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# 'I wish there was a f\*\*\* it app': creative strategies of digital un-use in family settings

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## ABSTRACT

Families creatively negotiate many different types of digitally mediated communication to do social family work – sometimes playfully and sometimes due to urgent need. This negotiation can manifest in numerous ways, reflecting the dynamic nature of modern family life. Such creative acts are performed across a multitude of interfaces and media forms and serve to maintain family intimacy and cohesion. In this study, we combine the concept of creative un-use with the study of family life and digital technology. We analyse in-depth interviews with Swedish extended family members who are curating, cutting, reducing, or modifying their uses to 'do family'. Our results show that these social and creative acts are constantly negotiated and shifting as new technologies are adopted and uses, norms, routines, habits, and expectations change. We show how acts of creative un-use, always oscillating between use and non-use, and as small or sometimes quirky they may be, are deeply entangled with family work and used as a means to support both within and between household family ties. The study finally explores what creative family appropriation of digital communication technology means for how these very systems are designed.

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Discontinued use; non-use; human-artefact (dis-)engagements; intergenerational digital communication



## 1. Introduction

The ubiquity of digital and social media has hit modern family lives at full speed. For many, information and communication technologies (ICT's) have become an indispensable part of simplifying everyday life and keeping family bonds strong – within as well as across households (Eklund and Sadowski 2023). HCI research has shown how smartphones and other digital communication technologies help family members to keep up with each other while being separated during school/work hours, how organising family gatherings can be coordinated in chat groups created specifically for that purpose, or how keeping up with distant grandparents has become much more vivid thanks to video-based chat (Eklund and Sadowski 2021). However, integrating ICTs into families' everyday lives means new (micro) tasks, new opportunities, and new troubles (Mikats, Kink-Hampersberger, and Oates-Indruchová 2021).

A key concern has been on how digital technology should be used within the home, exemplified by the 'screen time' debate about children's uses (Eklund and Bergmark 2013). For adults, public discussions have revolved around concepts such as digital detox, disconnection, or mindful use, oscillating between enthusiasm

and moral panic about the erosion of 'authentic' human communication, not unlike the ones that accompanied the advent of earlier mass media such as TV back in the days (Belville 1948). Research in HCI has turned to concepts such as non-use, digital disconnection, or un-use to conceptualise how current strategies, norms, and desires of disconnection have momentum and are used in various sectors of society (for an overview, see Ghita 2022). However, less is known about how these strategies are navigated in the specific context of intimate family life. Previous research has further indicated that the family is a particularly complex social setting with specific norms and values that govern technology use, un-use, or non-use (Eklund and Sadowski 2023).

While non-use studies are relatively established and explore the experiences of people who quit certain technologies completely or do not acquire them in the first place, Krischkowsky, Fuchsberger, and Tscheligi (2021) have suggested the addition of the category of un-use. We draw on un-use, which is, as they suggest, 'a complementary, yet distinct, analytical category in-between use and non-use'. As a sub-category of non-use, which names a complete absence, un-use emphasises 'the transitional capabilities of users to

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(dis-)engage with technology to various degrees over time'. In other words, what interests us about this concept is how it highlights the myriad of stages between complete, unquestionable use, and complete non-use.

Drawing on interview data from family members belonging to 18 households, collected in six extended Swedish families, we start to fill this gap. We explore the intricate ways in which un-use practices, as existing in-between use and non-use, are experienced in this specific social setting and how desires and norms of relational intimacy and interaction play a key part in shaping how technology is both used and not used. Key for the social setting of families' digital technology uses is an inherent conflict between *strong demands and desires on digital availability* of family members across households and simultaneous *desires for disconnection to support within household interaction*. The outcome of the study is an analysis of *creative un-use* where we highlight how creativity in this domain is not about grand innovation, but about the deliberate process of increasing the agency in everyday domestic life. We use agency in the broader sense as defined by Latour (1993), he defines agency as a fluid situational property, that is 'borrowed, delegated, anticipated, reticulated', based on the circumstances (Latour 2005). We conclude by drawing out what these creative un-use strategies imply for the design of ICTs for families.

We understand un-use and its transitional and ever-changing variants as creative practices. We thus talk about creative un-use. We draw on Eisler, Donnelly, and Montuori (2016) by arguing that creativity is not solely the work of creating artefacts by gifted individuals and groups, but also collaborative and relational effort manifested in everyday activities. Creativity is in this vein not about innovation, but rather about the process of intentionally exploring how to increase the space for action in everyday domestic life. In this we want to highlight creativity as a dimension of traditionally feminised household chores, to recognise that the work of navigating and circumventing technology in new ways to create desired family life is also creative; it is not passive or reactive but active appropriation. We see family as something people 'do' rather than 'are', a process as Morgan has called it (1996). In this, ICTs are part of the (micro) tasks, responsibilities, and potential troubles that this doing consists of.

We analyse how families curate their digital technology use, how they un-use, to creatively do family and maintain intimacy and cohesion, which constantly shifts as new technologies are adopted and routines change.

The aim of the study is thus to extend the notion of un-use as an individual practice (Krischkowsky, Fuchsberger, and Tscheligi 2021) towards exploring un-use as

a social, collective, and creative practice relevant in family settings. To present the results of our studies, we also frame them in terms of design sensitivities (Hindmarsh et al. 2005). Design sensitivities offer a way to highlight key considerations that should be considered when proposing alternative approaches to technology design. Rather than presenting insights as fixed requirements, design sensitivities draw attention to important dimensions and priorities in use, aspects that are often overlooked in shorter or more superficial studies. They also help surface complex nuances in user practices, helping to avoid oversimplification in the design process. Following Eisler, Donnelly, and Montuori (2016) and Mikats, Kink-Hampersberger, and Oates-Indruchová (2021), we wish to underline the creative dimension of family life by exploring how families engage in various forms of creative un-use. Thus, this study answers the question: what practices of creative un-use do Swedish families engage in, in order to both manage ICT use as well as family relations?

