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# “IT HAS SNUCK INTO ALL PARTS OF OUR LIFE” - A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF A SWEDISH SINGLE MOTHER’S EXPERIENCES WITH SCREEN TIME IN EVERYDAY FAMILY LIFE

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## **ABSTRACT**

Screen time has become one of the more pervasive debates in recent years, eliciting recommendations from states and health organizations alike. While the debate often focuses on the negative aspects of screen time and screen use, actual experiences are seldom at the forefront of these debates. This article explores a Swedish single mother’s experience with her child’s screen time, in their everyday domestic life. The case is selected from a larger empirical body of 23 semi-structured interviews with 34 parents living in Sweden. A social phenomenological perspective is applied to explore the everyday expectations and negotiations this mother experiences and engages in. It is clear that the way screen time is experienced is highly context-dependent and often reliant on negotiation work around ambivalence and uncertainty. As the mother moves through the small life-worlds of her home life, screen time attains differing, and often diverging, meanings. As a phenomenon, screen time holds a distinct place in everyday life, dependent on modes of attention (visible in negotiations around rules, management and notions of trust) and inattention (as ‘naturalized’ and routinized in the domestic space).

## **KEYWORDS**

Screen Time • Everyday Life • Parenting • Single Parents • Negotiations • Phenomenology

## 1. INTRODUCTION

'Screen time' has become an intensely debated subject in many western societies in the 2020s, connoting management, limitation and control of children and youths' media use in the context of everyday family life. In Sweden, the national health authority rolled out recommendations on screen time for young children in 2024 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2024), causing a pervasive public debate. Screen time constitutes a special issue in discussions on media developments in the digital age (exemplified by Australian social media age restrictions, or WHO's (2019) recommendations, where screen time is linked to child obesity). While children are often thought of as especially vulnerable in terms of health (Lupton, 2013), management of their digital practices ultimately befalls parents and caretakers. Discourses around screen time promote "practices that parents are expected to follow as responsible citizens of the state" (Willett & Wheeler 2021, p. 723). Substantial responsibility is placed on parents to cover all aspects of children's lives, which in the digital age means navigating complex situations and forms of mediation (Schofield Clark, 2013). Screen time, understood as time spent in front of screens, has become a product of the digital age, and is now largely a taken-for-granted aspect of everyday family life.

While the hypothesized harmful dimensions of media use and screen time have been extensively studied, "research on screen time does not acknowledge the unique behavioural context and users" (Pontes, 2021). Hence, it is essential to address the unique values, practices, and contexts within which parents navigate their everyday lives (such as socio-economic contexts). This article explores the everyday of one Swedish parent, "Ester," a single mother of an eight-year-old daughter, mainly through the social phenomenological perspectives of Alfred Schütz (1970; 1973) and Benita Luckmann (1970). It is important to note that when 'screen time' is used in this text, it connotes the term as it is used in everyday language. The use of 'screen time' is often criticized for concealing crucial aspects of media use in everyday life; since its inception, it has been linked to children's 'excessive' media use (see Engelhardt, 1991). Sandberg et al. (2024a) note that the term is often far too generalizing, covering a wide range of media practices, contents and technologies in one simplified expression. Within psychology, for instance, screen time denotes excessive use of media technologies (Tezol et al., 2022), excluding important contexts. This in turn has implications for how the term emanates in public discourse. Moreover, the term has been criticized for being too imprecise in referencing social problems. In usage, it does not account for families, parents, caregivers or children outside of (hetero)normative, nuclear family ideals. The presupposed notion is that it is a universal phenomenon. However, screen time as a term is (often deeply) integrated into families' everyday lives, including their everyday language. So regardless of

these issues, the term remains *meaningful* to parents. Related negotiations and media practices are engrained and inseparable from the mundane day-to-day (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). Here, the central focus is on screen time as a form of management of children’s media use, which is how most parents describe the phenomenon when asked about it. Therefore, the usage of the term in the present article should be understood as a ‘phenomenon’ (which can be experienced by individuals), which adds to an understanding of parents lived experience with it.

