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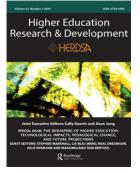
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Always on standby: acknowledging the psychosocial risk of our postdigital presence in online digital labour in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on our experiences as higher education workers and the changing work culture that has resulted in the move to online digital labour. The shift to online and remote teaching has had disastrous impacts on academics' ability to both pursue research, and maintain a work–life balance. Examined in this paper is an understanding of how online digital labour has created an ontological shift that has inexorably blurred the boundaries between home and work. We theorize how forms of psychosocial risk in the academy has been normalized in both an intensification of digital labour and in part, an entire sector transformation away from physical campuses. Through a nomenclature of 'postdigital presence' we discuss how there has been a fundamental change in how we experience academic work, and narrate how it has (re)formed our working worlds. As future projections, we situate notions of the Slow University and Quiet Quitting as counter hegemonic tactics for policy makers to consider, by reflecting on three 'interruptions' around Remote and Isolated work, Job Demands, and Digital Fatigue. We conclude that there is a need to engage in critical questioning around digital labour as an emergent social, anthropological and technological phenomena, not only for improved academic well-being, but also due to the financial risk to institutions of academics being always 'on standby'.

Introduction

In March 2020, Janine and Mark were thrust into remote and online work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Janine, a working mother, juggled virtual classrooms and home schooling while working from home. She embraced the flexibility but faced constant pressure to be available at all hours, leading to digital fatigue. Meanwhile, Mark, an experienced academic, retreated into silence as he grappled with overwhelming work demands and felt like a cog in a machine, monitored by the institution. Both Janine and Mark's stories highlighted the psychosocial risks of being 'always on standby' in

their postdigital presence. The digital integration brought complexities and disconnection to their lives, emphasizing the need for supportive policies and interventions to address the toll of digital labour on academics' well-being. Their narratives urge a re-evaluation of contemporary higher education workplaces, focusing on work–life balance, agency, and mitigating risks associated with psychosocial health. In this co-autoethnography, Janine and Mark's experiences emphasize the importance of balancing virtual and physical spaces, fostering supportive policies, and institutions providing mechanisms for academics to have more control over their workloads and environments. The challenges they faced shed light on the need for a compassionate approach to the complexities of modern academia in the digital era. While navigating interruptions, silences, and fatigue, their journey also offers opportunities for growth, resilience, and transformative change. Each narrative begins with an identifiable interruption or theme that forms the basis of the storyteller's experience. This interruption is explicitly related to the postdigital presence and its impact on academic work and well-being (Arantes, 2023). The storytellers, Janine and Mark, present their experiences as academics in a postdigital context, sharing personal anecdotes that shed light on the challenges they faced. Conceptually, the narratives are centred around three common themes: interruption of (1) remote and isolated work, (2) job demands, and (3) digital fatigue. These interruptions were chosen as they are relevant and coherent with the broader context of the psychosocial risks and challenges associated with our postdigital presence being always on standby. Methodologically, we, as the storytellers, combine our subjective experiences with theory, adding depth and meaning to our accounts. This approach is evident in the narratives as both Janine and Mark reflect on their lived experiences and relate them to broader socio-political issues in higher education.

Leave your body at the door.

Online digital labour has significantly transformed academic work, making technology a central aspect of higher education. Since 2020, the academic community has faced significant transformations due to technological advancements (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). This evolution not only affects knowledge dissemination but also necessitates social and psychological adjustments in response to online digital labour reshaping workplaces (Arantes, 2023). McGaughey et al. (2022) reported that 77.6% of the 370 Australian academics surveyed in 2020 experienced digital fatigue, characterized by feeling overwhelmed and emotionally fatigued from excessive technology use. McGaughey et al. (2022) emphasize the detrimental impact of the shift to online digital labour on academics' research and work–life balance, making us digitally exhausted as our lives increasingly become intertwined within a digital realm, shaped by technology and scientific reasoning (Arantes, 2022). This is significant as digital exhaustion is arguably a psychosocial risk in the workplace (Safework, 2022), and we need to be constantly updating workload models and policies to align with the digital era. Without addressing the implications of online digital labour we risk not supporting the psychosocial health of academic workers. As such, we argue that prioritizing staff welfare is essential for a transformed landscape of higher education, considering the intertwined nature of technology and work in the postdigital world.

