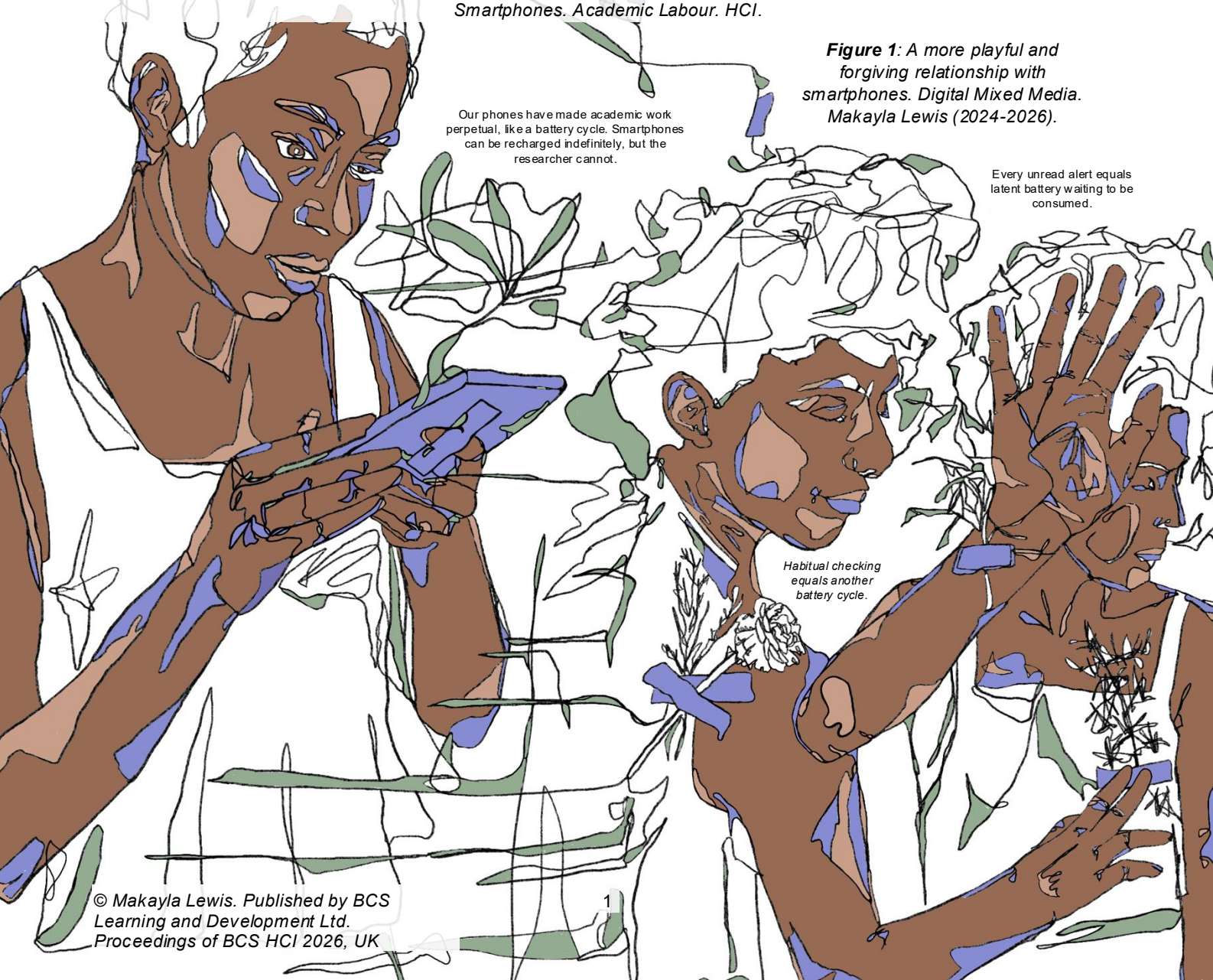
Playful and Forgiving Relationship with Smartphones: A First-Person Story of Academic Labour and Digital Dependency