## 2. Related research

### 2.1. Families and ICT

Critical discussions about usage patterns and how they affect social life and social relationships have been *en vogue*. In the context of families, they are accompanied by worries or fears. One concern is that children, but also grown-ups, and particularly (young) parents, neglect their family for the sake of digital distractions (Garg 2021). One of the most cautious voices, Sherry Turkle, argues that a 'vicious circle' occurs:

Parents give their children phones. Children can't get their parent's attention away from their phones, so children take refuge in their own devices. Then, parents use their children's absorption with phones as permission to have their own phones out as much as they wish. (Turkle 2011)

Both screentime (see also Konca 2022) and rules that organise screentime in families (Duckert and Barkhuus 2021; Hiniker, Schoenebeck, and Kientz 2016) have been topics that receive much attention as many families struggle to draw and negotiate suitable lines between use and non-use, both for parents and children. Earlier research (Garg 2021; Garg and Sengupta 2019) has also investigated how families with varying backgrounds and cultures tend to value technology differently and thus putting emphasis on different aspects of technology use and restrictions.

Indeed, (self-imposed) screentime or other forms of disconnection are also a topic for grown-up family

members. These are some of the reasons why variations of non-use, technology pushback, and media refusal have become explicit practices. It is clear that technology use is debated, for example concerning reflections of overuse (Chowdhury and Bunt 2023), how technology is and is not improving the life situation (Kou et al. 2019; Nguyen et al. 2022), and how the mixed emotions towards smartphones show signs of our complex relationship towards them (Terzimehić, Aragon-Hahner, and Hussmann 2023).

These approaches reflect earlier work (Eklund and Sadowski 2021) which argued that it is important to pay attention to everyday family communication practices and the creative uses of technology that people engage in to construct and maintain family intimacy, both with those living close by and those far away. Seeing creativity as a collective and relational effort with gendered dimensions connected to power and work division in families allows us to see the intimate family work that previous studies have described, also as work that is creative (Mikats, Kink-Hampersberger, and Oates-Indruchová 2021). In their edited volume on Creative Families, Mikats, Kink-Hampersberger, and Oates-Indruchová (2021) stress that we should investigate the social, collaborative, and creative nature of how contemporary families draw on technologies in the making of family. That the acts of constant negotiation and shifting, as new technologies are adopted and uses, routines, habits, and expectations change, should be understood as social and creative.

## 2.2. On disconnection and non-use to un-use

Research in the vein of the dictum ‘Offline is the new luxury’ discusses how voluntary non-use or restricted use has become a widespread trend in many Western societies (Thorén et al. 2019). This approach, the non-use, is defined by abstaining from using technology as far as possible. Many tech abstainers argue that they curate their uses to minimise stress and refer to current trends such as mindfulness, digital hygiene, or (digital) minimalism, which are supposed to support psychological well-being and health (Garg 2021). Strategies include spatiotemporal restrictions, such as unplugging, using time-limiting apps (such as the app *freedom*, which blocks apps and websites according to self-determined schedules), getting rid of devices or replacing them with non-web-enabled devices (such as the minimalist mobile phone *Punkt*, Ghita 2022). The language used in this context – such as ‘detox’ or ‘freedom’ – suggests interpretations of current digital technology designs as enslaving and addictive. On a similar note, research concerning opportunities for professionals to

disconnect has shown the need for having professional strategies for maintaining a balance (see e.g. Bossio et al. 2024). ‘This research emphasises narratives around connection and disconnection as well as conversations about opportunities for collective changes. Other strands of research in this area draw attention towards disconnection as a critical stance towards the norms surrounding our relation to digital technologies today (see e.g. Albris et al. 2024). In this context, it is interesting that in recent years, scholars have explored the contexts and reasons why people abstain from using digital media (Baumer et al. 2015; Ghita 2022; Oudshoorn and Pinch 2005). In older literature, non-use did not refer to strategic avoidance of technology but referred more to people who had not (yet) adopted or received access to the internet or digital media (key word: digital divide), for example due to location and access (Ragnedda and Muschert 2013), age (Neves, Waycott, and Malta 2018), religious (Neriya-Ben Shahar 2017), or other reasons. Currently, research about non-use is more concerned with personal strategies and reasoning behind resisting technology and refraining from use, mainly concerning mobile technologies, ubiquitously present and accessible. Above this, non-use studies argue that digital abstinence and its reasons are similarly interesting to investigate as usage itself (Baumer et al. 2015; Kaun and Schwarzenegger 2014; Satchell and Dourish 2009). Furthermore, disconnection has particularly been discussed concerning social media (Light and Cassidy 2014). For example, quitting Facebook (Portwood-Stacer 2013) or in temporary ‘digital detox’ (Syvertsen 2017). Others have pointed out that it is not easy or sometimes even possible to define straightforward, binary discrimination between use and non-use, but that there is a range of behaviours, strategies, and levels of involvement (in the case of Facebook, Baumer et al. 2015).

As an addition to non-use studies, we find recent research on un-use a particularly apt point of departure for describing our participants’ relationship to technology. This term is used by e.g. Krischkowsky, Fuchsberger, and Tscheligi (2021) and refers to ‘reducing use towards lessened or non-use as technology un-use, emphasising the transitional capabilities of users to (dis-) engage with technology to various degrees over time’ (Krischkowsky, Fuchsberger, and Tscheligi 2021). Un-use describes the continuum between use and non-use. In that sense, un-use differs from non-use and more principled critical standpoints about the benefits of disconnecting from the digital society. The authors draw on Vardouli’s concept of making use ‘as an embodied and temporally contingent process—as a form of making’ (quoted in Krischkowsky, Fuchsberger,

and Tscheligi 2021). Un-use can be described as the practices involved in creating and maintaining a situation where technologies are less in focus, achieved both by physical arrangements and deliberate technological restrictions. In this way, un-use is a softer approach to refraining from using digital technology. The intention is less driven by principles and more about choosing what feels sensible or personally meaningful. In our analytical development of the concept, we argue that un-use is less about implementing a stricter discipline and, instead, more about life choices (Kou et al. 2019; Nguyen et al. 2022); how to live a meaningful life and what role technology should have in that life. It is about doing family in creative ways in and with technologies. Creativity in this context can be seen as a response to both a lack of structural arrangements and a push against existing arrangements in order to maintain agency and create a meaningful life.