The empirical case is one of 23 interviews with parents in Sweden during 2020 and 2023. Through social phenomenology, description and interpretation remains methods of understanding, focusing on the world as it comes into being to individuals (Bengtsson, 1998). The subjective experiences of Ester’s everyday family life function as a point of departure, where she negotiates the values, norms and subsequent practices associated with her child’s screen time. While parental perspectives have been at the forefront of a substantial body of research on media use and family life (Schofield Clark, 2013; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Sandberg et al., 2021; 2024a; 2024b), important specificities emerge through greater emphasis on parents’ taken-for-granted life-world. Moreover, many of the studies in the field of digital media use and families focus on ‘traditional’ families (Mannell et al., 2024). Hence, an important contribution of this article is investigating a single-parent household, which often involves different challenges and perspectives. Looking closer at single-parent households can shed light on these specific challenges and add to knowledge on non-normative family life. It is important to be conscious of the potential ‘othering’ of non-traditional families, to avoid mythologizing them (Golombok, 2015). The phenomenological perspective provides an alternative approach to *subjective* experience, which here involves a detailed analysis of the mother’s life-world as she *herself* experiences it.

The article’s analytical section begins with a short introduction to the phenomenological perspective operating in the analysis, exemplified through a few quotes from the larger body of interview data. These also highlight the experiences of Ester, who is the main analytical focus. One central theme is how screen time is part of the routinization of everyday life, and in some ways experienced as a ‘natural’ part of it. This theme contextually illustrates how parents experience screen time as part of their life-world, as another routine in modern media-saturated life. The article is based upon Ester’s subjective experiences with the phenomenon of screen time in her day-to-day, which is more thematically varied.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Ester becomes a specific case study, which is included in my PhD dissertation on parenting and screen time in everyday life, defended on September 12<sup>th</sup> 2025.

## 2. SCREEN TIME, PARENTING AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The contexts and ideas of media as catalysts for harmful effects are long-standing, often conceptualized as moral or health-related effects on audiences (see Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Leick, 2019; Nesi et al., 2022); the bulk of which has focused on negative effects (Kaye et al., 2020; Maricarmen, 2020). Psychological and medical studies have consistently linked young children's increased or unregulated screen time with decreased psychological well-being (Tezol et al., 2022). Hence, a vast body of research investigates the effects of screen time on child development (see for example Kracht et al., 2023; Yamamoto et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2024; Slobodin et al., 2024), as well as tactics for regulating screen time for health reasons (Ponti, 2023). Further, screen time research tends to emphasize the relationship between screen use and physical activity (Iguacel et al., 2018; Forte et al., 2023). Often, these studies' discursive presentation carry values and norms that shape notions of "appropriate screen time use" (Vrinda et al., 2021) or "excessive screen time use" (Tezol et al., 2022). However, these notions of the broad, generalizing term screen time have been challenged by psychologists too, citing that it remains a blunt instrument (Kaye et al., 2021). Kaye et al. (2021) argue that it is two-fold; screen time does not function as an all-encompassing term for all media-related practices, neither are there any longitudinally established correlations proving long-term effects. As such, some argue for the need to pay greater attention to the contexts where families are exposed to media and screen time, resulting in development of specific methods and methodologies (see Barr et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the field of studies on digital media, children and families has been criticized for too often "looking backward to old debates, concepts, and methods rather than looking forward" (Mannell et al., 2024:623).

This has impact on public discourse, as negatively charged health perspectives tend to be premiered, ultimately defining what has become a "highly controversial concept" (Sandberg et al., 2024a). As such, the realities of actually living with the phenomenon mean that "[p]arents take on, and often amplify, the abundant and fearful claims that screen time is damaging their children physically and mentally" (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018, p. 179). Consequently, a counter-reaction to 'excessive' screen use has emerged, often coined digital detox (Syvertsen, 2020; 2023). Sometimes described as a movement, digital detox is predominately seen as individual practices, such as organized screen free retreats or spaces (Syvertsen, 2023). These practices are seen as responses to digitized society, which "permeate our everyday lives" (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021).

The norms around (self-imposed) digital disconnection signal perceived feelings of not being in control of one’s media use, which are shaped by social life (Fast et al., 2021). The arguments cement screen time as inherently bad or harmful, connoting that less is always better.