Makayla Lewis
Kingston University London
United Kingdom
m.m.lewis@kingston.ac.uk

Smartphones are portable, always present, and facilitate persistent connections with people, information, and work. They transformed how we live and work, blurring the boundaries between personal and professional life. HCI academics are uniquely positioned as both creators and consumers of these technologies, contributing to an 'always-with', 'always-on', and 'always-connected' culture that can obscure their relationship to technology and academic labour. Although universities provide guidance on 'digital health' and work-life balance, contemporary academic smartphone use remains underexplored—this alt.britchi paper presents an autoethnographic account of a contemporary HCI researcher focusing on flexible working, FoMU (not FoMO), and forgiving intentions. It then invites the alt.britchi community to reflect on their smartphone battery—the question is not how long your phone lasts, but how long yours does—and how many recharge cycles you have left.

Smartphones. Academic Labour. HCI.

***Figure 1**: A more playful and forgiving relationship with smartphones. Digital Mixed Media. Makayla Lewis (2024-2026).*



© Makayla Lewis. Published by BCS Learning and Development Ltd.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gone are the days when mobiles (smartphones) were used solely for making calls and sending text messages. Today, smartphones are, as described by Dávideková (2016), "excellent small computers" that are portable, ever-present, and facilitate permanent connections with friends, family, colleagues, and professional networks due to various applications (apps). These apps support a range of activities, from entertainment and education to banking, shopping, health monitoring, and IoT device management. Consequently, smartphones are increasingly blurring the boundaries between our personal and professional identities, creating a culture of being 'always-with', 'always-on', and 'always connected', e.g. Mdhluli, N.I. (2025).

1.1. Personal and work life balance

Despite attempts to establish clear boundaries between work and personal life, our connected devices have reshaped how we live and work. Smartphones and wearables (e.g., smartwatches) have extended our digital presence beyond traditional working hours and physical workplaces, transforming expectations of accessibility and responsiveness.

While these devices offer significant benefits, they have also been associated with reduced productivity, increased stress, and adverse effects on workers' health and well-being (Lazar et al. 2006; Autor 2015; Hafner et al. 2015; Collins et al. 2019). The pervasive nature of digital connectivity raises important questions about how we negotiate the increasingly blurred boundaries between professional and personal life.

1.2. Lived experiences of HCI academics

Discussions on everyday smartphone usage (e.g., O'Kane, 2014; Almunawar et al., 2008; Hiley, 2022); technology use in the workplace (e.g., Lowe, 1997; Lazar, 2006; Collins, 2019), and digital well-being within the workplace (e.g., DWP, 2008; Aczel et al., 2021) are common, Whilst in academia, this often involves generalised challenges and balance management, as stated by Čingienė & Batuchina (2024), or places ownership on the employee through engagement with institutional policies, training, and best-practice recommendations, e.g., Derks, D. et al. (2014); Mdhluli, N.I. (2025). However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the lived experiences of academics working within Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and related technology disciplines. These academics occupy a unique position as both creators and consumers of digital technologies. They design, research, teach, and critically evaluate the many technologies that contribute to an 'always-with, always-on, and always-connected' culture. This can make it difficult to recognise or address their own relationships with technology and digital labour.

As one might describe in British vernacular, it is "not a bed of roses"; the realities of contemporary academic life are often more complex than institutional narratives suggest.

2. METHOD

This alt.britchi paper presents an autoethnographic account of an HCI researcher (Makayla Lewis) living with their smartphone in the United Kingdom between 1 Jan. 2022 and 1 Jul. 2026. It uses reflections-in-action (Beyer & Holtzblatt, 1999; Wall, 2008; Lucero et al., 2019; O'Kane, 2014), which were documented using their smartphone via notes, screenshots, photographs, and sketches (see figure 2). The data was analysed thematically, identifying three themes: flexible working (or working more), FoMU (not FoMO), and forgiving intentions.