### 3. Methods and materials

This study draws on interview data gathered in the research project ‘Social Relationships in the Network Society’ funded by the Swedish Research Council. The full project explored technology use for family cohesion of Swedish families living in Sweden (four family networks) and in the U.S (two family networks). Interviews took place mostly in people’s homes, (one took place at a café, one on the phone, and one at a participant’s place of work) in groups or with one participant at a time, depending on participants’ schedules and preferences.

**Table 1.** List of number of households and family members in those households.

Sampling location	List of the number of households and family members in those households.
Sweden, Rural area	Family 1: five households. One household with two adults and one child, one household with two grandparents, one household with one young adult, one household with two older grandparents, and one household with two adults and one small child. Family 2: 3 households. 2 adults in one household, two elderly grandparents in one, one family with two adults, only one took part in interview, and one small child in the last household.
US, Large city	Family 3, US, but extended family in Sweden: 2 households, two adults and two children in the US, one grandparent in Sweden. Family 4, US, but extended family in Sweden: 2 households, two adults and one child in the US, and one household with two grandparents <sup>a</sup> in Sweden.
Sweden, Large city	Family 5: three households. One household with two adults and two small children, one household with two grandparents, and one household with one younger adult. Family 6: three households. One household with two adults and three children, one with one grandparent, and one with two grandparents.

The interviews were in Swedish and lasted around 1 h. They were in-depth, open-structured (Hayes 2000) and concerned with family communication and technology use. A complimentary survey was handed out for an extended interview situation (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), to collect information about technology habits and demographics.

In total 39 people (aged 1–86) were present at the interviews. See Table 1 for a division on sampling location and family networks. 28 persons were officially contacted and agreed to be interviewed and eleven children were part of the families and parents talked about their children’s technology habits. Of the adults, 60% had a university degree or equivalent. Fifteen adults were working, eleven were retired, two women and one man were on parental leave, and one woman was a homemaker. Their professions were as diverse as a fast-food restaurant employee, lumber size controller, architect, and biomedicine analyst. All, except children below the age of 10, had their own phones and everyone had internet at home. In general, the Swedish family structure is characterised by a dual-earner, separate taxation system with high acceptance of alternative family forms e.g. cohabitation and relatively equal parenting opportunities for separated parents (Ohlsson-Wijk, Turunen, and Andersson 2017). In the EU commission’s Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) ranks Sweden 4th in the EU indicating high levels of digitisation in the society broadly. The Swedish context is thus one of relatively high gender equality in the family and high saturation of technology.

We reached participants through community representatives e.g. moderators of online community forums and the study was described as focusing on family communication and as interested in all types and sizes of families. Our only requirement for participation was that more than one generation would be interested in taking part. We applied a stratified quota sampling (Kothari 2009) with three predefined sampling locations: Swedish countryside, one of Sweden’s bigger cities, and a big city on the United States’ West Coast (with first-generation emigrated Swedish families). The goal was not to compare but to gain contested views and analytical depth by widening the range of informants. The US West Coast was chosen as it, due to the IT industry, hosts a large number of migrated Swedish families. The extended families of the US-based families were located both in Sweden and in the US at the time of the interviews. For an overview, see Table 1. Saturation for results was reached before all interviews were finished, yet we opted to complete the pre-defined sampling strategy rather than stopping the data gathering mid-study.

We transcribed interviews verbatim, the manual transcription performed by the interviewee took around 8–10 h per interview, then compared them for a first understanding of the sample. We focused on the informant's understanding of everyday life (Aspers 2006). Following a phenomenological approach, we first studied the life-world of the informants as they described it, using their own words. The dataset was then extensively and manually coded with an inductive approach using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 11). Coding focused on a wide variety of categories, initially defined in discussions but added to in the course of the coding phase: e.g. types of communication technology (e.g. SMS), relationships (e.g. siblings), family rituals (e.g. holidays), relationship to ICTs (e.g. frustration) *et cetera* with 59 coding categories and almost 2000 coded sections. While the interviews were held with usage patterns in mind, it was clear that family members regularly engaged in un-use practices. Un-use was thus an inductively arrived-at analytical category. Consequently, the data was coded again under special investigation of un-use and non-use practices, following common conventions of qualitative thematic coding (Saldaña 2009). Drawing on (1) the everyday understanding of the data from the perspective of the informants, (2) the inductive coding, and (3) the theoretical concept of creative un-use, we arrived at analytical categories which mapped out the creative un-use strategies family members engaged in.

### 3.1. Ethical considerations

The study adhered to the ethical regulations and recommendations from the Swedish Research Council and followed the Swedish law for research. The research did not fall under the Swedish law for research and as specified by the Swedish authority for regulating research (SFS 2003:460), The Swedish Ethical Review Board, it did not apply for ethical permission. Informants were thoroughly informed of their rights, for example that participation was voluntary or that they could quit and withdraw from the study at any time without citing a reason. They could interrupt interviews and choose which questions to answer, or not to. As some interviews took place in home environments, children were present during the interviews. They were not asked any direct questions, but they were not stopped from talking if they wished to speak to the interviewer or make comments.

This study is focused both on immediate families and extended families, and it was important to protect participants' anonymity, also *vis-à-vis* other family members. We have taken extra precautions when presenting

participants to make sure family members would not be able to distinguish who said what. We thus have not included a detailed participant list, and the demographic information on each participant linked to quotes is limited. Our intention is that family members should not be able to recognise each other or be able to guess which one in the extended family made a certain statement. This makes the family structures less transparent for the reader but it was an important choice for us not to breach the anonymity agreement with our participants.