Academic work involves the constant blurring of boundaries between home and work. Virtually all our interactions now revolve around technology, which has arguably led to increased forms of digital exhaustion in academia (McGaughey et al., 2022). As commercial technology's integration becomes essential in higher education (Watermeyer et al., 2021), there is a pressing need to as part of considering pedagogical issues, that we prioritize staff welfare to address the mental, emotional, and social toll of online digital labour. Uddin (2021) suggests that traditional working schedules, workplace environments, reward and incentive structures, workloads, and policies, struggle to effectively integrate the implications of digital technologies for staff. As such, the constant presence of technology (Ljungkvist & Moore, 2023), email communication, navigating virtual classrooms (Wood et al., 2023) and the utilization of digital applications on personal devices add fresh challenges and higher demands for academics, that Okeke-Uzodike and Gamede (2021) suggest are not adequately reflected in workload allocation and recognition mechanisms in higher education. Consequently, academics find themselves navigating the implications of the blurred line between work and personal life as the demands of digital labour extend beyond traditional workloads, expectations, and affordances. What follows are two academics' consideration of online digital labour and the associated fatigue discussed as a form of psychosocial risk.

Acknowledging psychosocial risk through co-autoethnography

Cohen et al. (2017) believe that co-autoethnography has been likened to transformative and emancipatory processes in its pursuit of situated understanding and Scott (2014) argues that a co-autoethnographic research is an appropriate method for exploring the practice of educational practitioners. To collect and collate our lived experiences, we began with a thoughtful and systematic co-auto-ethnographic approach to gather rich, personal accounts that reflect our experiences and perspectives. We started by defining the research objectives (Ellis & Bochner, 2006), around the notion of digital exhaustion and considered questions that allowed for critical inquiry into the ever-expanding presence of digital technologies in our working lives. We began with the conceptual prism of thinking through human-technology relations in a post COVID climate of digital overload (Lupton, 2020), and identified themes such as Zoom fatigue and information overload as key constructs. With the co-autoethnographic approach determining the scope of the study and specific topics or themes to explore, we identified our firsthand experience and knowledge related to this research focus (Ellis & Bochner, 2006) and drew reflexively on our shared experiences to provide prompts for our written narratives (Diekelmann, 2001). We analysed our collected narratives iteratively, looking for recurring themes, patterns, and connections to broader contexts, such as the work of McGaughey et al. (2022), who found that work intensification has occurred as a direct consequence of online transitioning. Ellis and Bochner (2006) suggest that co-autoethnography catches passions, feelings, and struggles with ideas grounded in the personal experiences of their author. As such, co-autoethnography has significant connections to critical reflection, empowering academic voice, and the connections between intersectionality and social justice. What follows is consideration of how we have come to understand our working lives as part of the academe, and the commercialized technological impacts and implications for academics' time.

Our postdigital presence makes us always on standby

Postdigital presence refers to the seamless integration of digital technology into various aspects of our lives, blurring the lines between the physical and digital realms. This concept recognizes the normalization and pervasiveness of digital technology's impact on how we perceive the world and connect with others (Gourlay, 2023). In the postdigital era, technology ceases to be a mere external tool; instead, it becomes an intrinsic part of our workplace, which according to Hill (2003) has led to feelings of estrangement, as well as uncertainty, reduced efficiency, isolation, and inadequate support (Vicars & Pelosi, 2020). As workers in the postdigital landscape, we find ourselves engaged in acts of 'digital ventriloquism', navigating the complexities of being 'present online' while balancing various responsibilities. Constantly caught in the 'inbetween', we juggle work and personal life through digital means, perpetually in a state of transition and liminality (MacLure, 2010). This postdigital existence positions us somewhere between online labour recognized in workloads and a sense of discomfort in our personal lives. Our current state of being post digitally present has significant implications, especially concerning psychosocial risks and digital fatigue (SafeWork Australia, n.d; McGaughey et al., 2022). As the landscape of higher education evolves with technology, it is essential to strike a balance between the benefits and drawbacks of online digital labour, ensuring the well-being and productivity of academic workers in this dynamic digital age.

