

# The son (*érzi*) is not really a son

## Generalization of address terms in Chinese online discourse

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This paper aims to explore the generalization of address terms in online discourse, a largely unheeded pragmatic phenomenon. Taking the generalized Chinese kinship term “son” (*érzi*) as an example, it analyzes its referents and functions. The analysis was based on a sizable data set collected from WeChat, and interviews with some WeChat users. It demonstrates that the address term “son” (*érzi*) conveys its faithful meaning when referring to the male child of (a) parent(s) but virtual meaning when referring to the addresser’s friends, classmates or pets. It is also argued that the generalized use of the address term “son” (*érzi*) can function to enhance relationships, make jocular abuse, and express emotions. These functions suggest the users’ identity avoidance and relating needs in a virtual community. This study attempts to contribute to a better understanding of the virtualization of address terms and rapport management in online discourse.

**Keywords:** address term, generalization, referent, function, virtual context

### 1. Introduction

Address terms are words and expressions for addressing individuals or groups in communication (Alenizi 2019). They can be divided into two categories, namely, kin terms and social terms (Dickey 1997). Among them, kin terms refer to relatives, such as “mum”, “dad”, “son”, and “cousin”, whereas social terms refer to non-relatives, such as “friends”, “colleagues” or even “strangers” (Liu 2009; Sandel 2002). Interestingly, kin terms are frequently employed to address non-relatives in daily communication, which leads to the phenomenon of generalization (Chen and Ren 2020; Nakassis 2014; Ren and Chen 2019). Besides, most of the generalized kin terms in face-to-face interaction are age-based, and they may be borrowed from (1) antecedent kin terms, such as “aunt” or “uncle”, and (2) descendent kin

terms, such as “younger brother” (Ren and Chen 2019). Notably, although there truly exist generalized kin terms which are borrowed from descendent kin terms, they are less frequently used, especially in face-to-face interaction (e.g., “son”). The reason might be that this would violate the politeness principle (Fleming and Slotta 2018) or Address Maxim (Gu 1990). However, the borrowing of these descendent kin terms is a common occurrence in online discourse. In addition, while the generalization of kinship terms in face-to-face communication is considered to assist in maintaining and enriching social interaction (Mavunga et al. 2014), whether it performs the same functions online remains unclear.

Against this backdrop, this article purports to report a study on the generalized use of address terms in online discourse by taking the Chinese kinship term “son” (*érzi*) as an example. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 offers an overview of relevant literature on address terms, including the generalization of address terms and Chinese kinship address terms. Section 3 covers the study’s methodology, including research questions, and data collection and analysis procedures. Section 4 presents the findings, concerning the referents and functions of the generalized address term “son” (*érzi*). Section 5 offers a discussion on some major determinants of “son” (*érzi*). Section 6 acts as a conclusion.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Address terms

Studies on address terms can be traced back to Brown and Gilman (1960), who touched upon the usage of second-person pronouns in interpersonal communication. Today, address terms have become a focus of interest in disciplines such as sociolinguistics (Bin Towairish 2012), pragmatics (Levinson 1983; Yule 2006), socio-pragmatics (Martiny 1996), and cognitive-pragmatics (Maalej 2010). In the literature, many researchers have focused on the different forms of address terms, including names (Afful 2010; Braun 1988), nicknames (Crozier and Dimmock 1999; De Klerk and Bosch 1999; Dornyo 2010), kinship terms (Mavunga et al. 2014), institutional titles (Rendle-Shot 2007), etc.

Some of the studies on address terms have dealt with their functions in communication. The first and foremost function of address terms is to manage interpersonal relationships. Through address terms, the addresser can express his/her relationship to (Quirk et al. 1985) or social distance from (Mavunga et al. 2014) the addressee. Besides this, Miller (2000) and Afful (2010) propose that address terms can help to identify gender, age or socioeconomic status. Another function of address terms, such as kinship or endearment terms, is that they are used as

markers of mitigation (Anchimbe 2008; Fleming and Slotta 2018; Hampel 2015; Obeng 1999). They are also related to politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) or deference (Thomas 1995) conventions in some countries. Apart from these functions, address terms are also found to be serving as structural units in interpersonal conversations (Clayman 2012).