Research on screen time and family life does not only encompass psychological and health related perspectives, even if these are persistent in public discourse. Survey studies have shown how parents implement rules regarding screen time, based on the American Academy of Pediatric recommendations (D’Angelo & Moreno, 2019). Livingstone (2021) problematizes rules-focused perspectives and argues that when “screen time becomes a battle between parent and child, everyone loses” (2021, p. 89), with reference to the increased pressures to manage and enforce screen time that parents experience. This pressure is also noted in Sweden by Sandberg et al. (2024b), who have studied young children’s (0-3 years of age) screen use and interviewed their parents. Amongst several important conclusions, they argue that screen time as a concept does not specify what is actually done on the screen. Moreover, they discuss how screen time experiences and negotiations often rely on “personal moral values” (Sandberg et al., 2024b). According to Livingstone (2021; also see Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018), screen time negotiations are often grounded in anxiety, guilt and self-stigmatization. Media technology and practices are sources of struggle, seen as needing to be domesticated into everyday family life (Sandberg et al., 2021). These arguments are often based on “references to expert advice” (Mascheroni & Zaffaroni, 2025), for instance dictating how much is believed to be ‘excessive’.

However, parents’ individual experiences of screen time are not homogenous, which several studies illustrate. In the US, Willett (2021) notes that for the parents she interviewed, practices and decisions around screen time often contradict recommendation and regulation discourses. Managing screen media in the domestic space thus becomes “efforts to maintain ontological security” (2021, p. 340). In the UK, Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2020) bring up the importance of policies relying on actual (heterogenous) experience, noting that parenting styles impact the way media use is handled in the family. Sandberg et al. (2024b) argue for similar perspectives within the Swedish context, as they see state recommendations as far too generalizing. In a study from the Spanish context, Monteiro et al. (2022) include pre-school teachers alongside parents, concluding that respondents reproduce public debates and recommendation discourses in their practices around screens. Discourses thus extend outside of family life, while still impacting it. In interviews with Australian parents, Jeffrey (2021) points to how socio-technological

perspectives on child development and everyday media technology management practices “intensify parental anxieties” (2021, p. 1057). Overall, these studies show how screen time is tied to intense and sensitive experiences and feelings, relating to specific ideals and norms.

### 3. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Ester is selected from interviews conducted with 34 parents living in Sweden, with both individual parents and couples (23 interviews in total). The focus has been understanding the experiences, ideas and related practices related to screen time in the parents’ daily life. This article represents a case study of one of the parents interviewed, which allows for a more detailed exploration of screen time in one parent’s everyday family life. The selection of the parent was based on thematic as well as contextual considerations. Ester is a young single mother of an eight-year-old who works irregular hours in a care home in a larger Swedish city (further presented in the opening of the analytical section). She was interviewed in her home at the end of 2023. Being a single parent has implications for Ester’s experiences of her daughter’s screen time, both in ideals and practices. It impacts the ways in which she negotiates and subsequently shapes screen time practices and norms in the domestic space. Her experiences constitute a thematic frame in which a phenomenological perspective allows for a subjective understanding of her subjective everyday situations.

As a case study, this article’s aim is to extract detailed knowledge from a single case. As Flyvbjerg (2013) puts it: “It is only because of experience with cases that one can at all move from being a beginner to being an expert” (2013, p. 222). While Flyvbjerg is referring to the use of case studies in educational methodology, this still rings true in terms of knowledge production through, as in this case, interview-based means. The context-dependence of a case study invites a deeper understanding that is sometimes lost in large-scale approaches; attention to the “nuanced view of reality” (Flyvbjerg 2013, p. 223) that this article relies on. While the case presented here is specific, it should be understood as part of a larger body of research on parenting, media and everyday life. Unique cases such as this can bring forth “black swans” (Flyvbjerg, 2013), which in larger studies might constitute small results, often left out in favor of more persistent patterns. Hence, while Sandberg et al. (2021) use a similar approach, they focus on two families with toddlers where everyday conditions differ from that of Ester’s, recognizing the need for more case-based unique knowledge within parenting and screen time in daily life, not least within non-traditional families.

