"My AI Family Loves Me More": Toward Understanding "AI Kinship" as an Emerging Form of Social and Emotional AI Use

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Current discourse on social and emotional AI use has primarily framed human–AI relationships in terms of assistants, counselors, friends [Brandtzaeg et al., 2022, Qi et al., 2025], or romantic partners [Li and Zhang, 2024, Reilama, 2024]. Drawing on findings from my CHI'26 study [Song et al., 2026], I argue that these categories overlook an emerging pattern in how some users interpret and engage with social–emotional AI: AI in kinship roles (e.g., children, siblings, or parent). Rather than constituting a clearly bounded relational type, this "AI-generated kinship" reflects a distinct mode of social–emotional engagement that carries particular risks and sensitivities related to family structures, intergenerational obligations, and the culturally embedded meanings of care, and thus warrants focused attention.

Empirical grounding. My interest stems from a CHI'26 study [Song et al., 2026] examining AI-generated influencers on Chinese short-video platforms that adopt kinship roles (e.g., "AI grandchildren," "AI sons," "AI siblings") to engage older adults. Through analysis of 224 videos and interviews with 16 older adults, I found that these AI personas evoked strong emotional resonance, fulfilled needs for companionship and filial piety, and led some to compare AI "family members" favorably against real ones. One participant noted: *"These AI children are so sweet and obedient. I can't help comparing them to my real grandkids."* I coined the term *virtual kinship* to describe these digitally mediated, kin-like relational interpretations.

Why "AI kinship" is inevitable. Two forces drive this trend. First, *care is inherently tied to kinship*. Attachment theory [Bowlby, 1982] and anthropological work on fictive kinship [Carsten, 2000, Pierre, 1975] show that people form family-like bonds with whoever provides consistent care—whether biological kin, community members, or non-human agents [Harlow, 1958]. When AI delivers warmth and responsiveness, users naturally interpret these interactions through kinship logics rather than friendship or service frames. Second, *care is costly labor that is increasingly scarce*. As populations age [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023] and family structures shrink, the gap between care needs and available caregivers widens [Celebi and Kemmerling, 2025]. In social or cultural contexts where caring needs are acute and human caregivers are unavailable or overstretched (e.g., east Asia), even AI systems not explicitly designed to fill this role may be taken up as relational substitutes Song et al. [2026].

What makes AI kinship uniquely consequential. *"You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family."* AI challenges this assumption by enabling people to select kin-like relationships. Unlike AI friends or lovers, AI kinship does not exist alongside human ties as a separate social category; rather, it *enters into, reshapes, and potentially disrupts existing family systems*. For example, my research found older adults comparing AI "grandchildren" with real ones, often finding the AI more emotionally available. This surfaces a provocative possibility: AI can offer "customizable" and "unconditional" love - always patient, always present, never burdened by its own obligations - a standard real family members, constrained by work, distance, and emotional limits, cannot meet [Patterson and Margolis, 2023, Bengtson and Roberts, 1991]. This risks not only emotional displacement but a fundamental reshaping of intergenerational expectations.

Questions I hope to explore at this workshop:

- How should we design AI systems that fulfill kinship-like emotional needs without displacing real family relationships?
- What ethical frameworks can guide AI kinship across cultural contexts where family carries different moral weight (e.g., filial piety in East Asia)?

I bring to this workshop empirical insights from one of the first studies on kinship-role AI in the wild, and a commitment to understanding how AI's relational capabilities intersect with family structures, care labor, and emotional well-being across the lifespan.

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