The Who and How of Recreating the Dead: Relational Distance and Acceptance

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Abstract: Emerging AI technologies allow deceased individuals to be recreated through enhanced images, voice cloning, conversational agents, and AI-generated video, thereby raising urgent questions regarding who may be recreated after death and whether public acceptance adheres to any consistent logic. This exploratory study addresses the following two research questions (RQs): RQ1. Is acceptance patterned across recreation technologies and across the relationship of the people being recreated? RQ2. To what degree is acceptance explained by country of residence, prior bereavement, and digital or AI service use? We surveyed 1,000 adults (n = 200 per country) across five English-speaking, multi-ethnic countries—namely, the United States, Singapore, India, New Zealand, and South Africa. These countries were selected for English-language fielding to avoid measurement non-equivalence arising from translation rather than to ensure cultural representativeness. Participants evaluated eight recreation technologies that differed in the degree of generative intervention and 11 categories of deceased persons that differed in relational closeness. Data were analysed using cross-tabulation with chi-square tests, the Friedman test, bivariate correlation, and multiple regression. Acceptance exhibited a stable two-dimensional pattern—specifically, higher for less generative or interactive technologies, such as photo enhancement, and lower for AI voice and conversational agents; likewise, it was higher for close family members and lower for distant or public figures. Notably, recreations of grandparents personally known to respondents were more accepted than grandparents never met, suggesting that lived relationships matter more than genealogy alone. Cross-national differences emerged primarily as differences in overall acceptance levels rather than in the underlying pattern; although the gap between the most and least accepting countries reached 42.5 percentage points for parents, the relational ordering remained intact. In regression analyses, familiarity with generative AI, especially image-generation tools, was the strongest predictor of acceptance, whereas bereavement experience was not significant once AI use was considered. This study proposes a relational-technological framework for understanding the public acceptance of AI recreations of the deceased, in which national context affects overall acceptance levels while leaving the underlying pattern markedly stable.

Keywords: AI afterlife, Cross-national survey, Relational distance, AI familiarity, Technology acceptance

1. Introduction

In recent years, advances in generative AI have rapidly diversified and operationalised technologies that recreate deceased individuals. Through AI use, long-standing practices—such as upscaling or colorising old photographs—have extended to animating images, reconstructing the voices of the deceased, and rendering 'what if they were still here' scenarios through visuals or chatbots. Such technologies, though anticipated as novel means of remembering the dead, have also intensified ethical, psychological, and social debate.

Much research on the 'digital afterlife'—a person's persistence in digital form after death—has focused on the bereaved and on the design and ethical aspects of individual services. Far fewer studies have examined which relationships to the deceased and which forms of recreation people are willing to accept. Moreover, factors such as an individual's familiarity with the technology itself may also play a role. Consequently, the questions of who may be recreated, in what form, and to what extent such recreation is accepted—that is, whether acceptance has any underlying structure at all—remain unclear.

To examine this question in an exploratory manner, we administered an online survey to 1,000 adults across the following five multi-ethnic, English-speaking countries: the United States, Singapore, India, New Zealand, and South Africa. The survey was administered entirely in English in all five countries to minimise potential translation-related variability. Participants evaluated eight recreation technologies that differed in the degree of generative intervention involved, as well as 11 categories of deceased persons that differed in relational closeness. We address the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Does the acceptance of AI-based recreation of the deceased demonstrate a consistent pattern across types of recreation technology and relationships to the target of recreation?

RQ2: To what extent is acceptance explained by country of residence, prior bereavement, and experience using digital and AI services?

This study is positioned as an exploratory study within multi-ethnic societies rather than as a culturally representative international comparison. It aims to provide a foundational framework and empirical basis for future theoretical and policy work.

2. Related Research

2.1 Acceptance of Digital Recreation of the Deceased in Japan

With the diffusion of generative AI in Japan, public acceptance of the digital recreation of the deceased has shifted, as indicated by comparisons with survey findings collected from before generative AI became widespread. A survey of individuals who had recently lost someone close to them (N = 1,300) reported that 85% of respondents did not wish to have the digital remains of the deceased processed, with only 1.3% expressing interest in recreation through an AI chatbot (Orita, 2022).