A few studies have noted that address terms are sensitive to some socio-cultural contexts (Ju 1991). For example, some researchers reveal that social distance and interpersonal relationships are important factors influencing address terms (Brown and Ford 1961; Brown and Gilman 1960, 1989; Wardhaugh 1986). Afful (2006, 2010) and Cao (2007) note that age and gender differences between the addresser and addressee also influence the use of address terms (Afful 2006, 2010; Cao 2007). Some recent studies have also begun to explore discourse structures (Liu 2009) and communicators' geographical distribution (Fleming and Slotta 2018) as factors that constrain the use of address terms.

## 2.2 Generalization of address terms

Previous studies on address terms demonstrate that they may convey extended meaning or fictive meaning besides their original meaning (Afful 2010; Dickey 2004; Kueh 2013). Studies have also identified three ways to extend the original meaning of address terms: the generalization of address terms, the inversion of address terms, and the re-interpretation of address terms (Kraska-Szlenk 2018). Of the three ways, generalization of address terms is the most frequently discussed (Fleming and Slotta 2018; Pan 1998).

According to the literature, the generalization of address terms is achieved in various ways. Firstly, they could be generalized in creative and non-literal ways, such as metaphor, irony or joking (Fitch 1991). Secondly, the address terms, especially some kinship terms, are sometimes extended to address those without blood relationships (Ren and Chen 2019). Thirdly, some general address terms (Wong 2008), titles or positioning address terms (Rendle-Short 2007) are widely used in interpersonal communication, even though the addressees do not have the corresponding title or position.

Of the various generalized address terms, generalized kinship terms are the most frequently discussed by researchers (Chen 2018; Chen and Ren 2020). Generalized kinship terms are the kin terms used for non-blood relations in specific contexts and functions (Alenizi 2019). In many languages, kinship terms are extended to refer to non-kin for politeness purposes (Hentschel 2013) or for expressing affection (Kraska-Szlenk 2018), which may be influenced by a variety of social factors, such as (1) the social status or rank of the other (Hentschel 2013) and (2) the gender, age difference or family relationship between the addresser and addressee (You 2014).

### 2.3 Chinese generalized kinship terms

Turning now to the literature on Chinese address terms, a number of studies have examined generalized kinship terms in Chinese. Many researchers have noted their varying forms. For example, Pan (1998) exemplifies sixteen types of generalized kinship terms in Chinese. Zhao and Xu (2009) discuss different forms of Chinese generalized kinship terms used with acquaintances or strangers. Chen and Yang (2015) note the generalization of the self-addressed kinship terms *Ge/Jie* (“brother/sister”) in online discourse.

Studies on Chinese generalized kinship terms also concern their features, functions, and/or principles (Chen 1984; Du 2017; Wang 2006). For example, Chen (1984) suggests that generalized kinship terms are used for relationship maintenance. Wang (2006) discusses the intimacy principle, age principle, status principle, and politeness principle that operate behind the use of Chinese generalized address terms, arguing that the terms have both a personal designation function and a social designation function. In addition to these studies, others also address the translation of generalized kinship terms (Cong and Li 2013).

Furthermore, it has been found that the generalized use of Chinese kinship terms is sensitive to a number of factors. These factors include: (1) the traditional family structure and social structure (Chen and Ren 2020); (2) the interpersonal relationship network with the family relationship as the bond and outward extension along with the relative order (Pan 1998); and (3) the purpose of constructing a social, cultural, and/or family-based identity (Sandel 2002; Zhu 2010).