Our postdigital presence places us in a constant state of being 'always on standby', where digital technology is deeply integrated into our working conditions and personal lives. This integration goes beyond mere tool usage and encompasses a deeper understanding of how online labour shapes our experiences and relationships. Arguably McGaughey et al. (2022) predict a 'great resignation' among academics as a result. Our postdigital existence blurs the lines between physical and online work (Wardak et al., 2022), affecting academics worldwide as technology seamlessly integrates into their lives, leading to emotional and social strain (Uddin, 2021). However, the recognition and mitigation of mental health and well-being risks in higher education whilst we are always on standby are yet to be fully acknowledged in workload, processes, and policies. Littlejohn (2023) notes how working from home brings together multiple roles and responsibilities, prompting us to consider the future of higher education and our nuanced presence in digital spaces, and Peseta (2017) emphasizes caring for well-being and academic work, exercising control over speed and intensity. However, the fluidity between physical and digital realms and meaningful interactions as quantified and recognized in our working schedule, the workplace environment, the reward and incentive structure, workloads, and policies is yet to be considered as a crucial association with psychosocial risk.

The normalization of working from home (notably not for a full day, but on our personal devices, watching TV for example) also leads to constant surveillance and monitoring. Technology enables continuous online communication and increases the perception of always being available and connected; but also when you are connected and working. This state of never fully being disconnected and constantly monitored causes constant tensions that require the academic to set clear boundaries and expectations around working hours and locations. We do not see the workplace 'locking the doors of the office' (metaphorically restricting access to work emails) to prevent ongoing hours of

work past those that academics are paid to complete. It is commercially more profitable to leave 'the office doors unlocked'. We suggest that this can result in technologically induced unconsciousness and a lack of agency and control over our labour (Arantes, 2022). To disrupt a postdigital presence that is always on standby, and prompt critical reflection, we need interruptions that shock us out of the frenetic paralysis of digital labour. While we sense the ways our employers modulate our actions and perceive that 'someone else, external to yourself, is like a puppeteer, guiding your behaviours and restricting your movements' (Arantes, 2022, p. 340), we look for the critical presence of interruption. Through interruption, we can confront the discomfort we experience in our virtual embodiment to elucidate our lived experiences with digital technologies.

Interruptions

The critical presence of interruption can help us to illustrate how digital technologies are created and experienced. Interruption here, refers to the significant impact and importance of interrupting our digital labour in higher education through reflection, reevaluation, and redirection of attention. Interruption challenges established norms, assumptions, and routines to bring about new perspectives or insights. In this paper, we use a series of 'interruptions' to disturb our thinking around our postdigital presence to situate notions of the Slow University (O'Neill, 2014) and Quiet Quitting (Formica & Sfodera, 2022) as a counter hegemonic tactic to the psychosocial risks associated with the pervasive presence of digital technologies at work.

What follows is an academic exploration by two educators who reflect on their virtual environments and the associated psychosocial risks at work. They delve into three interruptions, examining how their postdigital presence is embodied and performed.

Interruption 1: Remote and isolated work

Noise (Janine)
Prior to working in Higher Education, I was a K-12 teacher, and remain keen to work with people face-to-face. I started my PhD and the shift into Higher Education in 2017, and finished my final thesis write up during the COVID19 lockdowns in Melbourne, Australia. In 2020, I found myself sitting in a darkened house at 1 am, typing the final chapter of my PhD. As a mum of two, a working academic and PhD candidate, when the Melbourne lockdowns hit, I found myself negotiating virtual environments that both helped and hindered the nature of my lived experiences. On one hand, I felt safe and able to care for our children. On the other, I could maintain work due to Zoom-created virtual environments. Work and caring duties were now shaped and mediated by virtual environments. Kids would bring a bean bag to my desk, and sleep next to me, while I ran online classes or marked assessments – new social arrangements changed relationships and the ways we interacted (Littlejohn, 2023).

I never disconnected, because the work expectations I had placed on myself required me to work long hours or without enough breaks. This self-imposed sense of being technologically comatose was, perhaps (or perhaps not) a 'choice' but ultimately welcomed me into a pool of students and academics globally sharing similar lived experiences (Jandrić et al., 2020). The 'nightshift' became the norm for work; the 'day shift'

the norm for home. I found myself waking at 11pm and working until 6am on my PhD, then making breakfast and engaging with my family. Off to work by walking the 2m to my desk, I became wedged between two children for 6 hours while running meetings and classes on Zoom. My children's virtual world on Microsoft Teams, and my husband in another room, writing, working and meeting through a variety of platforms including Slack. Digital labour cannot be separated from physical labour – they meld together into my postdigital presence. All four of us connected physically in the one space, but disconnected through these virtual environments. The moment a meeting would end, I would home school, support my children learning. It was loud. Constantly buzzing and moving, never silent. We did English, Maths and Physical Education videos.