## 4. Results: creative strategies of un-use in a family communication context

### 4.1. The family setting: navigating norms on availability and desires to disconnect

To contextualise strategies of un-use we will first start by presenting the social setting of families' digital technology uses. This setting is defined by *strong demands and desires on digital availability* of family members across households and simultaneous *desires for disconnection to support within household interaction*. This conflict lies the foundation for the creative un-use strategies we have identified.

When work time bleeds into family time and laptops move from offices onto kitchen tables, as Gregg (2011) put it, new strategies for arranging family life are negotiated.

Firstly, the family setting comes with strong norms on quality family time and social engagement with those one shares a household with. For example, the 36-year-old mother living in the city argues that it is crucial to actively create screen-free family moments, and to be a role model for children:

You are at a screen all the time, the whole day, communicating. As a project leader, I communicate really 190% all day, when I come [home] I just want to \*slumping in on herself, sighing\*. So I think we should put some effort into making sure that [her older daughter] and [her younger daughter] have the right forms of communication.

In other words, she is yearning for change and wants to try, not only for her own sake but also for her children. She wants to be a role model for them and manifest family routines and practices. Similarly, another interviewee states that they feel they or others 'are not really there': 'I get very annoyed when I am out having coffee with someone, and they start to talk on the phone with somebody else who does not seem important, it feels like: 'But we are here now!'

Secondly, central to how ICT was understood in the family context was the expectation from family

members, both within the same household and extended family living in their own households, to be available for interaction through digital devices. Self-reflexively, several interviewees diagnosed a ‘social nervousness’ (Man, large city family 1, 35 years old), caused by digital devices and fuelled by an actual or perceived obligation to take part in family chat groups; not taking part becomes a statement to others, signalling disinterest or discontentment. For example, this 27-year-old woman from a big city says that while it is okay for her to not answer and call back a few days later to acquaintances or colleagues, this would not be acceptable for family members or close friends. She says:

I cannot write to my friends or family, if I wrote this: ‘sorry for the late reply’, then they would be just like: ‘What did she do’, ‘What do you mean with sorry for the late reply, you are not at all sorry, just say where you have been’.

Not answering a call or message is not an easy decision in some family contexts, as it conflicts with norms about being available. Thus, for many of our participants, the question of how to achieve these ‘acceptable’ types or levels of communication in family settings remains a complex puzzle to solve, and here creative strategies of un-use are applied, as we will detail later in the text.

One linked point of importance for the family setting is how, similar to earlier research, participants identified strains on spillover effects between work and private life due to digital technology’s bridging qualities. Participants spoke of ‘spilling over’ of work life into private and family lives, and the other way around. Echoing earlier findings, what is thus most prominent in the interviews is that people complain about the increased merging of work life into private life and vice versa (Schier and Jurczyk 2008).

All in all, many reflect on and in some cases are critical towards contemporary technology’s omnipresence and the effect this has on family lives. Participants desire technology-free interaction with family members of the same household, yet simultaneously want to keep up strong and intimate ties to family members living in different households. This leads to a questioning of one’s own and others’ use of technology. One participant, a middle-aged man (57 years old) from the countryside, asks himself during an interview: ‘So you are reaching a certain limit, and still, I feel like I should be available. Should I be, all the time? This is a question we struggle with today; how available should we be?’ For the participants, it is not clear how to deal with this inherent conflict of availability and non-availability. Due to this, our participants apply different creative

strategies to un-use their devices to enhance a meaningful family based on their life situations.

#### **4.2. Strategies of skipping and utilising features: curating un-use**

We now turn to describing the creative un-use strategies which our participants employed to navigate the social setting we have described in the previous section. We begin with the everyday and seemingly straightforward; constantly curating use by skipping features.

In opposition to non-use and a complete abandonment or active refusal of the technology in question, creative forms of un-use are more selective, focusing on particular parts of technologies, certain applications, or particular affordances of devices. As a 55-year-old father living in the U.S. puts it:

I wish there was an app called ‘fuck it’ or the like, which you can press and turn off everything at once and get a little break, maybe for a quarter of an hour at work or something like that.

Even though many such apps and phone settings exist today, the man was not aware of them or wished for an even simpler way to disconnect. Or, considering his phrasing, a more straightforward or blunt way to temporarily and instantly disconnect. He would like to be able to rely on the device’s functionality to help him towards ‘a small break’. A 57-year-old man from the countryside has a different strategy:

Yes, and we do have WhatsApp, for when you want to send something. I have thought of it, many now have email on their smartphones, but not me [...] No, we do not want to, maybe. I think you would get stressed if it were so. You would be forced to check if you got any emails.

In other words, the informant made a conscious choice of preferring one smartphone application over the other: WhatsApp is for private, personal communication, and the email app is intrinsically related to work, and reading emails is something one can feel compelled to do. For him – and he is attempting to speak here for his wife as well and about how they want their home life to be (‘we don’t want to’) – the solution is as efficient as easy: He did not install the email application on his phone. In other words, he ignores the pre-installed apps that tend to merge various accounts (e.g. email) in one app in order to be able to designate applications for sole purposes of drawing demarcation lines between work and private life. Similarly, a younger woman from a big city (27 years old) explained that she sometimes would uninstall the e-mail app on her phone during her holiday while still being able to engage with

and enjoy all the other features on her phone, like social media and entertainment. In this way, participants are creative un-users, they increase the space for action available for them in everyday life by both using and not using at the same time. They want and need to use ICTs to be in contact with family, but also need to find a balance in being accessible and not.