### 2.4 Research gaps

Overall, there have been abundant and substantive studies on address terms (e.g., Afful 2006, 2010; Brown and Gilman 1960; Sandel 2002), including generalized address terms (e.g., Kueh 2013; Ren and Chen 2019). However, most of these studies address their use in face-to-face communication. It seems that little attention has been paid to the use of other-targeted address terms in online discourse. A number of questions may arise. For example, it remains unclear why the generalization of some subfamily address terms (e.g., *érzi* “son”) is widely found in virtual contexts, given that this violates the politeness principle (Fleming and Slotta 2018). Researchers should also consider whether the generalized address terms in online discourse have the same functions as those in face-to-face communication, such as politeness, rapport management or identification (Nakassis 2014; Quirk et al. 1985). Moreover, it is curious why it is the case that, when address terms like “son” are generalized in online discourse, the addressers do not seem to consider the factors of power, age or gender difference (Carstarphen and Lambiasi 1998;

Fox et al. 2007), as if the social structure were broken down. This study will serve to fill these research gaps.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research questions

To fill the research gaps above, this study explores the phenomenon and rationale of generalized address terms in online discourse by taking the Chinese “son” (*érzi*; hereafter referred to simply as *érzi*) as an example. Specifically, three questions are going to be answered:

1. What are the referents of the address term *érzi* in online discourse?
2. What functions does the generalized use of address term *érzi* perform in online discourse?
3. Why do the Chinese WeChat users resort to the generalized use of address term *érzi* to perform these functions in online discourse?

#### 3.2 Data collection, identification, and calculation

This study collected data from WeChat users’ chatting records to answer its three questions. The chatting records include the users’ person-to-person chatting records, group chatting records, and a few posts on WeChat moments. The reason for collecting data from WeChat is that it is an online social networking medium that enables its addressers to be connected with friends and family, which has been widely used in 200 countries and by 800 million people. It is used not only by people in China but also by various Chinese-speaking communities worldwide (Li 2018). WeChat’s wide use is owed to its two primary communicative features: First, it allows users to directly text and call each other or conduct a group chat via the ‘Chats’ feature. Second, it allows users to build an online community with friends by posting texts, photos, and video clips on their own “moments” (similar to Facebook’s news feed). By collecting data from WeChat, we can achieve a better understanding of the generalized use of address terms in online discourse.

To collect data on the address term *érzi* in WeChat, we randomly selected 10 (five male, five female) WeChat users ranging in age from 18 to 40. The 10 participants had varied occupations (e.g., teachers, students, researchers), and they came from seven major cities of China, such as Tianjin, Xi’an, and Chongqing. The data were collected from the users’ chatting and moment records. Through the data, the diversification of the address term *érzi* could be examined. Considering that age, gender, and socioeconomic status are critical factors for address terms (Afful

2010; Cao 2007; Liu 2009), the participants' characteristics (including age, gender, and hometown) are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Information on the WeChat users

Sequence	Age	Gender	Occupational background	Hometown
No.1	39	female	Teacher	Tianjin
No.2	37	female	Doctor	Tianjin
No.3	35	male	Researcher	Taiyuan
No.4	33	male	Teacher	Xi'an
No.5	31	male	Researcher	Wuhan
No.6	28	female	House seller	Tianjin
No.7	26	male	Student	Chongqing
No.8	24	male	Inspector of airplane operation	Huhehaote
No.9	22	female	Cabin attendant	Nanchang
No.10	18	female	Student	Fuzhou

During the data collection process, the 10 WeChat users were asked to search their WeChat chatting records (including person-to-person chatting and group chatting) and moment records (including posts on moments and readers' responses). Then, they handed over the chatting records or posts involving the use of the address term *érzi* voluntarily.

When sorting out the data, we found that some conversations had more than one *érzi* in a single excerpt. We then consistently identified each occurrence of *érzi* as a case. By calculation, we reached a total of 1,120 cases related to the address term *érzi*, which involved 596 addressers.

To guarantee the validity of the identification and calculation, the two researchers double-checked the process and reached a consensus. Ethical procedures were followed for data collection concerning obtaining consent and protecting the identity of participants.

### 3.3 Data analysis

Based on the data collected from WeChat, we set out to answer the three research questions by adhering to the following data analysis procedures.

Question 1 was answered by analyzing the chatting records in WeChat or posts on WeChat moments. Over the course of the analysis, it was fairly easy to determine the referents of *érzi* because most of the addressers remarked on the

addressee's name or the relation with the addressee on WeChat. For example, the researcher could recognize the identity of the addressee as a father because there was the WeChat note "father" on the recordings provided by the participant. If there was no remark matching the addressed *érzi*, the researcher interviewed the addresser of *érzi* to identify its referents.