#### 4. A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF EVERYDAY FAMILY LIFE

In this article, special focus is given to the “symbolic significance” (Shove et al., 2012) of screen time experiences as an integrated part of Ester’s life-world, following Schütz (1970; Schütz & Luckmann, 1973) social phenomenological perspective. A phenomenological perspective emphasizes individuals’ subjective experiences of phenomena and objects (Bengtsson, 1998). In phenomenology, the surrounding world is seen as transcendent – it exists regardless of individuals’ belief in it (which differs from Cartesian philosophy). Within the life-world, individuals encounter phenomena and other individuals, cultural and social norms, continually making sense of living with these dimensions of the mundane daily life. Schütz (1970) uses the notion of ‘natural attitude’ (also see Schütz & Luckmann, 1973) to illustrate the fabric of an experience as it is directed towards the world (as it appears to us). The natural attitude notion posits that the world appears unquestionable and taken for granted; we do not reflect on or question every detail. As Husserl (1995) notes, one can reflect on one’s place in the world and the relation one has to specific objects, however, this remains from the vantage point of ‘solid ground’ (1995, p. 70). We do not question the atoms and particles which make up our smart phone screen as we come into contact with it; the construct is as it appears to us, a solid black and shiny screen.<sup>2</sup> However, the screen *is* made up of atoms and particles, that is not in question. The question remains *how* we experience these objects and phenomena. Schütz (1970) uses Husserl’s (1995) notion of *intentionality* to explain this. Intentionality is a certain state of mind, directed at specific phenomena (of meaning) (Husserl, 1995; Schütz & Luckmann, 1973). To intend something is to make a connection with the intended phenomena, representing something in a certain way. This makes phenomenological philosophy unique, as it includes a natural scientific explanation of the world, yet still focuses on our lived everyday experience of it (West, 2010). It means understanding the world as intersubjective, as we share this conscious way of being with other subjects.

Screen technologies are very much part of this intersubjective world, as parents’ subjective experiences within the world remain a focal point. What can be extracted from understanding the “movements” (Moore, 2015) through daily life is that experiences of screen time are often part

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2 Certainly, one can question and think about these subjects, the point being that phenomenology builds on the idea of taking these things for granted as a part of our everyday lives. We can wonder about them, but we still live with them as real and tangible objects of our lived experience.

of complex negotiations. Within the larger scope of material from which the case study is selected, screen time is often experienced as a more or less ‘naturalized’ part of everyday life. The management, and often struggle, that screen time entails for the parents is expressed as one of the many dimensions of mundane daily life. One mother states that: “It’s something that’s here and will continue to be, and maybe it will develop even more.” More than just being an example of how the phenomena is taken-for-granted in families’ everyday life, screen time remains consistent in the digital age and experienced in many of the “small life-worlds” (Luckmann, 1970) of the interviewed parents. Several of the parents acknowledge how screen time is part of what can be understood as “routinization work,” a site of negotiating the often-felt shame and self-stigmatization around the phenomenon (which is also noted by Sandberg et al., 2024a). As another mother notes: “In the end it becomes quite difficult ... Like “what is screen time?” [...] Our screens are part of our daily life.” Screen time, as an experienced phenomenon in daily life, is part of the routinization work that takes place constantly in the domestic space (and beyond). With this short introduction to the phenomenological perspective this article relies upon, the remaining sections focus on the case of Ester.

#### 4.1. The small-life world of the domestic space

For Ester, a single mother living with her eight-year-old daughter in a larger town in southern Sweden, screen time becomes a topic that constitutes many facets of her daily life. Ester works irregular hours at a care home, acknowledging that she relies on her mother a lot for parts of her childcare. It allows her to work weekends and nights, which would otherwise be impossible. She does not disclose the role of her child’s father, simply telling me “no” when asked if he is involved in her and her child’s life. The routines and habits Ester and her daughter have established are thus often based on the two of them only. I ask Ester to describe a “typical Tuesday,” to further understand how screen time and media practices are incorporated in her day-to-day:

*Ok, so if we say that I work as normal, because it depends on how I work. So, there’s no set routine. Well, there is, because [the child] has to go to school, so she has a routine. So yeah, there is a routine regardless of how I work. [...] On Tuesdays I also work out, and my mom comes over at night. That’s basically it. Tuesdays are pretty boring.*

