participated in the study.

### ***Conditions exposing university students to internet addiction***

For the purpose of data analysis, the issues raised in this study were categorized in to six major themes:

#### *Absence of Attractive Campus Recreational Centers*

Concerning campus recreational centers, “Yared” forwarded the following idea:

*....in a university where students’ friendly recreational centers are not available, what will be your favorite place and close friend to enjoy than participating in online activities and chatting with online friends? Because there is no attractive recreational center in our campus to go and have joyful time there; most of the time I use internet as my best means of entertainment....*

Yared’s statement above revealed that, he always use internet for an extended time because there is no attractive and alternative way of entertainment in the university for him to enjoy. Hence, he chat with online friends and actively participate in online activities for prolonged time every day. This clearly shows that, through time a student who began using internet as a means of entertainment develop internet addiction behavior.

Also, another informant, “Haymanot” supported this idea and said that:

*.....As a young university student you want to enjoy your leisure time, you want to establish friendship, and you need to enjoy together with your friends. But to do all these, attractive and youth friendly recreational centers should be available in your university. In this regard, when we look at our campus there is no well-furnished and attractive recreational center for students. In this situation, you will have no any best alternative and cheap means of entertainment better than using face book to form friendship online, to chat online, to search information online and to enjoy online.....*

Here, Haymanot’s description also pointed out that, she uses internet for prolonged time because she has no alternative means to enjoy her leisure time and to entertain together with her friends in person face to face. Due to this, to get the opportunity that she missed in her campus real life setting, she got using internet for an extended time as the best way to form online friendships and chat with online friends. The narratives above from the two study participants disclosed that, poor and non-inviting recreational centers in the university push students to choose internet as a primary means of entertainment and spend extended time on using it. Based on informants’ views mentioned above, it is possible to conclude that had attractive, well-furnished and students-friendly recreational centers available in the university, informants could have not become internet addicted.

#### *Peer Pressure*

The other contributing condition for internet addiction behavior described by informants is peer pressure. Concerning this, an informant namely “Habesha” described that:

*...We are on the same age group living in the same dorm and attending classes together. I have a close and frequent contact with my dorm mates and classmates. Every time I meet my intimate friends, they raise many issues and try to impose their ideas, feelings and activities into me. Whether you like it or not, intimate friends in the campus always try to influence you to be like of them and do what they do. In such a condition, you are more likely to follow the path of your close friends and dorm mates especially if most of your close friends are on the same way in doing that particular activity. Unless and otherwise you will become odd from the way of your close friends and they will ignore and undermine you. The case of my internet addiction is not different from this reality.....*

Habesha clearly pointed out that, in her earliest period she began using internet for an extended time not because she was feeling happy to use it for extended time but the influence and pressures made by her intimate friends. Students are doing activities that their intimate friends do in order not to be ignored by their friends and not to be labeled as odd of the mass in their campus life. Once the informant began using internet influenced by friends, gradually practiced it as a habitual behavior in her life and finally got herself internet addicted. Likewise, another participant “Walelign” added that:

*I have never used internet at all previously, but after I came to BDU, a dorm mate who use internet for an extended time always influence me to be connected to internet and fantasize me as I will get a lot of fantastic new ideas from using internet. Then, when he repeatedly nag me I started using internet*

*mainly Facebook. At the beginning I got it appealing to use and gradually I feel internet as the best option to enjoy. Now I am internet addicted who can't even stay disconnected for a short while and can't imagine life without internet...*

This narrative also indicated that, *Waleign* was totally non-internet user before he came to BDU, but after that through time peer pressure from intimate friends influenced him to start to use internet and gradually he became internet addicted. From this, we can summarize that peer pressure has strong power to influence students start participating in online activities after they came to universities and later on they become enslaved to internet addiction.

#### *Absence of Parental Control*

The other contributing condition mentioned by study participants exposing them to internet addiction is absence of parental control. Majority of the study informants shared and mentioned that, before they came to the university in their high school time they have been receiving a close parental control and strict censorship of what they do, where they go, and with whom they have friendship. But after they came to BDU, there is no one to control and censor what they do online, where they spend their leisure time, and who their close friends are. There is no close parental control after students went to university and if any, it is limited to phone call. Phone call follow ups are not this much effective since they have no room to physically monitor students. This situation exposed them to easily fail under their friends' influence and freely test all they want without anyone's follow up and control whatever a negative adverse effect their activities may have in their own life. Regarding the non-existence of close parental control in the day to day life of students after they came to Bahir Dar University, "*Friehiwot*" point out that:

*Before I came to BDU, my parents, sisters, brothers, relatives and even neighbors follow up and censor what I do, where I go, who my friends are, with whom I have frequent contact and show me directions when I do something wrong. But now in my university life, there is no one to control and give me positive direction when I go in a wrong way. I can go anywhere I want to go regardless of its negative side effects, I can make friendship with anyone I am happy with regardless of his/her kindness to me. My current excessive internet use is not different from this reality. When I was with my parents, they closely check my involvement in online activities, monitor what do I did there, and guide me to focus on my academic matters instead. But now, no one follow up and advise me to control my excessive internet use.*

*Friehiwot's* statement illustrated that, absence of close parental control has contributed for the development of her internet addiction behavior. After she came to the university, the parental control she have been receiving before declined for her parents are now far away to physically monitor her situation. Due to this fact, she started using internet freely for prolonged time with no one to guide and advise her what is good and bad in her campus life. Consequently, she is now internet addicted.