After the first step was completed, the study moved on to answer Question 2 by analyzing the same chatting records or posts and interviewing some of the addressers who used *érzi*. Specifically, when the researcher found that *érzi* had an extended meaning, the researcher analyzed the functions of *érzi* and the addresser's intention. If the researcher was unsure of the address term's function, the researcher interviewed the addresser to determine whether he/she used *érzi* for some specific function. Besides, the addressees' or readers' responses would also contribute to understanding the functions of *érzi*.

Finally, the discussion section will provide an answer to Question 3.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Referents of the generalized address term *érzi*

Through the coding procedure, our identification of the referents of *érzi* yielded eight categories. The referents included the addressers' male descendant, male classmate, male friend, boyfriend, female classmate, female friend, girlfriend, and pet. Among them, the address term *érzi* had a faithful meaning (or original meaning; McCarthy 2008) when used to refer to the addresser's male descendant. In Example (1), the addresser, a mother, used *érzi* to address her son when asking whether he is adapting to the new school. The *érzi* in Example (1) thus conveys a faithful meaning. Indeed, the faithful meaning instances of *érzi* constituted the vast majority. That is, about three-quarters of the cases (837/1120) conveyed faithful meaning. After all, this is the basis for the generalized use of the address term.

- (1) (Context: The addresser, a mother, is chatting with her 13-year-old son, who is studying in the UK)

A: 儿子呀，在学校里还适应吗？

*Érzi ya, zài xuéxiào lǐ hái shìyìng ma?*

'Dear son, is it difficult to adapt to the new school?'

B: 这里超级棒！早上我还听到院子后面的鸟在叫。

*Zhèlǐ chāojí bàng! Zǎoshang wǒ hái tīng dào yuànzi hòumiàn de niǎo zài jiào.*

'It's really nice here! I even heard the birds sing in the backyard this morning.'

Apart from the canonical use, *érzi* is also found to convey some virtual meanings, as indicated by its seven other referents in our data. By virtual meaning, or extended meaning (Afful 2010; Dickey 2004; Kraska-Szlenk 2018), we mean that the address term is not used to convey its original meaning but some other meanings not found in the dictionary. Such uses occurred frequently in our data, approximately in a quarter of the cases (283/1120). As observed, the seven referents of *érzi* used with a virtual meaning could be classified into three categories. In what follows, this section discusses the three categories separately based on examples from the collected data.

First, the generalized address term *érzi* in online discourse may refer to a male non-descendent. More specifically, the referents could be the addresser's male classmate, male friend or boyfriend. Instances of these referents can be found in Examples (2)–(4). In Example (2), the address term *érzi* refers to the addresser's boyfriend. A background investigation indicated the romantic relationship between the addresser and the addressee. The addresser always addresses her boyfriend as *érzi* in daily communication, which is a kind of *sajiao* style (Yueh 2017). Here, while addressing her boyfriend as *érzi*, she is requesting that he give her a gift on Father's Day. In the conversation, the addressee, B, also calls the addresser *érzi*, and jokes "do you still remember who you are?" The addressee is not blaming the addresser because of her *sajiao* words. Rather, the joking words of the addressee may enhance their romantic relationship.

- (2) (Context: The addresser, a female student, is chatting with her boyfriend through WeChat. The addresser has just received a gift from her boyfriend, and is waiting for another gift on Father's Day)

A: 儿子乖，父亲节的时候也记得这么做

*Érzi guāi, fùqīn jié de shíhòu yě jìdé zhème zuò.*

'Good and well-behaved son, remember to do the same on Father's Day!'

B: 儿子你咋一觉醒来不知带自己是谁了

*Érzi nǐ zǎ yī juéxǐng lái bù zhī dài zìjǐ shì shéile*

'Son, do you still remember who you are?'

