

## Scholar Report

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Title of Scholarship Project:	What is the role of social media communication in older people's lives and to what extent can it help mitigate loneliness?

This report chronicles my journey through summer 1 of my Laidlaw scholarship and my self-defined research project exploring social media communication and its impact on mitigating loneliness amongst older adults. I chose this topic for several reasons, firstly loneliness among older adults is a pressing societal issue, with about 15% of older adults reporting frequent loneliness - this number increasing to up to 45% in older adults over the age of 80 (Newman et al., 2019). I also hoped to make a meaningful change by bringing awareness to the issue and contributing to conversations on the topic.

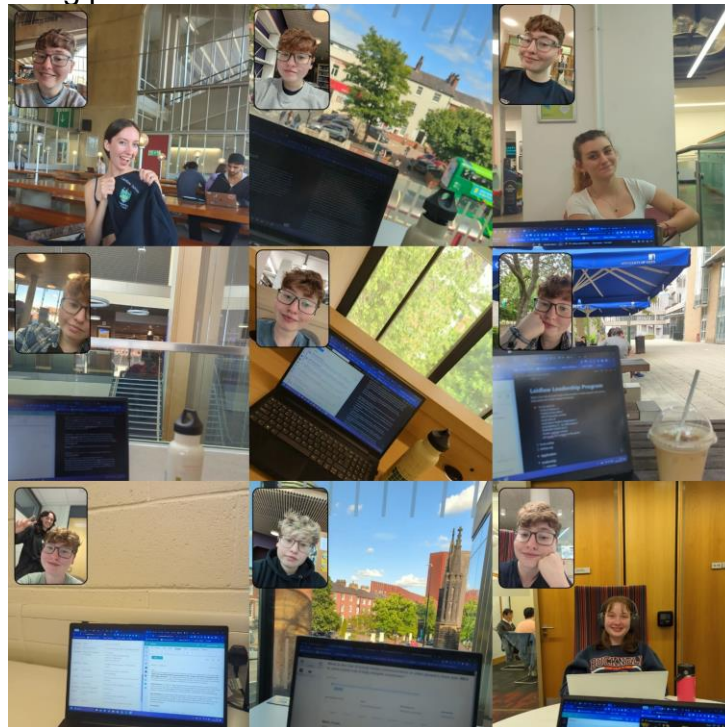
Furthermore, this topic was also interdisciplinary in nature which meant I was able to branch in psychology, sociology, and media theory. This was important to me as I wanted to broaden my research interests beyond what is covered in my degree (which is media and communications). The topic aligned with my academic interests and career interests, combining my passion for humanities, social sciences, technology, and research. In this report, I will discuss the research I conducted, its importance, the activities involved in disseminating my findings, the personal impact of conducting research, the leadership skills I acquired, and my future plans in academia and research.

### **The Research Process**

One of the first steps in the research process was getting a grasp on the existing literature on the topic. This involved a review of the academic articles and books on the topic of older adults and social media. Although there is certainly existing literature on most of it is extremely recent, with a notable increase during/after COVID-19 (largely attributed to an increase in social media and internet use due to the impact of lockdowns during the pandemic). The literature review process focuses on identifying key themes in existing research which I divided in my literature review, as well as exploring research gaps and challenges in the field. One of my main takeaways from the

literature, before I conducted my own primary research, was understanding the complexity of external factors impacting individual differences in social media use. There was a repeated recognition amongst research that socioeconomic, education level, age, and health are all major contributing factors as to whether someone will benefit from social media use. Although I was unable to address these factors in much detail in my survey (partly due to its smaller size but it was also designed for a different purpose) it is important to note for potential future research.

Another important aspect of the research was the application for ethical approval which also led to one of my biggest challenges in this process: timescales. Ethical approval took longer than expected, which forced me to adjust my research plan. This situation taught me the importance of flexibility and adaptability in research. I had to revise my timeline, extend the data collection period, and adjust my expectations while maintaining the integrity of the study. Also, the rigorous nature of the application, although time-consuming, led me to do more reading into the process of ethics in research. This information is undoubtedly useful, and I hope will give me a strong foundation for taking part in future research.



[As my research was survey based, I unfortunately don't have many exciting photos to share of me conducting it. But I do have a catalogue of BeReals from over the summer of me working on my project sometimes with my fellow scholars!]

The impact of Dr. Bethany Robertson, my supervisor, cannot be overstated during this challenging phase. Her guidance and support were instrumental in navigating these obstacles. Dr. Robertson's expertise and mentorship provided me with valuable insights into research methodologies and data analysis techniques. Her unwavering belief in my abilities encouraged me to keep going.

