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School Research

Loughborough University

Professor Michael Wilson,

LONELINESS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Academic Institutions
Loughborough University: Prof Michael Wilson (PI), Dr Lyndsey Bakewell (RA)
University of Bath: Prof Julie Barnett (CI), Dr Konstantina Vasileiou (RA)
University of Exeter: Prof Manuela Barreto (CI), Dr Mark Atkinson (RA)
Northumbria University: Prof Shaun Lawson (CI), Ioannis Petridis (RA)
Northumbria University: Prof John Vines (CI), Kiel Long (RA)

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LIDA at a glance:

- Funded by the **ESRC** and the **Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl)** under the *Empathy and Trust In Communicating ONline* (EMoTICON) call
  - **Duration:** 3 years (Sep 2014 – Aug 2017)

- **Investigating how people (who find themselves temporarily isolated or disconnected from their close relations and families) experience loneliness, and the role that digital technologies might play in both amplifying and counteracting such experiences.**

Research Problem:

- Loneliness, isolation and lack of connectedness are important challenges with significant health-related implications.

- Academic focus has been primarily on **chronic forms** and mainly in older people, modern patterns of social and work life may elicit more **transient episodes of loneliness.**

LiDA's Objectives:

- To **understand experiences of episodes of loneliness and isolation** in people's daily life as **a result of important transitions**

- To **develop innovative digital interventions that will mitigate or attenuate episodes of loneliness**

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LiDA: Methodological Approach and Case Communities

Mixed Method Approach

Qualitative, quantitative, and experience-centred co-design methods bringing expertise from psychology, computer science, design, and creative and performing arts.

Case Communities:

Carers: Pilot interviewing phase with 7 carers indicated the significance of **three main themes** in the daily life of carers:
a)**Isolation;**
b)**Restriction,** and
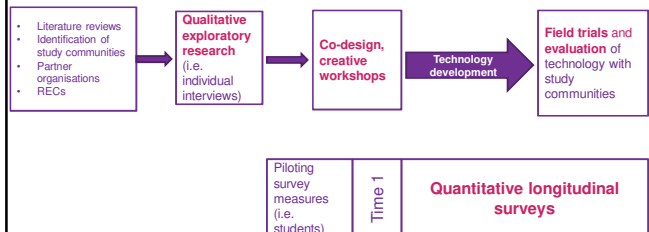c)**Constant preoccupation**

Students: When the separation is expected to have a **temporal character**, individuals may be **less likely to feel the need to invest in developing new long-term relationships** and may not seek help if loneliness is only a passing feeling

Lone Workers: In the UK there are **4.2 million home workers** (13.9% of those in employment and the highest number since 1998 when comparable information started to be recorded; Office for National Statistics, 2014) and around **1 million remote and mobile workers** (Bates & Huws, 2002).
Despite some benefits of tele-working, **there are negative emotional consequences, with loneliness and isolation being among the most serious challenges**

Additional work being completed with forced migrants and first time mothers

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LIDA Research Strategy

- Literature reviews
- Identification of study communities
- Partner organisations
- RECs

→ **Qualitative exploratory research** (i.e. individual interviews) → **Co-design, creative workshops** → **Technology development** → **Field trials and evaluation** of technology with study communities

Piloting survey measures (i.e. students) | Time 1 | **Quantitative longitudinal surveys**

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Research Phase I: Qualitative Exploratory Interviews

Purpose:

❖ To explore, through experiences of transient episodes of loneliness, social isolation or lack of connectedness

❖ To understand how people manage these experiences

❖ To identify what the implications of these management practices might be for the development of technological solutions

Interviews conducted:

➢ 14 Lone worker interviews:
- 13 men, one woman
- *Mean age* = 33 years (*SD* = 11, *Minimum age* = 20, *Maximum age* = 53)
- Nine participants were married and 5 were single or divorced
- All were using digital technologies (e.g. facebook, twitter, skype, facetime).
- Ten participants had had less than a year work experience in openreach at the time of the interview and four had been employed for more than a year (between 2-12 years).

➢ 16 Carer interviews:
- 11 women, 5 men
- *Mean age* = 63 (*min* = 24, *max* = 91; 12 participants ≥ 59 years)
- 8 spousal carers; 1 caring for partner; 4 for a parent; 3 for children
- 8 carers cared for someone with dementia; 5 for someone with a physical illness; 3 mothers (i.e. bipolar disorder; ADHD' & high functioning autism; 2 boys with additional needs)

➢ 15 Student interviews:
- Nine women and 6 men took part in the study.
- The average age of students was 21.7 years old (min = 18, max = 29).
- Nine students were undergraduates and the remaining 6 were postgraduates.
- All students were single except for one who was married.
- Seven were British and 8 were international students from various countries (i.e. Spain, Germany [2 students], Mexico, China, South Korea, Vietnam and India).

Lead Institution: University of Bath;
Prof Julie Barnett & Dr Konstantina Vasileiou

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Findings

Carers:
- **Caring and existing social ties: A relation of identification, amplification, continuity and conflict**
  - Despite the emotional and practical challenges of assuming caring responsibilities and the frustrations, sadness and agony experienced from facing the illness of a loved one, caring was seen by some participants as an inextricable element of a relationship that was being fundamentally grounded in love, reciprocity and devotion.
- **Caring: from restriction to opportunity for self-fulfilment**
  - The day-to-day reality of caring and the impact on participants' life was commonly characterised in negative terms.
- **Caring as responsibility: coping and agency**
  - Caring was often depicted as a responsibility that is owned by participants as a result of their initiative to assume this role and the prescriptions of pre-existing kin relationships.

Lone workers:
- **Initial period in the field**
  - A prevalent theme that emerged from the interviews concerned the challenges the engineers face when they first enter the field on their own after the period of formal training. Several participants commented on how difficult and stressful the initial period in the field was due to inexperience, limited knowledge and understanding of the network and the technical aspects of the job, as well as a lack of confidence around the decisions one needs to make.
- **Experiences of loneliness and isolation in field engineers**
  - Some participants recognised and admitted feelings of loneliness and isolation linked to their lone/remote work situation. For other engineers, this was not a problem and they even enjoyed working on their own.

Students:
- **Social relations oriented strategies: In quest of psychological closeness to others**
  - Contacting significant others, such as family members and close friends from the home environment, was a common strategy that students used to alleviate feelings of loneliness and homesickness.
- **Creating familiarity, structure, and perspective**
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