In Example (3), the address term *érzi* refers to the addresser's male classmate/roommate, Zhang Jia (nickname). These classmates/roommates generally call each other *érzi* in WeChat person-to-person chatting or group chatting. Here, the addresser tries to tease his classmate by addressing him with *érzi*. In response to the addresser, the addressee, Zhang Jia, sends him a GIF, which includes a doll holding a knife, and a sentence. The GIF means that Zhang Jia wants to give the addresser's mum a knife. Literally, the addressee's response could be interpreted as rapport threatening (Spencer-Otaey 2000), which is apparently impolite. However, in actuality, the impolite form of this GIF does not convey the addressee's



impolite intention. Instead, it works as a mock impoliteness strategy, which will contribute to maintaining interpersonal relationships (Taylor 2016).

- (3) (Context: The addresser, a male student, is chatting with his two classmates in a WeChat group)

A: @ 张佳 儿子 你什么时候来找我  
 @ *Zhāng jiā érzi nǐ shénme shíhòu lái zhǎo wǒ*  
 '@ Zhāng jiā son, when will you come to see me?'

B:



*Wǒ gěi nǐ mā yīdāo?*  
 'Should I give your mum a knife?'

Now, let's consider Example (4), where the generalized address term *érzi* refers to the addresser's male friend. Here, the addresser (a female) addresses B as *érzi* and states that she wants to do advertisements for B. The generalized address term *érzi* in this conversation is not used for the sake of conveying politeness (Hentschel 2013) or expressing affection (Kraska-Szlenk 2018). Rather, it demonstrates the addresser's intimacy with the addressee, B. Besides, the addressee's response "you are so handsome" also demonstrates their intimacy.

- (4) (Context: The addresser, a female house seller, is chatting with her male friend)

A: 儿子, 你也要做微商吗? 那我帮你宣传下  
*Érzi, nǐ yě yào zuò wēi shāng ma? Nà wǒ bāng nǐ xuānchuán xià.*  
 'Son, are you doing WeChat business? If so, I will advertise your products.'

B: 你也太帅了叭  
*Nǐ yě tài shuài le ba*  
 'You are so handsome.'

Second, the generalized address term *érzi* sometimes refers to a female non-descendant. Examples (5)–(7) are cases in point. The address term *érzi* in Example (5) refers to the addresser's girlfriend. By saying, "Honey, when will you arrive..."; the addresser states what he is doing and expresses his expectation of B's coming. We noticed that the addresser's hometown is Chongqing, and he used Chongqing dialect frequently. In Example (5), "哟 (yo)" is an indicator of his Chongqing dialect. Thus, the generalized use of some address terms might be specific to some Chinese dialects (Ren and Chen 2019). We must also note that "哟

(yo)", similarly to the mood auxiliary words "撒 (sa)" and "鸭 (ya)" in this conversation, enjoys an online usage widespread among WeChat users (Zhou 2019). The generalized address term *érzi*, collocating with these words, indicates the addresser's *sajiao* style (Yueh 2017). More importantly, it implies the addresser's attitude and involvement in a conversation, thus contributing to a harmonious communicative context (Lee et al. 2017).

(5) (Context: The addresser, a male inspector, is chatting with his girlfriend)

A: 儿子, 你啥时候到哟? 等你好久了。

*Érzi, nǐ shà shíhòu dào yō? děng nǐ hǎojiǔle.*

'Honey, when will you arrive? I have been waiting for you for a long time.'

B: 马上到了撒, 你再等我会鸭。

*Mǎshàng dào le sā, nǐ zài děng wǒ huì yā.*

'I will arrive soon. Wait for a movement.'

The address term *érzi* in Example (6) refers to the addresser's female roommate. Here, we can infer that the addresser wants to celebrate a birthday with her roommate B. Instead of addressing her roommate by name, the addresser uses *érzi*. As a response, B thanks the addresser, "蕾劳斯 (Miss Qiang)". In this conversation, "劳斯" is a homophonic address term (Che 2019) of *lǎoshi* (teacher), which is also frequently used in online discourse.