The days were different, tiring, challenging. But, I do look back on them with content. Perhaps because I had the privilege of having a supportive family, a safe home, food, and my needs met. I loved the extra time with my family, and had the physical and mental capacity to continue this juggle for a good month. For just over 4 weeks, I would end this mixed day of home school, working, counselling, cooking, and cleaning around 3 pm, when I would go to bed. Sleep from 3pm to 11pm, with earbuds and eye covers to encase myself in silence. Then the next day – and the day after it was the same. I didn't *have to* do this, but I *wanted to* do it. These virtual worlds allowed me to make the pandemic as *normal* as possible for my children.

Silence (Mark)

As I encounter and rencounter the rolling out change of policy and procedure, rage has turned to disbelief. I am keenly aware of the costly consequences when those discourses are disrupted. As I contemplate the amount of additional work that was being asked of me in a turnaround of one month, I am stuck in the uncertainty as to what I am going to do and I struggle to control the rising panic in my voice, and I endeavour not to sound defensive. Faced with what felt like an insurmountable challenge I retreat. Subsiding into isolation, I withdraw to spend protracted amounts of time working through task after task after task and as I sit day after day and night after night in the room that I converted to a study I light another cigarette and I draw deeply, pulling the nicotine-laced smoke deep into my already kippered lungs. The yellowing surface of my computer monitor became increasingly tarnished by numerous nocturnal sessions reconstituted by this never-ending digital labour.

Interruption 2: Job demands

Never stop, keep going – they know when you do (Janine)

I began working fulltime in a teaching intensive role during the COVID19 pandemic. Online and remote, I worked in, with and through virtual environments, exposed to the dynamic of being 'present' through a screen. As I bid farewell to my PhD journey, a new chapter unfolded—a unique rhythm that embraced the night shift. With the completion of my doctoral thesis, I found myself diving into work at the crack of dawn, around 4–5am each morning. Why? To ensure that I could always be there for my children as they embarked on their school day and when they returned home. This helped to alleviate feelings of guilt associated with working while home schooling (Littlejohn,

2023). However, this choice came with its own set of twangs. The fear of sending early morning emails and receiving surprised remarks like 'Wow, you were up early!' lingered in the back of my mind. Yet, this was just one aspect of the intricate dance of staying connected—both with my family's daily lives and the demands of work, these days were exciting, and full of energy. The juggle, although disconnected from people physically, still allowed me to talk, speak, see, and engage with others. I found myself working better than I had ever before.

However, I wonder if I was actually experiencing what Beck (2017) calls – 'time burdens'. Being pulled in various directions simultaneously, resulting from the conflicting and contradictory obligations during a particular moment. These competing demands, according to Wacjman (2014), perhaps should have flagged that there was in fact an urgency for me to decelerate, or risk being exposed to a compressed experience of time. Efficient, productive, and connected to new ways of thinking and work, whilst also absent, tired, and disconnected due to compressed time, was this really healthy work/life balance? The speed at which I returned emails, and student work, through to the quantity of papers I wrote all compressed into what can be referred to as work intensification (Creagh et al., 2023). All of which were interconnected processes that subjected me to monitoring and accountability through quantifiable means.

While my line manager was not directly keeping track of my work, and I can't 'see' a human watching over me, I get sent a Microsoft Viva record weekly. This record shows me when I logged on, and when I sent emails outside of work hours. Unaware of any policy that says email should not be sent outside of work hours, I remain aware of the ways I am being monitored; who I engaged with the most and whether I was sending emails during meetings. I am being monitored for each keystroke, Zoom meeting, and email I make – I am in a Virtual Panopticon, that not only my employer has access to, but so does Zoom, Microsoft, and the myriad of apps and platforms I use. I fear that if I stop, I will have that on my 'record'. But if I keep going, I will be weirdly acknowledged somewhere, somehow. This quantification of my labour, intangible and normalized, was and remains disconcerting.