This pattern seems to have changed. For instance, a 2025 survey administered in Japan (N = 1,000) on the awareness of, intention to use, and valued elements of death tech found that usage intention was significantly higher among bereaved individuals and generative AI users, despite low overall awareness of such services. Regarding usage intention, conventional services, such as portrait photo enhancement, were received favourably, whereas conversational AI services tended to be viewed negatively. Furthermore, although 'alignment with one's memories and impressions' and 'fidelity to the actual appearance during the person's lifetime' were identified as valued elements of recreation, the two do not necessarily coexist, highlighting an inherent tension in expectations of recreation (Orita, 2025).

Does this pattern of acceptance, then, vary across cultures and religions?

2.2 Cultural and Religious Differences

Dwi's (2025) cross-cultural review of death tech acceptance examined 45 works (2020–2025) using a thematic SWOT analysis and the responsible inclusive innovation framework. The review revealed that ritual adaptation and spiritual meaning-making are essential to acceptance, noting, for instance, that Japanese and Jewish cultures exhibit high acceptance, whereas Hindu and Luhya cultures experience 'ontological dissonance'. Simultaneously, it underscored that data sovereignty remains a pressing concern.

Degni (2025) proposed a framework for AI-based posthumous recreation technologies from cultural and religious perspectives, summarising the relationship between beliefs concerning the afterlife, such as heaven and hell, and AI-based simulation. However, although the work addressed the use of such services, it did not analyse the influence of familiarity with generative AI.

Collectively, these two studies suggest that death tech—and, specifically, AI-based recreation of the deceased—warrants international cross-cultural research and that the design of services should likewise account for such diversity.

Additionally, some studies have evaluated grieftech acceptance from a consumer-behaviour perspective. Moriuchi et al. (2026) reported that attitudes towards grieftech drive usage intention through continuing bonds and that this process is influenced by the time elapsed since the loss, engagement, and perceived ethicality. However, this study focused exclusively on bereaved individuals.

2.3 AI Familiarity and Acceptance

Research on the acceptance of AI technologies has accumulated rapidly in recent years; however, its conceptual organisation remains underdeveloped. Kelly et al.'s (2023) systematic review of 60 studies on AI acceptance noted that although research on usage intentions and AI acceptability is expanding rapidly, the concepts and theoretical frameworks employed are highly diverse and have not yet achieved sufficient theoretical integration.

Concerning technology acceptance more generally, the technology acceptance model (TAM; Davis, 1989) was an influential early proposal in the information systems field, while Kim et al. (2007) subsequently advanced the value-based adoption model (VAM). The VAM posits that users weigh the benefits a technology affords against the sacrifices it entails; this comparison precipitates a perceived value that, in turn, influences adoption intention. Applied to the AI-based recreation of the deceased, users may weigh benefits, such as preserving the deceased's memory or easing the sense of loss, against ethical and normative costs, such as infringing upon the deceased's dignity, diminishing the authenticity of memory, and recreating a person without their consent.

Relatively recently, attitudes towards AI itself and prior experience using it have been found to influence the acceptance of specific AI services. Novotny et al. (2026) developed a short scale measuring general attitudes towards AI and demonstrated that positive attitudes towards AI are associated with the acceptance of AI services; furthermore, such attitudes are reportedly linked to familiarity with and experience using digital technologies.

Building on this prior work, this study focuses on experience using digital services, including generative AI, as one facet of AI familiarity. Specifically, we use the frequency of using social networking services, messaging services, video calling/conferencing, text-generative AI, and image-generative AI as indicators. Accordingly, we examine, in an exploratory manner, how these relate to the acceptance of AI-based recreation of the deceased.

2.4 The Personhood of Death and Relational Distance

The recreation of the deceased carries different meanings depending on who is recreated and for whom. Morris and Brubaker (2025) introduced the term 'generative ghost' for an agentic AI representation of a deceased person, distinguishing between whether it presents itself as a 'reincarnation' or a 'representation', while noting risks to mental health, reputation, and sociocultural order. Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska (2024) further distinguish the data donor, the data recipient, and the service interactant as distinct stakeholders in the digital afterlife industry. Such accounts resonate with Continuing Bonds Theory, which holds that healthy grief involves a transformed, ongoing relationship with the deceased rather than its severance (Klass et al., 1996); yet recent work cautions that maintaining such bonds does not uniformly aid grief and varies by relationship and culture (Clarke et al., 2026; Hewson et al., 2024).