(6) (Context: The addresser, a student, is chatting with her roommate and celebrating her birthday through WeChat)

A: 狗儿子, 生日快乐, 永远18岁🎂🎂🎂 一直爱你❤️

*Gǒu érzi, shēng rì kuàilè, yǒng yuǎn shí bā suì 🎂🎂🎂 yīzhí ài nǐ ❤️*

'Happy birthday, dog son. Wish you were 18 years old forever 🎂🎂🎂 Love you forever ❤️'

B: 谢谢蕾劳斯🙏!

*Xièxiè qiáng láo sī 🙏!*

'Thank you, Miss Qiang 🙏!'

The addresser in Example (7) is a female who has graduated from college recently. By using the address term *érzi*, the addresser refers to her female colleague. Here, the addresser focuses on the fact that her colleague B has been slapped. In response to the addresser, B says, "our friendship boat is overturned". The sentence literally means that they are not friends anymore. Actually, B's words are meant as a joke, which does not entail any impolite intention (Taylor 2016).

(7) (Context: The addresser, a female, is chatting with her colleague and talking about their experience of watching a movie)

A: 儿子, 你还记得看电影的时候挨了多少揍吗?

*Érzi, nǐ hái jìde kàn diànyǐng de shíhòu āile duōshǎo zòu ma?*

‘Son, do you remember how many times I slapped you while watching the movie?’

B: 啊呜 我们友谊的小船翻了!

*A wū wǒmen yǒuyì de xiǎochuán fānle!*

‘Oh, our friendship boat is overturned!’

Moreover, even though the address term *érzi* has a virtual meaning in Examples (2)–(3) and (4)–(6), there is a difference in the degree of identification. When *érzi* refers to a male, it is easier to identify because of human cognitive categories (Ungerer and Schmid 1996), whereas identification is more challenging when *érzi* is used to refer to a female.

Third, the generalized address term *érzi* also refers to the users’ pet (most of the time, it is the addresser’s pet dog). In Example (8), *érzi* refers to the addresser’s pet dog. When referring to the pet dog, the address term *érzi* also has a virtual meaning. Here, the addresser mentions a conversation with her dog. By addressing it as “baby” and “big son” (*dà érzi*), she implies her love for her pet. Addressing the dog as *érzi* is an example of cute playfulness, or a *sajiao* style frequently used in online discourse (Yueh 2017).

- (8) (Context: The addresser updated her post on WeChat moments. The post is about her conversation with her pet dog last night)

昨夜我关灯要睡觉，大白就跑到我跟前用鼻子蹭蹭我的鼻子。我对它说“宝宝，大儿子，去睡觉吧”。大白扭头就回阳台接着睡觉了。



*Zuòyè wǒ guān dēng yào shuìjiào, dàbái jiù pǎo dào wǒ gēnqián yòng bízi cèng cèng wǒ de bízi. Wǒ duì tā shuō “bǎobǎo, dà érzi, qù shuìjiào ba”. Dàbái niǔtóu jiù huí yángtái jiēzhe shuìjiào le.*

‘When I turned off the light and went to bed, Da Bai ran to me and nuzzled my nose. I said to it “baby, big son, go to sleep”. Dabai turned his head back to the balcony and went to bed.’

#### 4.2 Functions of the generalized address term *érzi*

The faithful and virtual meaning of the address term *érzi*, as mentioned above, imply that *érzi* has different functions. When *érzi* is used as a non-generalized address term to convey its faithful meaning, it indexes a referential or descriptive function (cf. Jakobson 1960; Lyons 1977) for the purpose of relationship maintenance (Spencer-Otaey 2000). However, when *érzi* is generalized to convey a virtual meaning, it will extend beyond the description or reference function, to

enact social functions such as conveying politeness, as proposed by Chen (1984) and Wang (2006), among others. To demonstrate the functions of the generalized *érzi*, this section will analyse some examples from the collected data. Besides, we will support our analysis with feedback from our interviews with some of the addressers.