Go and lie down, take a break, it's alright you can spare the time (Mark)

Drawing on Heidegger's (1958) concept of Sous Rature, 'a crossing out of a word [that] signifies a particular signifier is not wholly suitable for the concept it represents, but must be used as the constraints of our language offer nothing better' (Sarup, 1993, p. 33), scaffolds the rescripting of concept of ~~academic well-being~~. Jasper (2023) has suggested that:

> Currently, there is no universally established definition of what constitutes social wellbeing. However, many researchers, policymakers, and analysts have put forward various ways to think about social wellbeing and even ways to measure it. Unlike other terms used in policymaking, there is no strong push to establish a definition for the term once and for all though. Much of the credible literature on the subject makes note that the ways in which we think about social wellbeing depend on the communities we are in and what is important to us as individuals. But social wellbeing doesn't just depend on *having* relationships. It also depends on the quality of the relationships that we have.

Made an appointment with the doctor. Perhaps I am not well, I don't feel well. I am tired. I can feel it coming on again. Haven't eaten for two days now – not interested – not even

hungry anymore. Go and lie down. I know all too well how as a Queer man bodies can hold stories of abjection, shame, anger, pain, denial, and erasure.

Social isolation = Anxiety and depression = Stigma and Shame = Immuno-Suppression = Dis/ease; Illness (mental and physical) make bodies visible and once seen as lacking, or deficient, can never be forgotten and are placed under surveillance becoming subject(s) to a polymorphous stigmatizing vernacular: Thinking with and through these interpolations embedded in flesh, blood and bone …

> I am afraid, because … In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear- fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgement, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. (Lorde, 1984, p. 42)

De Beauvoir (1996) has noted how 'one can never know oneself but only narrate oneself' (p. 11) and as I speak back to the normalcy of postdigital disciplinarity that governs my everyday academic labour, I situate psychosocial risk as a prism through which to re-examine concepts such as my wellness, belonging, being and becoming. Our narratives are, I suggest, more than mere contemporary cautionary tales, they are a social critique of the affects of postdigital materialist practices with/in the spaces, places and structures of quotidian thought and action.

Interruption 3: Digital fatigue

6 Hours of zoom (Janine)

The notion of digital fatigue or the impact of plenty of screen time, and social isolation, seems to have implications that vary from person to person. Some people I speak with are simply over online Zoom meetings and video calls, whereas others have barely experienced a shift in their day-to-day way of thinking. I am the latter. I completed my PhD by distance. I work from home. I like it this way. I am decisively more productive, and the virtual world enables me a work/life balance that is so much more attuned than when I travelled into work. I don't feel burdening loneliness or tiredness from working online. I really enjoyed it. But, I am well aware that this may be because I am new to this gig, being an Early Career Researcher. The research is at odds with my experiences. De Carlo et al. (2019, p. 6) argue that 'workload, in terms of both the amount of work to be done in a given time (i.e., quantitative workload) and the difficulty or complexity of the job (i.e., qualitative workload), may play a central role in the onset of work-family conflict in teachers.' Perhaps my thermostat for digital fatigue is still yet to be reached. Working from home means that when I am time poor at work, I have to be very clear about the time or lack thereof I allocate to my family. I also have to be very clear about the time the institution provides me to do my work. Given the increased intensity of work, I have found myself resorting to different forms of routinization and streamlining as a way to manage the time to do my work. The intensified work is manifested as a need to juggle numerous conflicting responsibilities throughout the day, which appears to be a sector-wide issue.

Institutional fatigue (Mark)

Bullough (1998) has suggested how:

> Teachers teach themselves; they testify … through … story and its plot, to make sense of ongoing experience. They serve as the basis for acting in the classroom and elsewhere

I have come to acknowledge how increasing moments of institutional emplotment of my voice relates to Beckett's urging:

> you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know in the silence you don't know. (Beckett, 1997, p. 418)

I wait … and in the silence, the flow of experience of living with shame that I am not adaptable enough as an academic circumnavigates bone, muscle and connective tissue. I cannot keep up with the pace required of me by the university and feel that I am falling behind in my attempt to bend to a logic of practice of the cannibalistic neoliberal narrative (Kress & Lake, 2019). A narrative that has the contemporary academic worker dwelling in a constant combative state, not only pitted against colleagues but also pitted against oneself. The imperative to do more, be more, give more is beyond anything Kafka could have invented. I am somewhat perplexed as to what is going on and to what extent I am measuring up as I write, teach, supervise, and repeat; I am on repeat throughout this year and I can already visualize the next year stretching ahead with more of the same. I find myself grimacing and picking up the phone to phone a friend … I need to talk this out and hours later I am exhausted by the process of continual negotiations in conforming to the regulatory ideal and negotiating a field of practice that legitimates prescribed ways of knowing in a postdigital position. I am only too aware of how my significance in the postdigital university is being grafted out of the necessary fiction of my academic self.