Similarly, a 36-year-old mother living in the city describes how, when she was on parental leave (8 months per parent in Sweden currently), which is arguably a time rigidly dedicated to parenting, she had to find strategies to deal with the constant intrusion from her myriad WhatsApp groups:

I think it is bothersome with all these WhatsApp groups that I had, which only ‘pling pling pling’, I do not want to be distracted all the time, so I always have my phone on private mode. So I can hear it ring, but not see or hear an SMS or WhatsApp without actively going to the phone and looking at the screen.

While she is using different messaging services for communicating for private and personal purposes, the fact that the ‘pling’ of the different messaging services sounds, taken together, made it hard for her to achieve the home life she desired. Others also used these types of functionalities which involve using the devices’ standard functions, as expected e.g. turning them off by just using the on/off button, or utilising functions in the settings, such as aeroplane mode, silent modes, ‘do not disturb’, or turning off the volume. With the goal of supporting a home and family life that is free of various intrusions, whether work or private ones. They navigate norms and desires which both speak for and against technology in the family setting.

However, these strategies are not unproblematic when family calls, as in the example above where a young woman explains that she cannot simply choose not to answer when family calls. Limiting use and availability are easy, standard un-use strategies that nonetheless become difficult when looking at the family context, something we will now will explore more.

#### 4.2.1. Strategies of temporary un-use

In order to overcome the feeling of having to be online and available 24/7, people sometimes look for or create socially acceptable situations in which they have ‘little excuses’ to be unavailable. These gain a particular relevance in a family context where one is expected to be available. They create more or less ‘natural’ situations and contexts in which one is unavailable ‘by chance’, where the individual is not to blame. The previously quoted family father (43 years old, living in a big city), reports:

I also had periods in which my mobile was broken [...], and in such a case I am not quick in replacing it, so I can have a month in the summer where I am very hard to reach but this way I can shut off, it does not happen often but I turn it off sometimes at the weekends and I leave it, and it discharges when I just leave it laying down, it’s a smooth way to turn it off.

He has found several un-use strategies that function as an excuse to be unavailable: escape from all persons contacting him and letting him ‘off the hook’. Not replacing a broken phone straight away becomes a plausible excuse to be ‘off the grid’ for a month or so, preferably during vacation. The strategy of un-use here is a deliberate delay in buying a new phone, which he experiences as a socially acceptable way of being a non-user, however brief, and with no intention of it being permanent. Additionally, he is using what other people might describe as an annoyance – an empty phone battery – as a blessing in disguise: it is ‘a smooth way to turn it off’. Again, it is a socially acceptable reason for being unreachable by friends and family. A way of disconnecting by not acting; non-acting here becomes a creative tool of un-use.

At a different point, the same person also described forgetting the phone, leaving it at home when leaving the house, as a method. ‘[...] it is a type of method that you also have, it is a ‘little excuse’ because it is a social convention today to be reachable almost all of the time.’ ‘Forgetting’, which usually is an involuntary (un)action, this user rather describes it as a conscious method of un-use: ‘a type of method that I use’.

A big-city based grandmother (71 years old) parallels this sentiment. She reports usually ‘panicking’ when she finds herself on the street without her phone. However, conversely, she also reports leaving her phone at home on purpose at times: ‘I am outdoors often and I run or take a little powerwalk, and then I never bring my phone with me’. In other words, in those particular situations, intentionally leaving the phone behind brings her the opposite of panicking – it becomes a creative strategy to achieve peace of mind.

Many of our participants had various experiences with forgetting, misplacing, not charging, not replacing their phones that worked as creative un-use strategies. On the other side, many participants spoke with frustration about how some of their family members were harder to reach than others, about how they forgot their phones or did not hear a call. In the family context where non-use breaks an expectation that family and friends should constantly be available, simply being honest about not wanting to be available often was not an option and creative strategies of un-use were instead applied in small, everyday actions.

Linked to this un-use strategy was the issue of network coverage. This popular but increasingly difficult-to-achieve strategy is to travel to destinations where there is no or only poor coverage. For Swedes, this often means the typical ‘*sommarstuga*’ – literally ‘summer cottage’, a vacation home used mainly in the summer – often in the countryside. A couple from the city, 43 and 41 years old, express:

Our country house for the summer which we had for a really long time, well now we have pretty good coverage, but we used to not have any coverage there. It was not possible to call people, you had to stand on a cliff, and from there you could call. [...] It is very beautiful, well, absolutely beautiful, to not be available constantly. I think that it is very relaxing.

In Sweden, summer vacation time is taken very seriously, and it is common practice to be less available for at least a month in the summer. Summer cottages are a typical place of refuge for many who can afford them. From this point of view, it is also a form of a status object. In the manifestation of the *sommarstuga*, the relationship between the wish to disconnect and summer becomes particularly evident. Summer is family time as school is out, parents are off work, and the usual work pressure to connect/to be available fades away. Not having coverage – which, some participants mention with regrets, less and less often happens – is a welcome, ‘natural’ excuse to be a temporary non-user.

In other words, choosing places where there is no reception is another strategy of creative un-use, this time in the form of the absence of the internet or network connection, not of the device itself. The absence of a subordinate affordance, receptivity, affects availability. However, as the participants state above, this luxury of disconnection is becoming rare, not only because places without a connection are harder and harder to find, but also because there is an expectation of (extended) family to make sure there is at least some availability. The same couple now since coverage is available still attempts to behave as if it is not. They say:

Husband: Then you check your phone once a day

Wife: Most of the time it is upstairs [in the summer cottage]

Husband: “Oh they have phoned” and then you reply to those messages.

Here it is about acting as if they had no coverage, similar to the previous section on little excuses. Another dimension of this break from everyday life when having vacations relates more directly to family life. As a

woman (44 years old) from the US mentions about being in their Swedish summer house:

Yes well, but I think when you are off when you are on vacation for example, then you can just put your phone down because then you are together with everyone at the same place, and then you just speak out and then they come

The simple fact that one is physically close to some of one’s loved family members in vacation times additionally allows for a welcome, ‘natural’ break from constant availability. Here, it is not only a question of less coverage in an ‘authentic’ natural place, but about the family setting – during joined vacations, everybody is together.