Tuesdays are typical, mundane weekdays for Ester, filled with work, working out and other routine activities. She explains that her daughter’s rou-

tines are more important than her own, as she wants her daughter to have consistency in her daily life. When Luckmann (1970) describes what constitutes small life-worlds, she posits that an individual is “a part-time citizen in a variety of part-time societies” (1970, p. 587). These societies, or contexts, are realms of expectation, shaping what is experienced and how. The domestic space is one such context, and as such contains its own meanings, expectations and experiences. Ester describes one such small life-world, which in turn relates to other small life-worlds (like work or going to the gym). Central here, however, is understanding the small life-world which Ester defines as the mundane domestic everyday – her home life. It remains a special place, with its own “horizons” (Husserl, 1995), for example, the expectations and relations experiences have with different phenomena that occur in this small life-world. As an example, when asked how Ester usually starts her day, she explains how screen use and screen time have become a regular occurrence in that mundaneness:

*Then she takes her tablet and goes to get dressed. I prepare breakfast, she eats and watches something. And then she watches the tablet until it's time to leave. So, everything she's doing, she does together with her screen. And that's to avoid any conflicts in the morning. It's how two people who are tired in the morning survive.*

The morning rituals include screen time as a coherent activity; the phenomenon constitutes large parts of the routine. As Barbaras and Lawlor (2012) note, there is a difference in the phenomenological “lived-experience,” which is simply a constant stream of experiences, and an “active dimension of life” (2012, p. 99). When Highmore (2011) describes the things which we interact with daily, “[b]eds, chairs and clothes accommodate us: most of the time they receive our ‘daily inattention’” (2011, p. 58). Screen technology and related practices oscillate between demanding attention and inattention, which constitutes parents’ everyday life. An active dimension of living requires attention, while other parts of living can be defined as intuitive or “just living.” While screen time can be understood as a permeating phenomenon in Ester’s everyday life, it often needs special attention, or specific acts. The interplay between attention and inattention, where Ester lets her daughter use the screen to maintain stability in the morning, utilizes both dimensions, albeit differently. Ester explains her daughter’s use of the tablet as a way to make up for the fact that it is just the two of them in their domestic space. The screen becomes both a “motivation to get out of bed” and a privilege that can be taken away “if she doesn’t do the things she’s supposed to.”

Building on expectations of trust, Ester's notion of screen time is a negotiation between keeping a manageable morning routine and establishing rules of conduct. Inattention to objects, as things that simply exist without much question (Highmore, 2011), is based on the objects having a quality of 'naturally existing,' often functionally. The tablet, and screen time, become functional objects in Ester's small life-world. This functionality works best when it allows for inattention – when screen time is part of their “just living.” Ester's experience of screen time in the morning is bound to the object as a keeper of peace. However, the phenomenon has a special attention-based need, when 'misused' by her daughter. She describes this notion of trust simply: “So if she does what she needs to, there is essentially less fighting.” The everyday becomes a small-life world with “familiar spaces of movement” (Moore, 2017, p. 64), where the maintenance of a coherent and recognizable flow of daily life is paramount for keeping struggles at bay. Even if contexts change, the movement is based on the familiar and “knowable” (Luckmann, 1970). Ester's negotiation around when screen time is 'ok' is based on her own experiences, as well as the more extraordinary aspects of it (when it is used as punishment or reward). This dualism of the ordinary and extraordinary lies at the heart of how the phenomenon is experienced by Ester.

#### 4.2. The dualisms of screen time

On a more reflective note, when asked how she and her daughter discuss the subject of screen time, Ester expresses the experienced dualism of the phenomenon:

*We talk quite a lot [about screen time] ... You don't want to scare [the children] either, because it's also a part of our life today. It's going to be there. So, I don't want to create fear that the internet is dangerous, because it's not. It's a huge asset. But you have to be careful with it. And with all that I feel it's my responsibility as a parent; I can't put that responsibility on you yet. I have to be the one to keep you safe.*