Future projections and concluding remarks: the slow university and quiet quitting as a counter-hegemonic tactic

With our critical encounters providing interruptions to the normalized forms of digital labour in Higher Education, we now turn our attention to future projects and think through how we might apply counter hegemonic tactics. We consider the Slow University (O'Neill, 2014) and Quiet Quitting (Formica & Sfodera, 2022) and how we have used them in our working worlds, to reflect on the implications of the pervasive presence of digital technologies at work, and how technology contributes to the changing contexts associated with psychosocial risks of digital labour. Our reflection presents a space for a critique and interrogation into the personal/professional experience of educational systems (Vicars, 2018) and reveals ways we may become prepared for the ongoing reshaping of experience working within the context of Higher Education.

The Slow University is a concept that challenges the fast-paced, productivity-driven culture often associated with higher education institutions. Any discussion about Slow University essentially comes down to advocating for a reasonable work–life balance and the establishment of specific working hours. It is not about slowing down the pace in order to enhance the overall quality of the experience for both faculty and students, nor is it about 'designated working hours'. The term 'designated working hours' can evoke anxiety among academics who highly value their freedom to think independently and make their own decisions regarding what constitutes quality. It emphasizes the importance of autonomy. Designated working hours and slowing down the pace

are perilously close to being seen as 'imposed working hours' based on 'sound economic rationalities', which is often contrary to the expectations of most academics when they embarked on their careers. So, we do not push for a single dominant ideology, rather draw on it to consider social processes and practices.

Martell (2016) has called for academics to consider the social processes behind the increased pace of labour in higher education to promote a deeper engagement with knowledge, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and meaningful connections within the academic community. According to O'Neill (2014), the Slow University considers the structures and infrastructures of work and its governance as more than mere individual choice. The Slow University advocates for a more mindful and sustainable approach to learning, research, and academic life; one that responds to a need to mitigate risk with psychosocial risks in the workplace. Janine's experience in the 'Noise' narrative showcases the dual nature of virtual environments, which both aided and hindered her work and caregiving responsibilities during COVID-19 lockdowns (Littlejohn, 2023). This interruption aligns with the Slow University concept, advocating for a mindful and sustainable approach to academic life (O'Neill, 2014) to mitigate risks to her psychosocial well-being. Through this lens, we must, however, accept that we are 'comatose' to the digital labour we endure (Arantes, 2022); unconscious and unable to wake ourselves out of a coma that makes us think that the dual nature of work is beneficial to our psychosocial health. Janine's 'Never stop, keep going – they know when you do' narrative makes clear that she faced intensified job demands and the pressure to be constantly connected in the virtual environment, even during non-traditional work hours.

If psychosocial risk is part of legislation (Safework, 2022), shouldn't we reshape our thinking around Higher Education and the burden of 'setting clear boundaries'? Rather than being 'always on standby', shouldn't we consciously enact a demarcation between personal and professional hours. Mark's 'Institutional Fatigue' interruption demonstrates that there is associated mental and physical harm with our postdigital presence being always on standby. In Mark's narrative we see evidence of emotional and physical exhaustion in facing the demands of his academic work. To mitigate this risk, couldn't our workplaces remove the sense of needing to reply to the multitudes of emails 'now', through clear guidelines and policy to protect our working hours? Or perhaps look into the number of emails sent and received, or when they are sent and received to understand whose workload is not representative of the work being completed? Through this interruption, we see that the burden of mitigating psychosocial risk in policy and legislation around workplace safety (SafeWork, n.d.) must be placed firmly on the institution. It is the institution that must mitigate workplace risk of psychosocial hazards as part of academics' working conditions or risk academics becoming silent, to cope with the overwhelming demands and challenges in the academic setting.

The significance of a mitigation strategy is emphasized in the 'Silence' narrative that depicts Mark's approach to increasing job demands, that led to burnout and feelings of inadequacy. His experience relates to the notion of Quiet Quitting, where academics disengage from their work without expressing dissatisfaction overtly (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). This interruption forces us to acknowledge that the burden of mitigating risk should not lie squarely with the academic, particularly as the institution is armed with sufficient data from the constant surveillance and monitoring of our postdigital presence to enact guidelines around practice, and also to evaluate the extent to which their guidelines are effective.