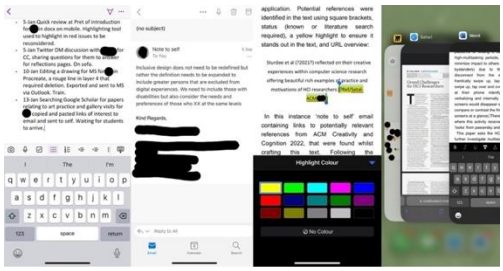


Figure 2: *Example screenshots of data collection.*

3. THE STORY

The story is told on Makayla's smartphone, with photos taken in situ. The photos are digitally edited to show different situations and emotions (see figures 3–5). Readers are encouraged to use a screen magnifier to engage with the figures and a screen reader to listen to AltText, as each figure has a supported AltNarrative (Lewis et al. 2022).

4. DISCUSSION

Smartphones have transformed academic labour in HCI from a series of discrete tasks into a continuous presence. Building on previous HCI work, this work suggests that contemporary academic smartphone use is itself a non-routine condition—one characterised by perpetual connectivity and invisible labour. Academic work is no longer confined by place or time; instead, smartphones mediate an 'always-with, always-on, and always-connected' relationship with research, teaching, and scholarly identity. This first-person story demonstrates that the consequences of this shift are not merely technological. While our smartphones afford flexibility and convenience, they also contribute to the erosion of boundaries between personal and work life. Rather than advocating for technological abstinence, I argue for a more playful and forgiving relationship with smartphones (see Figure 1). I invite the alt.britchi community is to reflect on their smartphone battery life for five minutes. The question is not how long your phone lasts, but how long yours does—and how many recharge cycles you have left.



Figure 3: *Flexible working (or working more). Digital Mixed Media. Makayla Lewis (2023-2026)*



Figure 4: *FoMU (not FoMO). Digital Mixed Media. Makayla Lewis (2023-2026)*



Figure 5: *Forgiving intentions. Digital Mixed Media. Makayla Lewis (2023-2026)*

REFERENCES

Aczel, B., Kovacs, M., Van Der Lippe, T. and Szaszi, B. (2021) 'Researchers working from home: Benefits and challenges', *PLoS ONE*, 16(3), p. e0249127.

Almunawar, M.N., Anshari, M., Susanto, H. and Chen, C.K. (2018) 'How people choose and use their Smartphones', in *Management Strategies and Technology Fluidity in the Asian Business Sector*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, pp. 235-252.

Autor, D.H. (2015) 'Why are there still so many jobs? The history and future of workplace automation', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 29(3), pp. 3-30.

Barber, L.K. and Santuzzi, A.M. (2015) 'Please respond ASAP: Workplace telepressure and employee recovery', *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 20(2), pp. 172–189.

Beyer, H. and Holtzblatt, K. (1999) 'Contextual design', *Interactions*, 6(1), pp. 32-42.

Čingienė, J. and Batuchina, A. (2024) 'Work-Nonwork boundaries in academia: A problematizing review', *Open Research Europe*, 4, p. 245.

Collins, E.I.M., Cox, A.L. and Wootton, R. (2019) 'Out of work, out of mind?: Smartphone use and work-life boundaries', in *Multigenerational Online Behavior and Media Use: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, pp. 963-974.

Dávideková, M. (2016) 'Digitalization of society: Smartphone–a threat', in *8th International Research Conference*.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (2008) *Working for a healthier tomorrow: work and health in Britain*. London: GOV.UK. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 27 July 2026).

Derks, D., van Duin, D., Tims, M. and Bakker, A.B. (2014) 'Smartphone use and work–home interference: The moderating role of social norms and employee work engagement', *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 88(1), pp. 155–177.

Hiley, C. (2022) *UK mobile phone statistics, 2022*. Available at: uswitch.com (Accessed: 27 July 2026).

Hafner, M., Van Stolk, C., Saunders, C.L., Krapels, J. and Baruch, B. (2015) *Health, wellbeing and productivity in the workplace: A Britain's Healthiest Company summary report*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

Aczel, B., Kovacs, M., Van Der Lippe, T. and Szaszi, B. (2021) 'Researchers working from home: Benefits and challenges', *PLoS ONE*, 16(3), p. e0249127.