I conducted a qualitative survey aimed at gaining insights into how older adults use social media and its potential impact on their well-being. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions. The survey included open-ended questions that allowed participants to express their thoughts and feelings regarding social media usage. The aim of the survey was to focus on higher quality and longer responses to perform a thematic analysis, the findings of which would be disseminated through a short research report and a research poster.

Disseminating the survey was also a crucial part of the process as I wanted to try and ensure a variation in the sample, this meant being shared beyond my immediate circles as a researcher. One of the keyways this was done was through social media, and I am incredibly grateful for the support I got in this regard. Sharing the research on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn as well as via email. The support from those interested in the project was extremely helpful, with other researchers offering advice, sharing links and networks, as well as those who took part in the survey or shared it with their families. As much as the project was my own in design it was the involvement of others sharing it online which greatly helped the dissemination of the survey.

The final part of the research (before sharing the findings) was the thematic analysis of the data and the writing up! Despite being possibly the biggest section this one went the quickest, I think largely as I was left to do it independently at my own pace which I where I work strongest. We chose to do a thematic analysis partly as this was a qualitative study but also because of gaps identified in the literature. From the literature I read on the topic I learned that one of the major issues was how broad the topic is and how vary so much between each study (leading to a lot of inconclusiveness on the subject). Therefore, rather than trying to produce one answer or overall judgement, I decided to present a categorisation of the many potential answers to my question, in the form of the themes that were most discussed in the survey responses. This was extremely fun to do as I have never had the opportunity to use the thematic approach to analysis, so it was a new way of writing and reading. This helped my skills and taught me a lot about how we interpret data, especially in the humanities and social science field where very often there is no one true answer. It was also a grateful step back from just looking at theory (which is what I do most often at university) and looking at real-world responses to build up the evidence. In this process, I also learned a lot about data handling - going back to my now in-depth ethics knowledge - which is a very necessary step for security.

## **Leadership Development**

### *Leadership Residential 1: Headingley*

A part of the Laidlaw Scholarship which I believe helped me was the leadership training and development events. I, alongside my fellow scholars,

attended two residential focused on leadership. One of these residential was more challenging than the other but they were both infinitely rewarding (and eye-opening). Our first residential involved a two-day leadership-focused training conference that involved lots of group exercises, introspection, and laughter. It was also the first opportunity for the Uni of Leeds scholars to meet and it was definitely a great experience. We honestly covered too much in those two days to cover here succinctly but we covered skills like networking, management, and resilience in a series of workshops.



[The Laidlaw Scholars cohort together for the first time]

One piece of this first residential stuck with me in an unexpected way! First was our Quintax report, which if you are unfamiliar is a type of personality test (similar in appearance to MBTI) but focused on your leadership type, strengths, and weaknesses. Part of the reason I applied for Laidlaw in the first place is that even though I typically take on leadership roles, whether it is from group projects, managing trips with friends, to leading my school council back in sixth form, it is the role I seem to take. However, as a person, I typically prefer to work independently and can sometimes avoid teamwork as a result. My Quintax report very much reflected this outlook giving me the ILATV personality type, I will spare all the details, but the main points were introversion, adaptability, and an empathetic mindset to working. But the Quintax, and the sessions, taught me a lot about being a successful leader, and it is not just getting results or controlling a group, a lot of it is listening which **is** where my strengths lie. It was a little bit reassuring to hear that my strengths were just as important to leadership as confidence, extroversion and charisma can be.

I know everyone will approach leadership differently and I do not see the ways I differ in approach as weaknesses, but it addressed things I can work on. One of the main ones is my approach to deadlines and task management,

which I tried to implement over the course of this summer. One of my issues as someone who is very good at working independently can be my mindset on deadlines. When working alone it is easy to adjust deadlines as you see fit, but in a team, it cannot work that way and you need to take into consideration those around you. Although adaptability can be a great strength (and was very helpful when I did need to make many adjustments over the research project) it is also important to know when to stick to a structure.

Creating myself a 'timetable' to follow over the course of the summer research project with blocked-out working times that I follow each week was important to ensuring I met deadlines and did not work sporadically. Discipline in setting targets and meeting them was also necessary, to avoid work build-up and unnecessary stress, and although it was a tactic I had tried to use before it seemed to work better now, I understand the root of why I struggled to work structurally from my Quintax report. I never really put much merit into personality quizzes like the MBTI as they felt very reductionist, but I want to use something like Quintax as a starting point for some serious and needed introspection about my working style was needed, I hope to take this one further to my management of studying next year at university.