The interplay between being compelled to act or just “living” is often based on what appears natural, and what appears disruptive (Barbaras & Lawlor, 2012). It becomes apparent that Ester's negotiation between discourses of risk and screen time, as an integrated feature of modern life, is highly context-dependent. As Ester expressed above, there needs to be a flow of simply living in the morning, encompassing a need to avoid conflict – they just need to “survive.” This is not always easy, as Ester argues. There needs to be mutual trust between the two of them, as they are both responsible

for keeping situations conflict-free. This is akin to what Moran (2021) dubs “joint agency,” where the subjects are not acting in solitude; rather, the experience is reliant on several subjects. Although Ester and her daughter have different experiences, they act towards an intersubjective coherence, where both agencies are inseparable. Things simply need to move along, with both individuals on the same page – especially since none of them are morning people. It is a mutual agreement that does not need to be verbalized daily, remaining within the coherent life-world as ‘naturalized.’ Screen time is experienced as part of this ‘naturalization,’ a coherent part of the small-life world. Ester also notes that her being a single parent impacts the responsibility she feels towards her child’s screen use:

*Absolutely, of course as a single parent it’s another type of responsibility, like everything. Because I have the ultimate responsibility. [...] Primarily I think that when I can’t hack it there’s no-one else who can do it for me. And then the screen is there, for better or for worse. The good thing is that there’s a solution. The bad thing is that it might not even have been needed in the first place.*

The seemingly simple example of Ester and her daughter’s morning routine hence encompasses complex experiences, which intertwine and shape the small-life world of the domestic space. The small life-world can be defined as such because of the “knowable” and specific negotiations and practices preformed in it. Ester illustrates this when she connects responsibility, trust and certain meanings of screen use to their morning routine. Ester is “intending” (Schütz, 1970; Husserl, 1995) screen time with very specific understanding, which can be both emotional (based in frustration or conflict) and rational (where screen use is negotiated as ‘harmful’). Simply “surviving” is thus no simple act. The morning has specific expectations, or “horizons,” based on mutual trust as well as experienced necessity. While the domestic space can be understood as a small life-world, it contains contexts that change as Ester moves through everyday life. Distinct expectations, which follow the different context changes, rely on experiences that also differ in meaning. However, these contexts are part of Ester’s “wide-awakeness” in her day-to-day, her “paramount reality” (Schütz, 1970, p. 253). Using the tablet to get through the morning is part of her domestic life, but moving from one context to another, expectations are subject to change. This paramount reality includes how she understands the diverging (and converging) contexts in which she finds herself. Not only does she have the responsibilities of a mother, but they are as a *single* mother. This is her subjective experience, in which she places full responsibility for her child’s upbringing on herself. It colors her experience of and expectations on managing her

daughter's screen time, meaning the horizons of her small life-world are dependent on her being single. The small life-world can also be understood as her being a single parent, with its specific horizons and modes of acting.

The morning only constitutes one example of Ester and her daughter's daily life – screen time is part of many contexts in their small life-world. Ester explains what she experiences as screen time (consistently using this term) sometimes looks in the evening:

*On a Tuesday, we might just eat in front of the TV [...]. Even if we're watching together, we watch different things. So, the function [of screen time] in the evening I feel is relaxation, to close off a bit and wind down. [...] When it's been a crappy day, we'll take care of ourselves [...] and have a cozy night together.*

Again, as the context changes, so does the way in which screen time is given meaning, how it is intended. Instead of making things function or simply “surviving,” as with the morning routine, screen time is now relaxation and winding down. Moving into another context is moving into another province of meaning, which can be very different from the next. The horizons which Ester explains here are wildly different to those of the morning routine. Here horizons of “coziness” and “taking care of ourselves” become associated with the phenomenon. As Ester moves through her daily life, her horizons around different phenomena change, depending on mood, a specific space or temporality. Not least is it dependent on the technology – for the evening, the television instead of the tablet. According to Ester, the television is still screen time; however, it is a *specific* screen time. Its character is social and seemingly far removed from the morning's survival mode. She no longer sees screen time as related to harm; instead, it becomes a way for her and her daughter to wind down together. Ester also mentions how her daughter, who often gets to choose what they watch, selects something she knows they both like, without much question. This becomes another example of how Ester articulates the joint agency she and her daughter share. The coherence of the everyday is shared, in Ester's experience, maybe even in a stronger sense in relation to being a single parent; as she says: “There's no-one else who can do it for me.” This also shows how screen use, media technology, and subsequently screen time, have become part of the ongoing everyday experience of Ester and her daughter, and the different meanings associated with the phenomenon.