A noticeable function of the generalized address term *érzi* in online discourse is relationship enhancement (Spencer-Otaey 2000). This echoes some prior studies on the relationship enhancement function of kinship address terms (e.g., Hampel 2015; Mavunga et al. 2014). Following prior studies that focused on the relationship maintenance function of family members with a higher rank (Dickey 1997), we find that the generalized descendant address term *érzi* has a similar function. For example, when the addressers say “honey, when will you arrive” (Example [5]) and “happy birthday, dog son (*gǒu érzi*)” (Example [6]), they always use a friendly tone. Like many other address terms, the generalized address term *érzi* expresses closeness and solidarity between the addresser and the addressee (Hampel 2015). The addressees’ responses in these examples imply that their relationship with the addresser is not challenged but enhanced. For example, when the addresser wishes the addressee a happy birthday and calls her “dog son”, the addressee is not angry but instead thanks the addresser. We also found supporting evidence of this in the interviews with the addressers. When one of the interviewees was asked why he used “son” to refer to his friend, he said, “I use ‘son’ only when he/she is a friend of mine. However, when he/she is a stranger, I would not use it”. Through the examples and interviews, it can be observed that the address term *érzi*, like other address terms (Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990; Zhu 2010), can work as a relationship enhancement device.

Secondly, the generalized address term *érzi* in Chinese online discourse is also used in jocular abuse. Previous studies have shown that address terms may have the function of teasing or jocular abuse (Afful 2010; Chen 2019). However, there is no literature indicating that kin terms may also have this function. That is, no research has been conducted on the relation between kin terms and jocular abuse. The data collected from WeChat chatting records demonstrate that some address terms (such as *érzi*) also have the jocular abuse function. For example, when the addresser in Example (2) said, “Good and well-behaved son (*érzi guāi*), remember to do the same on Father’s Day!”, she was trying to tease the addressee. In response to the address, the addressee also called his girlfriend *érzi* in a teasing tone. This teasing tone when calling each other *érzi* lends support to Sandel et al.’s (2019) argument that WeChat affords playfulness in interaction. To confirm the jocular abuse function of *érzi*, we interviewed some of the addressers. An interviewee replied, “I have a good relationship with my roommate. I call him ‘son’ to tease”. Another interviewee said, “Sometimes, I call my boyfriend ‘son’ for teasing.

For example, when my boyfriend asked me for help, I would say ‘call me papa’. Thus, it is clear from the examples and interviews that the address term *érzi* is deliberately used with a jocular abuse function, especially when the referent is the addresser’s close friend or boyfriend.

In addition, the address term *érzi* could enact the function of expressing the addresser’s fondness of his/her pet. For example, when saying, “baby, big son (*dà érzi*), go to sleep” (Example [8]), the addresser refers to her pet dog. Besides this, the interview also provided evidence that *érzi* can express the addressers’ favor to their pets. For example, an interviewee said, “I would call my pet ‘son’ to show my favor to it. I love the pet as my real son”. It can be observed from the examples and interviews that one particular function of the generalized address term *érzi* is to express the addresser’s affection towards his/her pets. This finding of an emotional function may enrich prior studies of Chinese generalized terms’ functions (Chen 1984; Chen and Ren 2020; Wang 2006).

In sum, the virtual meaning of *érzi*, in contrast to its faithful meaning, has some special functions such as relationship enhancement, jocular abuse, and expressing affection towards pets.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis above demonstrates that the generalized address term *érzi* in online Chinese communication exhibits both faithful meaning (McCarthy 2008) and virtual meaning. In the former case, the address term refers to a male descendant of (a) parent(s). In the latter case involving generalized usage, it may refer to a male non-descendant, female non-descendant, or even the addresser’s pet. In particular, the generalized use of the address term achieves several special functions, including relationship enhancement, jocular abuse, and fondness expression. The diversified referents and functions of the generalized address term demonstrate a tendency for virtualization. The phenomenon of virtualization, which is arguably a manifestation of subjectification (Traugott 1989), suggests that the WeChat users’ attitude, emotion, and involvement (Lee et al. 2017) are conveyed by virtue of the generalization of the kin term in online discourse. In the usage, the virtual meaning and relational function are strengthened, whereas the faithful meaning and referential function are weakened. Fundamentally, we may argue that the virtualization stems from WeChat users’ adaptation to their needs in the cyber-media context (Yus 2011). More specifically, they are driven by two types of needs in a virtual community, presented below.