The concept of family holds a significant role for all participants in the study. Participants value what is possibly nostalgic ideals of direct, personal, and uninterrupted family interactions, free from external interruptions. Additionally, parents recognise their role as role models and emphasise the need to limit screen time to prioritise family connections. Lastly, digital disconnection within the family context differs from disconnection with others. Thus, creative un-use emerges as a family-supporting practice. The summer vacation setting, particularly the summer cottage, embodies the ideal place for achieving this nostalgic vision of family connections.

### 4.3. *Strategies of delegating use*

For some of the older generation, finding strategies of absence is both easier and harder. We talked to a 75-year-old husband and wife living in the countryside, and the husband straightforwardly told us that he is not interested in computers since he has ‘no use for them’, and it is ‘the same thing with the phone, I do not even know how it works.’ As a result, ‘it is just lying there in the drawer’. He has the luxury of his wife, who is more technology-savvy, to take on this task for him: She is taking care of anything online, saying: ‘he is very good at other things that I cannot do’. In other words, he can disconnect because of the division of work in their relationship, which allows him to act on (or rather, not act on) his disinterest in novel technologies.

Strategies of delegation also concerned specific applications. For example, in one married couple living in the US the man (55 years old) refused to use social media like Facebook as he considered it a time sink. This un-use was facilitated by his wife (43 years old) who made sure to also manage his social contact with more distant kin such as cousins.

Woman (43): It is almost like I have more contact with his cousins and others through Facebook.

Man (55): Yeah that is right

Woman: It is probably me who inform [him] more

Man: The one who use social media

Although not only, we saw this pattern chiefly in the older generation of families, where men would choose not to engage in digital family communication and work. In these cases, responsibility is delegated to women. Since communication technology was so central in managing family relations (Aspers 2006; Terzimehić, Aragon-Hahner, and Hussmann 2023) – a traditional feminised work task – the women became the main users. This reflects earlier reported gender expectations of who manages family social relations. In many of our interviewed families, men are un-users due to delegating use to female partners. Sometimes it was all use, as in the first example, and sometimes it was only some uses where the activity fell more in line with gendered expectations on family communication as in the example of social media.

For the oldest in our sample, children sometimes took over many digital responsibilities such as paying bills and providing and updating mobile phones and internet connections. Here, it was less about desires than the ability to keep up in a rapidly changing technological landscape. While we used to think of this as a passing problem, we now know that digital exclusion for the elderly is not going away due to diminishing cognitive ability, while digital technology keeps changing and thus requires constant relearning and adaptation (ref). Making this digital divide for the elderly a constant.

Woman (84-year-old): Well you can write on it [her new tablet] and call with it. But I have not learnt how yet. It is so hard for me nowadays. We have not been able to keep up with the latest development (...) We have a computer but we do not use it anymore, I used to work with it a bit in my work.

For this woman, her family has always sent her postcards as an important part of sharing their lives. As an extension of this, her son (55 years old) and granddaughter (30 years old) have translated and extended this tradition to contemporary technology by giving her a tablet with an updated photo stream where family members send images from their lives. They manage her family communication technology for her so that she can take part in family life. Here the entire family has been part of shaping new ways for connection. Her granddaughter came up with the idea, and the

granddaughter's husband physically went to pick up the second-hand tablet, and the son (father of the granddaughter) installed it and brought it over to her. On it, her children and grandchildren send her pictures on the tablet, thus sharing their lives.

When it came to delegation of use, among those able who still choose non-, or un-use it was often along traditional gendered lines. With women being users and engaging in family work, so-called kin-work, through being users. When delegating, no norms on availability to extended family are broken as the household is still in connection. Delegation also occurred for those not able to manage the technology to keep in touch with family.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Use and un-use concerns

In our study, we have explored several un-use strategies involving deliberately, but only temporarily, removing certain technologies or features within technologies. Being a non-user is not an option in these families for social reasons. Expectations on availability to family is a strong factor shaping potential technology use. To create space for agency many individuals in various ways negotiated use and un-use to offer room for disconnection, creatively orchestrating periods or moments of un-use to navigate between norms and desires of connection and norms and desires of a technology-free every day. As in Krischkowsky, Fuchsberger, and Tscheligi's (2021) work on un-use it is in the navigation back and forth between being a user and not being a user that we find un-use as a contemporary strategy for navigating lives increasingly saturated with digital technology. Participants sought out or longed for locations with no network coverage to ensure disconnection. Others delegated the use of digital devices. Un-use is enacted in creative navigation between the need to be connected to family and the need to be disconnected. Such strategies of boundary-making require active and creative management of digital uses. Some are technological strategies involving software functionalities, such as putting devices on silent mode, de-installing apps, ignoring incoming messages or using screentime apps and settings to temporarily block certain functions. In addition, there are *behavioural strategies* that go beyond technologies, for example, people instructing close ones that they will be unavailable, leaving phones in other rooms, or establishing rules for non-use times, such as after work or on weekends. It should be noted that these strategies of un-use are not always distinct and separate; they often overlap and merge. For instance,

it can be a deliberate choice as part of a boundary-making strategy when a person intentionally allows their device's battery to run out, or it could simply be unintentional. The boundaries between these strategies can blur depending on the individual's intentions and circumstances. Said differently, periods of un-use depend on periods of use, use and un-use do not exist separately from each other.

Of key importance for understanding these un-use strategies is the social context of use; the family setting. It is because of family norms of being available that people resort to these specific un-use strategies. Since participants experience that they should be available and that family members expect availability they have to turn to these un-use strategies. The families in this study thus carefully navigate a complex landscape for digital technology use where ideals of availability to extended family, but also ideals of quality family life within the household, enact conflicting and contradictory demands on how people should behave with technology. Additionally, gender norms add complexity in his process. Men and women had partly different strategies available to them, particularly in the older generation. In the heterosexual couples, men tended to delegate use to women, particularly such technology use that in previous work has been seen as feminine, such as kinwork (di Leonardo 1987). However, as previous research has shown, this pattern seems to be changing among younger couples (Eklund 2023). Our participants thus had varying strategies of creative unused available to them.