### 4.3. Screen time, ambivalence and uncertainty

The examples above illustrate different contexts of experience, as well as how the norms and values around screen time are negotiated by Ester.

These negotiations are, however, not always clear-cut or certain; they often include that of the unknown, and ambivalence. These dimensions become clear when Ester continues to explain how she discusses screen time with her daughter:

*You wouldn't let just anyone into our apartment. You let in people you know, people you trust. It's the same here, because they enter into your world, even if it's on a screen, they enter into your private life. They come in, you might be on your bed, they come into your bed, sort of, but through the screen. And I think she understands that.*

Ester perceives the domestic space as a very specific space: a safe one for her and her daughter. She continues to explain that she feels her daughter understands these ideas and knows what is expected of her. Nonetheless, Ester notes that *more* is expected of her as a single mother. She is the one who needs to research the content her daughter accesses. Ester uses the example of *Roblox*, a digital game she felt the need to manage and, at first, restrict quite heavily. Their worlds are often far apart, and Ester acknowledges this. Screen time is associated with disruptive qualities that can invade the domestic family space established by the two of them, making it fragile in many ways. Ester notes that she cannot constantly surveil her daughter, and when things simply need solving (like the morning routine), she needs to be more inattentive to what is happening on the tablet. The ideals and norms around screen time as having harmful qualities creates expectations for the technology and its practices. While morning screen time keeps things calm, there is a world beyond the screen that can enter the domestic space, should Ester not be careful or prepared. The domestic space is as a specific realm of experience which Ester feels she must protect. While being an aggregation of many contexts, the domestic still provides specific “province[s] of meaning” (Schütz, 1970). In Ester’s metaphor, the virtual and physical worlds can bleed into each other. Considering these “*plural* senses of lived experience” (Cavallaro & Warren, 2025) allows for understanding screen time as something transcendent of the actual phenomenon. The meanings Ester ascribes to experiencing the object and phenomenon also have metaphysical dimensions (such as digital content that can have ‘real life’ consequences). Ester sees the phenomenon as potentially crossing into the safe space of the domestic, the small life-world, and bringing in something else. Further, the risk is tied to a specific object and practice, making the metaphor a “real” risk; the perception of the object is tied to the experience, which creates the “real” risk (O’Shiel, 2025).

The contexts of everyday life then hold their own unique meanings, rit-

uals, practices and norms (see for example Bausinger, 1984), and Ester relates to them through her small life-world (both in terms of being a single mother and in the domestic space). At the same time, the issues she sees as related to media practices are not separable from “the normative and performative discourse on “screen time”” (Mascheroni & Zaffaroni, 2025). Screen time requires attention from Ester, as she experiences the horizons of harm, while certain contexts rely on specific modes of inattention. When asked how she manages screen time in these different situations, Ester explains that: “For me, it’s very much a feeling.” Rather than moving through everyday life with screen time in terms of rules or strict management, she relies on what *feels* ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. As mentioned, experience and intentionality towards screen time can appear rational but is often based on emotion. Ester illustrates how this feeling is, once again, built on trust:

*And I feel like it’s also one [reason for not having screen time rules] that me and her are pretty tight. And that has its good and bad sides. The good thing is that I feel like we talk about things [...] And I feel like there’s this unwritten rule that if we don’t do that, we will need more rules. Like, it’s freedom with responsibility. You’re allowed only what you can manage.*

Trust becomes a large part of the expectations Ester experiences around screen time. However, uncertainty is prevalent in many of these contexts. Ester’s expectations are connected to her and her daughter being open around screen time, and what is expected within the domestic space. As long as Ester feels this line of communication is open, she can be somewhat inattentive towards her daughter’s screen time practices. She intends screen time to be reliant on trust and open communication but also values of risk and ‘routinized’ everyday practices. The complex ways in which Ester intends the objects and practices that make up screen time show how she herself moves between different provinces of meaning, in which the phenomenon attains different meanings. This leads to constant negotiations, which transform and occur on different levels. These negotiations also rely on Ester’s own specific context, that of being a single mother. She notes that the different modes of acting are also built on respecting if her daughter is “fully into something,” like a digital game or an episode on YouTube. Ester calls this one of the several “frames” she uses to discuss screen time with her daughter, which she feels allows for much easier approach than strict rules or restrictions around time or content. She uses these “frames” to contextualize the expectations her daughter should have around certain media practices. Ester explains how this makes it easier for her to relay “rules” in a way that makes sense to her daughter – a strategy