One is the need for vague identity in online communication. Apparently, most of the generalized kin terms in face-to-face communication are address terms for

ascendants, such as mother (*mā*), father (*bà*), aunt (*āyí/bómǔ*), uncle (*shūshu/bófù*), older sister (*jiějiě*), and older brother (*gēgē*). These fictive kinship terms (Kraska-Szlenk 2018; Kueh 2013) construct communicators' relational identity as "family members" (Chen 2022; Ren and Chen 2019). However, in a WeChat virtual community, the real identity and social attributes of the communicators are ignored or even hidden (Yus 2011). That is, because the age, gender, social status, and even social relations of the addresser and the addressee (Zhu 2010) may not be considered significant in online communication (Hampel 2015), the communicators' identity will not have to be presented, which is, however, usually the case in face-to-face communication (Zhang and Ma 2021). Instead of focusing on the communicators' age, gender or social status, the addresser in a virtual community may opt to construct a temporary and even fictive identity (Sandel 2002) for the addressee.

The other type of need at play here is the need for interpersonal relating in online communication. While factors such as age and gender do not have to be considered in a virtual context, the addresser does consider the relationship with the addressee. As the literature demonstrates, the addresser has the need to negotiate or manage the relationship with the addressee in a virtual context (Quirk et al. 1985; You 2014; Yus 2011). For example, we could always find evidence that the addressers use *érzi* in a friendly tone. The friendly tone expresses closeness and solidarity between addresser and addressee (Hampel 2015). Besides, when using *érzi* in a generalized manner, the addressers could make clear that they do so with the purpose of jocular abuse. Such mock impoliteness can be a strategy used for fostering intimacy with intimate partners or close friends (Chen 2019). Since *érzi* connotes deep affection, the generalized use of the address term has a positive effect on the relationship with the addressee. That is why the generalized address term *érzi* is widely used in online communication even though it may threaten the addressee's face, which is highly valued in a real hierarchical social network (Arundale 2010; Yang 2021).

To satisfy the two needs, online communicators are supposed to share some background knowledge about communication in the cyber context (Yus 2011). As the WeChat users involved in the examples were close friends or intimate partners, the addressers knew who *érzi* referred to despite the fact that they were not engaged in face-to-face communication. Further, "non-insiders" like third readers of WeChat moments will be prevented from knowing whom the addresser is referring to.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have primarily analyzed the referents, functions, and motivations involved in the use of the generalized address term *érzi*. We have also discussed why WeChat users could manage to enact these functions online, based on data collected from WeChat and feedback from interviews. It was found that the Chinese address form conveys either faithful meaning, when it refers to a male child, or virtual meaning, when it refers to the addresser's friends, classmates or pets. In a virtual context, the generalized use of the address term may perform functions such as relationship enhancement, jocular abuse or fondness expression. This paper also argued that the generalized address term *érzi* might well originate in WeChat users' needs for identity avoidance and relation management in a virtual community. The enactment of these functions is made possible by the affordances of the virtual context of WeChat and the shared knowledge on the part of the communicators involved.

This study may help to better understand the use of generalized address terms in a virtual context and can contribute to the development of cyberpragmatics with regard to online communication. It also supplies new evidence for the subjectification and virtualization of lexical items (Lee et al. 2017) in online discourse; i.e., how the virtual context may give rise to relational functions for lexical items while coercing their semantic "distortion". Practically, the study may provide a window on how Chinese young people, especially university students, manage their relations by way of addressing each other online in particular ways, something that is quite impossible for their mentors or parents to find out or understand from their daily face-to-face interactions.

This study has also not covered some relevant issues and thus leaves room for future research. One issue that remains underexplored is the interpretation mechanism of generalized address terms in internet-mediated communication (including WeChat, MicroBlog, Twitter, etc.). Even though an addresser may try to maintain a relationship with the addressee, it is unclear whether the addressee will interpret the address terms as the addresser has expected. Thus, more efforts should be made to examine how the varied referents of *érzi* could be interpreted by adapting to the virtual context.

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