In our study, it becomes clear why our participants do not turn to drastic non-use, nor a constant use, but fluctuate in their un-use as they navigate contemporary family life. Thus, our findings here stand in contrast to the previously mentioned 'cautious voices' who argued that family communication and cohesion are becoming eroded with the omnipresence of ICTs in many ways (Turkle 2011). In our data, family members alternate between use and un-use, according to the circumstances, and are not at the mercy of communication technologies' persuasiveness at the same time as they spend much time and cognitive energy on navigating this use. Doing so within a normative landscape of what is 'good' family life.

This also implies a reflective approach towards discussions about how technologies are improving the participants' lives (or not) (Kou et al. 2019; Nguyen et al. 2022). In other words, participants oversee and manage their own and their families' uses, evaluate their behaviour and public discourses on ICT uses critically, and develop standpoints regarding what works best in their family contexts. This is creative work done by

family members and the reason why we are advocating for the further development of Krischkowsky, Fuchsberger, and Tscheligi's (2021) notion of un-use towards 'creative un-use'. All of these strategies are about increasing the agency in everyday life. Family members are actively making choices about good lives, instead of simply implementing discipline in the light of (real or imagined) guidelines about to what degree and in what ways families should use ICTs for family work. While ideals around non-mediated communication are expressed as the best for family communication, people embrace the going back and forth between use and un-use as a more contemporary solution to do family work today.

What can research learn from studies of un-use in the family setting? As mentioned, previous research has shown that it is often not possible to define straightforward, binary boundaries between use and non-use, but that there is a range of behaviours, strategies, and levels of involvement (Baumer et al. 2013). Our addition to this research is to show how this range unfolds in family settings. The strategies we found here are not radical gestures of turning to dumb phones or detox camps; not of active non-use. Rather, they are gentler, involving small ways to circumvent and choose other opportunities through small everyday acts. They come both as technological and behavioural and an intermix of these. We call this range creative un-use to highlight how creativity here is not about grand innovation but about the deliberate process of increasing agency in everyday domestic life. In this, we bring creativity to a domain that is often described as routine, domestic and feminised, to recognise that the work of navigating and circumventing everyday life in new ways is also an active act that can be seen as creative.

Understanding un-use as creative is also related to our participants turning towards other aspects of (family) life, rather than turning against technology. This attitude, we believe, stems from the need to adapt to current life situations; how to creatively curate and configure family life and what is experienced as meaningful.

In an era where many have come to embrace digital media as a natural part of everyday life, it is crucial to understand the boundaries people employ to create a sustainable life. In their classification of varieties of non-use, Satchel and Dourish describe different types of how and why people decide not to use technologies at all (2009). One type of active refusal, they argue, is due to disenchantment, which is 'associated particularly with nostalgic wistfulness for a world passing out of existence.' In other words, people yearn for (actual or romanticised) pasts, in which certain technologies and

their affordances did not exist. Many of the strategies of creative un-use shown here, we suggest, fall into this category of ‘disenchantment’, a longing for ‘easier’, less stressful times. A world passing out of existence is then the idea of a world in which the family is close, where communication happens face-to-face and is thus supposedly better. We interpret these life concerns and the un-use strategies as, at least in part, actions of resistance towards the disenchanted, technology-filled modern life.

However, considering how much the participants talk about ways to create spatial distance to their phones and how much they seem to enjoy leaving them behind, it is furthermore interesting that none of them expressed the wish – seriously or semi-seriously – to

permanently get rid of their devices, to go back to pre-digitalised times, to become non-users. Instead, they were looking to achieve certain degrees of availability, creatively trying to find different strategies of un-use. In other words, just like the idea of self-imposed screen time, they were looking for temporary fixes and to unlearn habits and automatic behaviour in favour of family relationships and intimacy. The consequence then becomes a micromanagement of use in everyday life, which results in a myriad of creative un-use strategies constantly negotiated in relation to the realities of everyday family life. Whether this micromanagement is sustainable in the long run or whether it takes too much cognitive effort is a question for the future and calls for design interventions.

**Table 2.** Design sensitivities.

Factors shaping un-use strategies in family contexts	Sensitivities for design
The merging of public and private, the entanglement of work into family life and vice versa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technology for family contexts should be sensitive to difficulties of private and public life merging.</li> <li>• Designers need to consider the amount of work that goes into family practices, and the cognitive burden the negotiation of technology takes in everyday life. Overarching solutions would be beneficial instead of settings in each app.</li> <li>• For example, solutions such as grey-scaling apps and providing easy opportunities to compartmentalise work and private life on the same device and even in the same app.</li> </ul>
Navigating family norms around the ideal of quality family interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designers should consider and be sensitive towards ideals and norms of family time and existential desires of the good life.</li> <li>• Designers also needs to consider how specific applications exist in an ecology of various apps and platforms and design with this in mind.</li> <li>• For example, exploring options for less intrusive design, easier to put down and less engaging. We argue that there is a sweet spot of ‘just about right’ amount of engagement to cater for users not giving up on apps.</li> </ul>
Increased/emotionally charged demands on availability from/ towards family members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designers should consider and design for availability and unavailability in a seamless and guiltfree way.</li> <li>• Social attention should always be considered a potential load which should be possible to minimise.</li> <li>• For example, designs could include sensible and guilt-free ways to communicate time management plans and time availability.</li> </ul>

### 5.1.1. Limitations

The study was carried out with Swedish families, living in Sweden or in the U.S. These families are thus characterised by a highly digital society and in a global comparison relatively high levels of gender equality in the family. Still, as discussed above, gender inequalities when it comes to family life are present. Recent research has also shown that there are large generational differences in technology and adaptation in the family context in Sweden (Eklund 2023). Still, digitisation is likely to keep increasing across the world and the Swedish context might therefore offer insights into other regions of the world.