3. Method

3.1 Survey Design and Participants

We administered an online survey using Freeasy, a self-service online survey platform, from February to March 2026. This study employed an exploratory convenience sample rather than a nationally representative design. Five English-speaking countries (the United States, Singapore, India, New Zealand, and South Africa) were selected because the platform supported English-language surveys in these countries. Quota sampling by gender and age was applied in each country, yielding 200 respondents per country (N = 1,000). Freeasy restricted each registered panel member to a single survey completion, preventing duplicate responses. Additional details of panel recruitment were not disclosed by the provider.

3.2 Data Quality

Although the survey did not include attention-check items, response quality was screened post hoc by identifying straight-line responses (i.e., identical answers across all Likert items). Excluding these cases did not meaningfully alter the main patterns reported below, indicating that the findings are not driven by low-quality responses.

3.3 Measures

Alongside demographic information (age group, gender, and country of residence) collected during panel recruitment, the survey measured bereavement experience (Q1) and the frequency of using five digital services (Q2). Awareness of digital services related to death or mourning (Q3) was also assessed but is not analysed in the present study.

Acceptance of AI recreations was measured from two perspectives: Q4 assessed the likelihood of using AI-based services after losing someone close, and Q5 assessed approval of family members using the same services after one's own death. The eight services ranged from simple photo enhancement to AI-generated videos and conversational AI systems. Q6 evaluated acceptance of recreating 11 categories of deceased individuals, including parents, spouses, children, grandparents, friends, historical figures, celebrities, and politicians. See Table 1 for exact question wording and response formats.

Table 1: Overview of Questions

Overview of Questions		
Question	**Wording**	**Response Format**
Q1	"Have you experienced the death of a close family member or someone close to you within the past five years (since 2021)?"	Yes/No
Q2	"How often do you use the following services?" (SNS, messaging apps, video calls, text-generative AI, image-generative AI)	5-point: Daily – I do not use this service
Q4	"Imagine that you have lost someone close to you. How likely would you be to use the following services?" (8 services)	5-point: Very likely – Very unlikely
Q5	"If you were to pass away, would you approve of your family or friends using the following services?" (same 8 services)	5-point: Strongly approve – Strongly disapprove
Q6	"Assuming that the following individuals have passed away or will pass away in the future, how do you feel about digitally recreating them using AI?" (11 categories of deceased individuals)	5-point: Strongly desire to recreate – Strongly object to recreating

3.4 Statistical Analysis

Before statistical analyses, all items were coded such that higher scores indicated greater acceptance. The researcher manually verified the converted data, with the generative AI system Claude used only to assist in checking the coding procedure's consistency. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.

For Q4 and Q5, the mean scores across the eight items were computed as the acceptance score. The mean acceptance scores were 3.21 (SD = 1.19) and 3.38 (SD = 1.15) for Q4 and Q5, respectively, indicating that respondents were slightly more willing to approve the use of AI recreations following their own death than to use such services after losing someone close. Internal consistency was high, with Cronbach's α values of .94 for both Q4 and Q5. Although the eight technologies differ in their degree of generative intervention (see Figure 1), this high internal consistency supports the use of a composite acceptance score for correlation and regression analyses. Technology-specific differences are examined separately in the descriptive results.

For Q6, given that the 11 relational targets are conceptually heterogeneous (ranging from close family members to public figures), no composite acceptance score was computed. Instead, acceptance across relational targets was examined descriptively (see Figure 2) and tested for overall significance using a Friedman test, reported below.

First, descriptive statistics (means) were computed for each item in Q4, Q5, and Q6 to examine acceptance patterns across AI recreation technologies and categories of deceased individuals.

Subsequently, Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships between the acceptance scores and explanatory variables.

Finally, multiple linear regression analyses using the Enter method were performed separately for the acceptance scores for Q4 and Q5. Independent variables included country (dummy coded with the United States as the reference category), bereavement experience, gender, age group, and the frequency of using the five digital services (i.e., SNS, messaging services, video calls or online meetings, text-generative AI, and image-generative AI).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics (RQ1: Patterns Based on Technology and Relationship)

Death-tech services were classified according to the nature of the recreation involved: photo-based digital editing, which restores or augments existing records (photo enhancement, portrait extraction, photo animation, and AI video generation from photos); predictive reconstruction, which generates an appearance that never existed (the 'what if they were still alive' image); non-interactive AI voice generation, which recreates the deceased's voice without two-way exchange (an AI-generated voice reading a message from the deceased); and interactive AI dialogue (conversing via an AI-generated voice and chatting with an AI version of the deceased).