### *Leadership Residential 2: Selside*



[Ghyll Scrambling with my fellow scholars!]

Our second residential was much different from the comforts of our hotel-stay leadership training weekend as we ventured into the Yorkshire Dales. It was an entirely different challenge to our first residential but was no less fun. From climbing mountains to clambering through caves I feel like I have seen enough of Selside to last me half a lifetime. I will not deny that I am not a very outdoorsy person, so this residential was a challenge for me. This added to the fact we had no phone signal (I wish I could say I do not need my phone, but I absolutely am reliant on it) was a new test in mental and physical strength.



[Pen-y Ghent Mountain top, it doesn't do it justice how tall this was.]

One of the most memorable parts of the trip was scaling up Pen-y Ghent due to my phobia of heights. I felt genuinely nauseous most of the way up this mountain, especially since it was our last main activity of the trip - so many of us were almost sleep-deprived delirium, phone withdrawal, and fear. But I will grudgingly admit the relief and adrenaline of reaching the top was (almost) worth it. What truly made it though was the people, on every residential but especially up that mountain, I relied on the support of my fellow scholars and the Laidlaw staff. Mountain climbing remains not a strength of mine, but what was learned was resilience and leaning on others when you need to. A helping hand or encouraging word can truly go so far, and I was on the receiving end of that. I distinctly remember on the side of Pen-y Ghent, when I was resolutely trying to not look down and also not panic, I tried to encourage my fellow scholars to go ahead, since I was taking it slower, but they stuck by me and I didn't realise till I got to the top how sometimes being a leader is not always about giving someone a solution, but sometimes it is just being *there* with someone through the process.



[Completing Pen-y Ghent!]

One of the most significant rewards of this research program has been the friendships I have formed. Throughout the summer, I had the privilege of getting to know a diverse group of scholars who share a passion for research and learning. The camaraderie we built, the shared experiences, and the mutual support have created a strong bond among us. I am excited about the prospect of continuing our journey together over the next year and beyond, and I am confident that these connections will be valuable throughout my academic and professional life. I truly cannot understate the connections that the Laidlaw program has given me, not just amongst my cohort but also from attending events as a Laidlaw Scholar it has allowed me to meet so many brilliant new people.

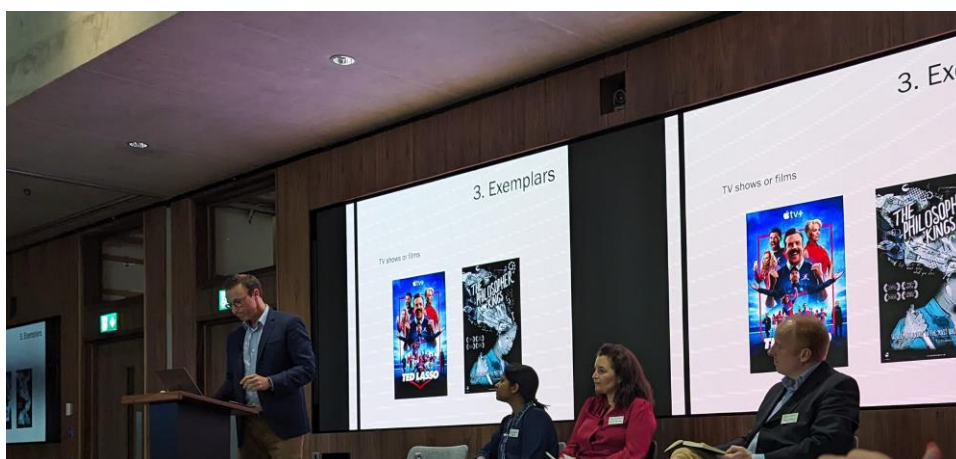
#### *Oxford Character Project*

Thanks to the Laidlaw program, I had the opportunity to attend a remarkable conference, the Oxford Character Project at Rhodes House, and I'm immensely grateful for it. The focus on skill development was evident throughout the event. We engaged with outstanding leaders from a range of areas, businesses, researchers and professionals in their fields. Stepping into a room filled with accomplished individuals was initially intimidating, but their warmth and kindness quickly made us feel welcome and it was an amazing two days of building my networking skills and learning everything about leadership. The conference was not just about networking, although we made the most of those opportunities. It also featured a series of thought-provoking plenaries and breakout sessions that explored various facets of leadership. Topics ranged from the essence of good leadership to the significance of balance, character, values, virtues of ethical leadership, and life economies.