Huusko, A. and Sivunen, A. (2025) 'Digital Balance, Digital Exhaustion, and the Complexities of Work-Related Connectivity Regulation', *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 62(2), pp. 228–258.

Lazar, J., Jones, A. and Shneiderman, B. (2006) 'Workplace user frustration with computers: An exploratory investigation of the causes and severity', *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 25(3), pp. 239-251.

Lewis, M., Sturdee, M., Miers, J., Davis, J.U. and Hoang, T. (2022) 'Exploring AltNarrative in HCI Imagery and Comics', in *Extended Abstracts of the 2022 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI EA '22)*. New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery, Article 7, pp. 1–13.

Lopez-Tovar, H., Charalambous, A. and Dowell, J. (2015) 'Managing smartphone interruptions through adaptive modes and modulation of notifications', in *Proceedings of the 20th International Conference on Intelligent User Interfaces*, pp. 296-299.

Lowe, G.S. (1997) 'Computers in the workplace', *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, 9(2), pp. 29-36.

Lucero, A. (2018) 'Living without a mobile phone: An autoethnography', in *Proceedings of the 2018 Designing Interactive Systems Conference*, pp. 765-776.

Lucero, A., Desjardins, A., Neustaedter, C., Höök, K., Hassenzahl, M. and Cecchinato, M.E. (2019) 'A sample of one: First-person research methods in HCI', in *Proceedings of the Designing Interactive Systems Conference 2019 Companion*, pp. 385-388.

Mdhluli, N.I. (2025) 'Perils of perpetual connectivity: Navigating the “always-on” culture in the modern workplace', *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 23, p. 3019.

Mueller, A.-L. and Gross, T. (2019) 'Notification Manager', in *Proceedings of Mensch und Computer 2019*, 53, pp. 605–610.

O'Kane, A.A., Rogers, Y. and Blandford, A.E. (2014) 'Gaining empathy for non-routine mobile device use through autoethnography', in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 987-990.

Ohly, S. and Bastin, L. (2023) 'Effects of task interruptions caused by notifications from communication applications on strain and performance', *Journal of Occupational Health*, 65(1), p. e12408.

Pierce, J. (2012) 'Undesigning technology: considering the negation of design by design', in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 957-966.

Rapp, A. (2018) 'Autoethnography in human-computer interaction: Theory and practice', in *New Directions in Third Wave Human-Computer Interaction: Vol. 2*. Cham: Springer, pp. 25-42.

Regan, T., Harris, B., Van Loon, M., Nanavaty, N., Schueler, J., Engler, S. and Fields, S.A. (2020) 'Does mindfulness reduce the effects of risk factors for problematic smartphone use? Comparing frequency of use versus self-reported addiction', *Addictive Behaviors*, 108, p. 106435.

Turner, L.D., Allen, S.M. and Whitaker, R.M. (2019) 'The influence of concurrent mobile notifications on individual responses', *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 132, pp. 70-80.

Wacks, Y. and Weinstein, A.M. (2021) 'Excessive smartphone use is associated with health problems in adolescents and young adults', *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, p. 762.

Wall, S. (2008) 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(1), pp. 38-53.

Wenyi, Y., Zongfang, T. and Shuangdai, J. (2024) 'Fear of Missing Out and Its Impact on Smartphone Addiction in Adults: The Mediating Role of Loneliness', *Theory and Practice of Psychological Counseling*, 6(9), pp. 656–665.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The story put forward is my lived experiences. However, I must acknowledge those surrounding me (co-authors): friends, family, colleagues, students, collaborators, passers-by, and pets as they have made my experience conducting research in the smartphone era what it is.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DISCLOSURE

This pictorial is an original work; Grammar.ly and Microsoft Word Writing Tools were utilised for copy-editing purposes only.

IMAGES COPYRIGHT STATEMENT

The images presented here are for viewing purposes only. They are not royalty-free images and may not be used for commercial or private use. Any such use of these images is strictly prohibited.

These images may not be copied, manipulated, reproduced by any other means, nor sold without prior written consent by Makayla Lewis (m.m.lewis@kingston.ac.uk)