Another informant namely, "*Yemaneh*" described the absence of parental control almost in similar way to the informant above:

*Before I came to Bahir Dar University in my high school and preparatory school, I was in the control of my parents about everything I do and there was immediate advice and even punishments if I did something wrong. But now, I live far apart from my parents where there is no one to closely control and advise me. I'm the sole decision maker about everything in my university life and when I did something wrong there is no one to give me immediate advice for correction. For instance, my internet addiction behavior relatively decline at summer when I go to parents for vacation. Because when I use internet for an extended time on my mobile, parents always ask me why I stay online for prolonged time and what I am doing on. Hence, I instantly stop using internet or else I choose to use it in my bed room and at night in a condition where parents can't directly observe me.*

Informants' descriptions showed that, absence of parental control exposed students to internet addiction for the reason that there is no body to practically guide and inform them what is good and bad in their university life. When they come to university, students get the life conditions of universities so attractive and land of freedom to test everything they feel fascinated to including excessive involvement on online activities without anyone's control. Then, as time goes on, they start to develop excessive internet use behavior. On the other hand there is no close parental follow up to censor what they do online and to advise them limit extended time on internet. As a result, they freely use internet for an extended time in their daily life and through time they found themselves internet addicted.

### Stress

Another contributing condition for internet addiction is stress. When people face stressful situations in their life, tries to manage it in different ways. Maybe sharing it to families or going to recreational centers. But university students have no access to these ways of stress management. They can't share their stressful condition to their parents in person because they are far away from them and also there is no entertaining recreational center to enjoy in the university. Furthermore, out of the university recreational centers in the down town are not affordable to students. Therefore, students prefer extended participation in online activities as the best way to manage their stress by freely talking with their online friends and viewing and downloading online entertainments. The statement by "Destaw" supported this idea:

*...When I face a stressful condition in my university life, I simply login to Facebook to freely share and chat my online friends about my feelings of worry because there is no other best way practically helpful to me. In return, my online friends from everywhere at the same time forward comments, solutions, and advises to help me evacuate from the disturbing situations. Also, I download and view online movies and music to forget the stressful moments. To do all these and manage my stressful conditions in the virtual world with my online friends, I should have to use internet for an extended time...*

This statement clearly showed that, students can't afford other alternative stress management mechanisms like going to recreational centers outside their university in the town. On the other hand, social networking sites especially face book provide them an easy way of sharing feelings to online friends from all over the world. In their online chatting to their friends, students receive advises and comments which are helpful to manage the stress they are struggling with. In consequence, students engage in online relationships for protracted time.

### Feelings of Academic Seniority

Another contributing condition for internet addiction pointed out by this study is feelings of academic seniority. Regarding this "Alemzerf" described that:

*...When you become a senior class student, credit hours and academic burdens decline compared to junior academic years. In addition, because classes are coming to an end, you start to feel guaranteed to graduate at least with 'C' grade. Hence, you start to participate in so many out of subject matter activities like frequent visit to night clubs, protracted internet use, and enjoying online friendship more than junior years...*

Alemzerf's narrative revealed that, academic burdens and credit hours decrease from fresh man to senior years. Students who have been trying to be high scorer in fresh man years start to lose their hope of doing so in senior years, if they already failed to achieve that in their junior academic years. Also, those students who have been in worry of academic dismissal start to feel relaxed to graduate at senior years. Besides, the available parental follow up to students decline from freshman to senior academic years. All these conditions give senior students the courage to go away from academic concerns and focus on personal entertainments than subject matters. In this way, senior students become exposed to internet addiction than their juniors.

Another informant named "Degarege" added that:

*The peer pressure from my friends become fierce enough in senior years than junior times. I started to have a closer bondage with my classmates and dorm mates in senior years compared to junior years and we do so many things together now because campus life is to come to an end soon. In many ways we get influenced one another more than junior periods. I influence them to kindly join my involvements and my friends too try to always influence me. Related to my internet addiction behavior, one of my senior dorm mates, who excessively use internet initiated me to prefer online activities for personal entertainments. As a result, I started to use it and through time I fell in love with online chatting. Now, I become excessive internet user who always stare at his mobile screen from morning to night unless there is classroom study to attend.*

As "Degarege" disclosed above, in senior academic years, students are going to miss what they call campus life and hence, they start to give attention to participate in out of subject matter activities together. In the late senior years, the level of peer pressure reaches the maximum level and they fiercely influence one another to actively participate in out of subject matter issues including excessive involvement in online activities. This fact made senior students more exposed to internet addiction than junior students.