[Drinks reception on day 1 of the conference with my fellow scholars and the Programme Leader at the University of Oxford]

One breakout session, titled "Next Generation Leadership," offered invaluable advice from individuals working on post-graduate programs at the University of Oxford. They emphasized the significance of discovering and adhering to one's values and encouraging personal growth through volunteering and experiences beyond academia. This advice gave me the confidence to pursue and look for volunteering opportunities this summer and now I volunteer bi-weekly at a local food bank in Leeds. It cemented a renewed vigour in wanting to improve myself outside of my grades or academics. I left the conference with a renewed sense of purpose and a commitment to developing my skills and character as a leader. The support of the Laidlaw program made this experience possible, and I am eager to apply these lessons in my future endeavours.



[A panel discussion at the conference]

## **The Future**

This research experience has solidified my passion for research and academia. I hope to continue the research I have conducted with Laidlaw in some capacity, and I am excited to see this research area continue to grow. It is my belief that research can drive positive change, and I am eager to be part of that process. In the future, my main aspiration is to pursue a PhD in the media field, focusing on digital spaces and continuing to work on the interdisciplinary links between sociology and media. I have a specific interest in algorithms and their impact on the content that we consume, I hope to look more into the policy and management of these algorithms in the future. I hope to continue to pursue academia and the Laidlaw program has helped me build up my skills, confidence, and connections towards this.

In summary, this research journey, with its leadership expeditions and networking experiences, has been transformative. It allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the research process, develop essential skills, and contribute to a meaningful area of study. I am excited to continue my leadership development, despite the breadth that was covered this summer I know there is only more to go in the next year. I am grateful for the support and guidance of my supervisor, Dr Bethany Robertson, and look forward to continuing my research and academic pursuits in the future. I also owe so many thanks to the Laidlaw staff who made this whole thing possible and the amazing support they have provided for us. This program has been life-changing already and so much of it should be credited to them.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to express my gratitude to the individuals and organizations that made this study possible. Firstly, my supervisor Dr Bethany Robertson who supported and helped me facilitate this project. She helped shape this project and give it much-needed direction, thank you for every piece of advice this summer. Thanks also must go to the Laidlaw Foundation and the Laidlaw team at the University of Leeds, Matt, Becky and everyone. You all supported me and my fellow scholars, giving us so many opportunities this summer. Special thanks go to the funding the Laidlaw Foundation Irvine Laidlaw has provided to make this research possible. To the participants, thank you for sharing your insights and time, which were invaluable to our research. I also want to appreciate the existing body of literature that informed my research and helped me discover my passion for the subject, allowing me to create this study from scratch! And finally, to my family, friends and fellow Laidlaw scholars, for listening to me talk about this project for half the summer, your support is very appreciated.

## **Additional Documents**

[Access to the research report, literature review and poster can be found here or on the Laidlaw Network.](#)

## **Supervisor Comments**

Sebastian has developed new skills in conducting social research including creating a research question, managing ethical approval, collecting data, conducting analysis and sampling. Specifically, he has gained an insight into the challenges and benefits of qualitative methodologies. To develop further, Sebastian could engage with further reading about the epistemologies behind choosing different methods to answer research questions. Preparing an application for ethical approval is an advanced skill (as in my School the Faculty Research Ethics Committee would not be experienced until PhD level) and crucial in avoiding harm to the researcher and participants.

Sebastian has demonstrated a variety of leadership attributes throughout the research process, such as adaptability and perseverance. Having initially agreed a timeline to complete the research, this was constantly subject to change due to delays by the institutional ethics process and amendments needed. During this time, Sebastian remained motivated to get ahead with other aspects of the research before gaining ethics approval, such as by conducting the literature review and designing the survey questions. This bodes well for Sebastian's future aspirations for PhD study, given it requires independent working and the ability to manage time and resources accordingly.

Sebastian also has shown strengths in active listening and communication in which he takes initiative to manage expectations and consider feedback from a supervisor but ultimately can make his own informed decision about how to proceed based on suggested improvements and his own reading around the issue. This has led to a thoughtful and proactive working relationship which would be beneficial for working as part of a team in future. Alongside this, an enthusiasm for the politics of algorithms, as well as curiosity and critical thinking around the social power of new media will hold him in good stead for making an academic contribution to understanding contemporary social issues in a digital age.

Signature of Scholar: Sebastian Glasper Date: 05/09/2023

Signature of Supervisor: Bethany Robertson Date: 06/09/2023