related to her having full responsibility in child-rearing. The “routinization work” that surrounds screen time and her child’s media practices fall primarily, if not solely, on her (and in certain contexts, her child). Making the morning routine function smoothly is not at the same level as making sure that negotiations around screen time practices are built on trust. The ideals and values Ester negotiates around screen time are thus part of several provinces of meaning, to differing degrees. Ester notes that her attitude towards screen time might be a product of her own relation to screens, as she says: “I don’t see myself as a screen person.” At the end of the interview, she reflects on whether she is actually doing the “right” thing when it comes to screen time:

*I also think to myself that I should be more careful than I am. I should think more about it than I do. And I think it’s quite tricky because I also feel that I am a part of it all. Now it’s a part of society and you just have to accept it and find my way to relate to [screen time]. But it has snuck into all parts of our life, like.*

As has been discussed in earlier parts of this article, Ester acknowledges the way in which screen time is experienced as infused into seemingly all parts of her life-world. Her perception of screen time being something unknown becomes apparent in her deliberation. She does not experience screen time as something separate from everyday life, yet it holds a special place in it. The right way to deal with this phenomenon is also a source of uncertainty. Ester feels she should be more careful than she currently is, as the outcome of screen time practices are unknown to her. Screen time, as a phenomenon, is in itself a source of uncertainty, as Ester intends it.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The larger data set mentioned at the beginning of this article (also see Johansson 2025) as well as Ester’s experiences show how parents learn to live with screen time as a ‘naturalized’ part of daily life. The specific case of Ester provides knowledge on the ambivalent dimensions of what meaning of screen time means in the domestic space (and beyond). As a single mother, Ester emphasizes the added child-rearing responsibilities she has as sole caregiver. Further, Ester sees the joint agency of her daughter as crucial to making screen time management work in their daily life, which she repeatedly attributes to her being a single parent. When following Ester’s movement through her everyday contexts and small life-worlds, the complexities of screen time as an everyday phenomenon emerge. Ester relies strongly on feelings of trust in the meaning-making processes around screen time, in intending the phenomenon. As she manages her daughter’s screen time,

she perceives the phenomenon as requiring a special kind of attention (or inattention). As the everyday contexts change and Ester (together with her daughter) moves through these contexts, so does the meaning of and how she intends the phenomenon. Screen time becomes a dualism in several ways, among them as both related to objects (screen technology) and connected to practices (like keeping the peace in their morning routine). These two dimensions are not separate to Ester, as she often discusses them in the same terms. The meanings of screen time as a phenomenon are in constant negotiation within Ester, as she on the one hand sees it as a consistent part of daily life, while on the other, negotiates the norms surrounding it (like those of harm).

This case shines a light on the specificities of screen time as experienced in everyday life. While the concept is often criticized, it is important to note that it holds specific value and understanding in parents' life-worlds. Understanding their struggles in the digital age, for example when questioning or seeking to improve policies (see arguments in Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Sandberg et al., 2024a), can be complemented by focusing on the negotiation work highlighted by a single case study. Ester's negotiations, expectations and experiences are ambivalent and even contradictory. She feels determined concerning some aspects, yet she also questions many of them. Here, a phenomenological account can shed light on the uncertainties of the experience, revealing the different facets of screen time. This is an exploration of what values and meanings these ambivalences, feelings and expectations create for Ester. Instead of focusing on the discourses and norms that Ester references and negotiates, a phenomenological account explores the norms and values that emanate from the subjective experience. This follows what Livingstone (2021) has argued for; screen time as a concept might need to be abandoned without neglecting the place it has attained in the experiences of everyday life. Screen time is indicative of much of contemporary (Western) family life; as an explanation of the struggles, ideals and experiences of contemporary parenthood, it can reveal plenty.

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