## Gender

Last but not least, gender is found out as one of the conditions exposing BDU students to internet addiction. It is reported that, the absence of gender inclusive recreational centers in the university and the inconveniences of outdoor entertainments for female students encouraged them to most of the time be restricted inside their dormitory. It is clear that when students be restricted inside their dormitory they find online activities as the most comfortable means for their personal entertainments. “Chuchu” described that “*The only available recreational facilities I knew available in the university are tennis and pool, which are dominated by male students and have no safe treatment for female students to go there*”. Another female informant named “Senayit” added that:

*Male students participate in outdoor activities at least like walking out on the streets, but it's not relaxing for female students to go out and participate in outdoor activities. For instance, if I want to enjoy outside, there are a number of obstacles to do so like what we call in Amharic “Lekefa”, a verbal insulting and disrespecting of girls. In this rude to girls’ social environment, the best way for female students like me is to stay at dorm and enjoy online entertainments through internet. Due to this fact, I use internet daily for extended time and my active participation in online activities in return provide me online friends and online entertainments.*

The informants’ narrative above clearly unveiled that, the existing social settings both inside and outside the campus are not friendly for female students to actively participate in outdoor activities and entertainments. Female students suffer from verbal insulting and disrespects of young men and boys when they attempt to go to outdoor entertainment areas. As a result of this, most of the time female students prefer to stay inside their dormitory and enjoy online activities using internet. This condition in turn exposed them to internet addiction.

## DISCUSSION

This study explored conditions exposing Bahir Dar University students to internet addiction. Findings of the study indicated that absence of students’ friendly attractive recreational centers in the university, stress, feelings of academic seniority, gender insensitive social environment, absence of close parental control, and intense peer pressure from close friends, classmates and dorm mates are the major socio-economic conditions exposing university students to internet addiction. Even if the issue is not well studied and documented in the study area setting, results of the study corroborate with some of the previous findings conducted mainly in Europe, Asia, and US context. The study also come up with some new findings that have never reported before by previous studies.

The finding that absence of close parental control and intense peer pressure from close friends and classmates creates conducive environment for students to be exposed to internet addiction is consistent with previous studies by Frangos et al. (2009) and Esen & Gundogdu (2010) who have reported that the lower the peer pressure the lesser chance to be internet addicted and the lower the family supervision the higher the probability for university students to be internet addicted. These findings are also consonant with a study by Kim & Kim (2002) which unveiled that social factors like weak family support, low parental supervision, and poor communication among family members creates an atmosphere conducive to internet addiction.

This study also pointed out that senior students are exposed to internet addiction more often than juniors. This finding is uniform with the study by (Okwaraji, Aguwa, Onyebueke, & Shiweobi-Eze, 2015) that revealed the senior they are the more likely students are going to be internet addicted. This is maybe for the fact that family supervision and support declines from fresh man year to senior academic years, peer pressure become fierce at senior years, and student’s advancement in internet usage skill at late senior academic years.

Consistent with findings of a previous study by Bahrainian & Khazae (2014), this study understood that students turn to excessive internet use as a means to manage stress and unpleasant conditions in their life. Because university students have no close family member to kindly help them manage stressful conditions in their university life, they actively participate in online activities and chat with their online friends as a means to relieve from the stressed mood.

Despite the consistency of findings with previous studies mentioned above, there are also some new insights and findings revealed by our study: absence of attractive recreational centers in the university and gender insensitive social environment as a condition for internet addiction. The study uncovered that poor and non-inviting recreational centers in the university are pushing students to use internet for an extended time as a means of entertainment because there is no well-furnished and students’ friendly recreational center to enjoy in the university. As a result, students start to chat and actively participate in online activities for prolonged time. Through time they develop internet addiction behavior and managing internet use become out of their control.

The other new finding of this study is gender insensitive social environment which motivated female university students to prefer staying inside their dorm and use internet for an extended time than involving in outdoor entertainment alternatives. The study discovered that, the existing social setting both in the university and outside

the university is not friendly for female students to enjoy outdoor entertainments. Female students suffer from verbal insulting and disrespects of young boys to enjoy in outdoor entertainment areas. Consequently, most of the time female students prefer sitting inside their dorm and freely chat with their online friends for an extended time.

### **IMPLICATION FOR SOCIAL WORK**

Findings of the study have an implication for social work education that the advantages and disadvantages of internet should be part of academic curriculums starting from early grade schools. So that, students will have conscious understanding of internet service and be capable to protect themselves from internet addiction when they go to universities. Findings also implicate that, universities should have to provide a standardized safe internet use and harmonization training to early alarm their students at freshman year before they start to develop internet addiction behavior. Because it is discovered that students become more exposed to internet addiction at senior academic years.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored that absence of attractive recreational centers in the university, feelings of academic seniority, absence of close parental control, stress, gender insensitive social environment, and intense peer pressure from close friends, classmates and dorm mates are major drivers of Bahir Dar University students to internet addiction. Exposed by these conditions, students neglect their academic responsibilities and spent extended time on internet. As a result, it is clear that they will academically perform poor and get troubled in many parts of their personal life. These findings add to existing literature and contribute to broaden the limited knowledge and professional understandings of conditions exposing university students to internet addiction.



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