Other limitations are the qualitative sample and the limited range of families represented such as heterosexual families and families dominated by native Swedes. This does not offer a representative insight into all types of Swedish families. Yet, the goal of the qualitative sample strategy was explorative insights into digital ways of doing family. Some limitations of the study at hand are the limited sample, the focus on Swedes, and heterosexual relationships. Attention to other family types and constellations would undoubtedly offer further insights.

### 5.2. Design sensitivities

We now explore our main conclusions by mapping overarching contextual factors for communication technology use in families to un-use strategies and corresponding implications for design. Table 1 lists these. There are mainly three key overarching contextual factors we have seen in our data showing difficulties in doing family work with ICTs: The fact that white-collar work and family life are increasingly entangled and that this fact is reflected in ICT uses; family norms and ideals around screen-free or unmediated family

communication; and explicit or implicit family expectations regarding frequent or near-constant availability with the help of ICTs. These three contexts are overlapping and at times not clearly distinguishable from each other. However, we suggest that these are three contextual factors typical of ICT-mediated family work. Above this, we have argued that the creative un-use strategies families use in these contexts consist of everyday acts instead of big gestures. Similarly, we show that it is not necessarily a surplus of design interventions that would help family members to manage those. Alternatively, we call for design sensitivities.

Hindmarsh et al. (2005) discuss design sensitivities instead of design recommendations or suggestions. The purpose is to serve as important user concerns for designers, rather than offering definitive requirements or rigid instructions. We are following this approach because many of the contexts discussed in Table 2 do not map straight onto only one single design implication, but rather consider contextual factors, also calling for changes on interpersonal levels, for non-technical solutions, and the balancing between use and non-use. In other words, the design sensitivities we list here are more about un-design (Pierce 2012) and how we can take away some of the efforts that families often experience when it comes to managing their family lives with the help of ICTs, also known as cognitive offloading (Grinschgl, Meyerhoff, and Papenmeier 2020).

## 6. Contributions and conclusion

In our study, we shed light on the intersection between digital media use and family life. The study introduces the concept of creative un-use, which refers to the intentional strategies families employ to limit their digital media usage to foster family intimacy and cohesion.

This includes practices like disabling notifications, creating separate communication channels, or seeking low-connectivity environments. Creative un-use refers to informal, almost haphazard actions that achieve a particular effect by partially withdrawing from certain aspects of digital technology. We find this concept particularly useful because, unlike frameworks centred on non-use or disconnection, it is less ideologically driven and principled. Rather than stemming from a restrictive stance that ‘too much technology is harmful,’ creative un-use focuses on the adaptive and often playful ways individuals, especially within families, curate their engagement with technology to suit their needs.

We also contribute to the corpus of work that shows how the integration of digital media into daily life can blur the boundaries between work and family time,

leading to increased stress and a sense of being limitless. Families report feeling the pressure to be constantly available, which can detract from quality family interactions.

Further, we contribute with examples of how families actively negotiate their use of technology, adapting their behaviours and routines to manage the impact of digital media on their relationships. This negotiation is dynamic and reflects changing norms and expectations around technology.

Finally, we propose six design sensitivities that consider the nuanced ways families interact with technology. Instead of rigid solutions, it suggests that designers should focus on understanding user concerns and the context of family life to create more supportive digital environments. These design sensitivities were:

1. Merging of public and private life: Offer design that enhance the separation of work from personal life, like blocking work emails on personal devices.
2. Balancing family norms and ideals: Enable both screen-free interactions and meaningful tech-based connections.
3. Managing (expectations of) availability: Design features for setting availability guilt-free and easing communication expectations.
4. Subtle everyday acts: Include simple features like notification controls to aid small, everyday changes in tech use.
5. Reducing mental effort: Simplify tools to help families coordinate and communicate effortlessly.
6. Adapting to context: Account for overlapping factors like work-life blending to create sensitive, adaptable designs.

To conclude, un-use does not entail permanent or complete non-use; instead, both individuals and families strategically and creatively switch between the connected and disconnected life. Considering that the family context sets certain norms, values, obligations, and expectations, strategies of un-use reflect these aspects. Key for the social setting of families’ digital technology uses is the inherent conflict by *strong demands and desires on digital availability* of family members across households and simultaneous *desires for disconnection to support within household interaction*. This conflict lies the foundation for the creative un-use strategies, both technological and behavioural, we have identified. The driving force is not to attempt to be moralising about digital devices, rather, they can be seen as creative practices and unlearning of habits. Many families need to find ways in which use, un-use,

and non-use coexist in ways that enable them to lead sustainable family lives.

More often than not, family coherence depends on use, to be accessible. Refraining from answering calls or messages may clash with family rules and norms that demand availability. Therefore, strategies of un-use affect families differently and are intertwined with the process of defining and shaping family practices. Furthermore, family norms, values, and expectations sometimes complicate un-use, for example when family members are disappointed when other members limit their availability. For others, there is a contradiction between the ideal of technology-free family life and the necessity to use technologies when family members cannot be physically present, to maintain family closeness and intimacy (Eklund and Sadowski 2021).

Finally, creative un-use is not about grand innovation, but about the deliberate process of increasing agency in everyday domestic life. We here expanded the concept of un-use from an individual practice (Krischkowsky, Fuchsberger, and Tscheligi 2021) to a collective and creative endeavour applicable to family contexts. Drawing on insights from Mikats, Kink-Hampersberger, and Oates-Indruchová (2021), we have underscored the creative dimension of un-use, enriching family life by providing a range of opportunities for creative un-use, showing how these practices contribute both to managing ICT and fostering family relations.

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