Quiet quitting is driven by various factors, such as burnout, job dissatisfaction, lack of recognition or growth opportunities, and a sense of futility – all of which are considered to be psychosocial risks that the institution is arguably legislated to mitigate against (Safework, 2022). To explain, the third narrative, '6 Hours of Zoom', explored Janine's experience with digital fatigue. If we consider this narrative collectively for early career academics, it points towards a need to consider these interruptions as part of a process of re-evaluating academic workload and workplace practices. For example, embracing the Slow University approach could lead to a healthier work–life balance. Further, a Slow University has capacity to foster critical thinking, creativity, and deeper subject engagement, a set of skills increasingly important with the advent of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI). To mitigate against Quiet Quitting tendencies (Formica & Sfodera, 2022; O'Neill, 2014) at a time when 'trends' associated with GenAI and other technologies constitute novel forms of labour for academics (Arantes, 2023), any disconnection in terms of autonomy and professionalization, through '6 Hours of Zoom' for example, should be seen as a financial risk to the institution. As such, a practical suggestion lies in the need to risk assess Quiet Quitting, while building business models around the Slow University serve as counter-hegemonic tactics in higher education. Quiet Quitting is a concerning phenomenon that many academics understand but institutions rarely acknowledge the financial impact of. As such, we point towards the notion that business models should consider the financial risks of Quiet Quitting compared to the benefits of a Slow University approach, as the burden and impacts associated will slowly begin to be evident in the bottom line of the institution. Where academics could unionize and collectively fight working conditions, it does not address the elephant in the room for institutions. Quiet quitting is a financial risk to the institution and mitigating psychosocial harm is a workplace expectation. For example, while mentorship and peer support networks can provide guidance and support to alleviate impacts of burnout, without careful consideration, the measure of success remains in publications and grants, not the prioritization of academic well-being that may prevent quiet quitting. Thus, although economic realities pose challenges, unless awareness that Quiet Quitting is an institutional level issue, the somewhat intangible financial burden for universities will not be considered a crucial part of any strategic plan. In sum, a comprehensive approach begins not with the academic engaging in mindfulness activities or better time management, it lies with institutions recognizing the pervasive issue of academic stress and acknowledging Quiet Quitting as a genuine concern to their budgets.

These narratives point towards a need to address digital tools and our online presence as a psychosocial risk that has financial risks for institutions, associated with digital labour. These interruptions make clear that it is crucial to support the well-being and productivity of academics in the digital age. The narratives offer valuable insights into the challenges posed by remote work, job demands, and digital fatigue in academia and it is by incorporating the principles of the Slow University and addressing the concept of Quiet Quitting (Formica & Sfodera, 2022; O'Neill, 2014) that institutions can foster a more sustainable and fulfilling academic environment for their faculty. Additionally, recognizing and mitigating the psychosocial risks associated with digital labour is imperative to ensure the overall need to mitigate psychosocial risk in the workplace (Safework, 2022) beyond the simple act of considering the well-being of academics in the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education. If quiet quitting persists within the

institution, it will inevitably lead to reduced productivity, diminished motivation, increased absenteeism, lower work quality, and decreased student satisfaction.

For us, the Slow University is associated with Quiet Quitting in some areas and not others. As Hunsinger and Senft (2013, 1) state, 'We do need time to think. We do need time to digest.' The emphasis on going above and beyond has diminished, giving way to a growing emphasis on workplace well-being and humanization (Chuang, 2022). What may be actionable recommendations? We want time not to provide increased productivity, but time to be human again. This is not only evident through our own thoughts and actions, but also through changes to policy and legislation around workplace mental health (SafeWork, n.d.) and the inevitable financial risk to the institution, as Chuang (2022) emphasizes, the significance of nurturing employees' human skills to ensure their success in the evolving digital work landscape is needed to mitigate the risk of mass resignations. As such, institutions need to recognize that while managing staff and engaging with students are integral aspects of the job, the excessive administrative tasks, expectations for data-informed practices, and the burdensome demands of data collection, analysis, and reporting in digital environments can be automated and are no longer considered innovative. Rather, a crucial aspect of innovating higher education lies in recognizing and addressing the psychosocial risks associated with our postdigital presence in online digital labour.

Disclosure statement

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