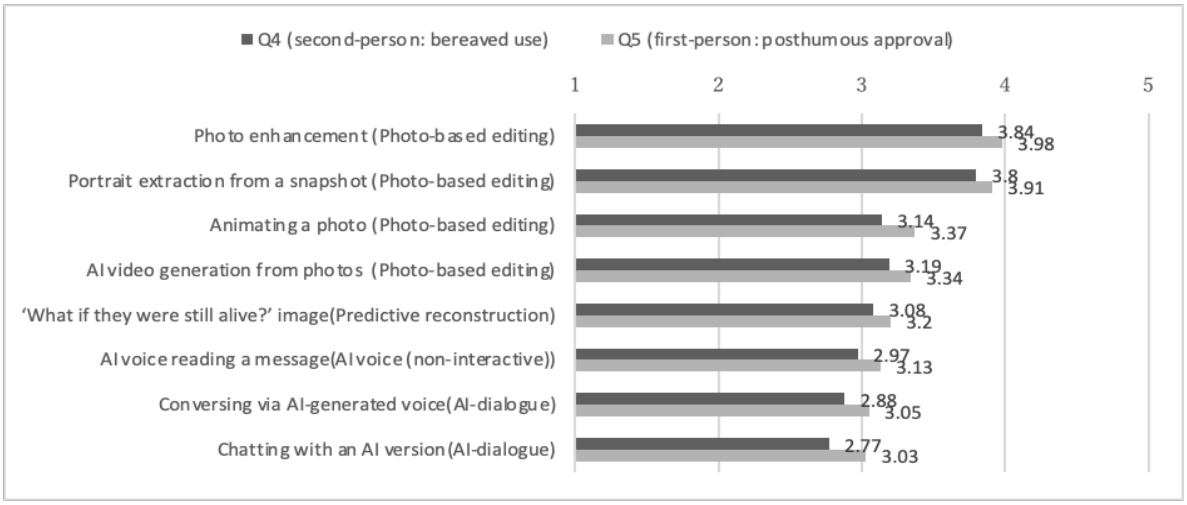

Figure 1: Acceptance of death-tech services based on technology type (means, 1–5)

Note. N = 1,000. The response scale ranges from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating greater acceptance. Q4 = willingness to use a service as a bereaved family member (second-person death); Q5 = approval of one's own posthumous recreation (first-person death).

For both Q4 and Q5, acceptance was higher for less generative technologies, such as photo enhancement and portrait extraction, and lower as the degree of AI-driven reconstruction or predictive generation increased—through photo animation, AI video generation, voice generation, and AI dialogue. The highest acceptance was for photo enhancement (Q4 = 3.84, Q5 = 3.98), whereas the lowest was for chatting with an AI version of the deceased (Q4 = 2.77, Q5 = 3.03).

Nevertheless, the decline was not strictly monotonic with the degree of generation. Within photo-based editing, a clear gap separated restoration and extraction (photo enhancement and portrait extraction, with mean scores in the 3.8 range) from technologies that add motion (photo animation and AI video generation, with mean scores in the 3.1 range). Moreover, acceptance of AI video generation from photos was nearly identical to that of photo animation (Q4 = 3.19 versus 3.14),despite involving a greater degree of algorithmic reconstruction.

For every technology, approval of one's own posthumous recreation (Q5) exceeded the willingness to use the same service as a bereaved family member (Q4). This asymmetry was the most pronounced for interactive, dialogue-based services, such as chatting with an AI version (+0.26), and the least for less generative ones, such as portrait extraction (+0.11).

Subsequently, acceptance was compared across relational targets (Figure 2). Acceptance was high for close family members—namely, parents, spouse or partner, children, and siblings—and decreased as relational distance increased, reaching its lowest values for historical figures, celebrities, and politicians. Recreations of grandparents whom respondents had met (3.21) elicited higher acceptance than those of grandparents whom they had never met (3.01); the latter fell between ancestors and historical figures. A Friedman test confirmed that acceptance differed significantly across the 11 relational targets, $\chi^2(10) = 517.705$, $p < .001$, $N = 1{,}000$, supporting the gradient observed in Figure 2. Pairwise comparisons showed that most targets differed significantly from one another, except for a few adjacent pairs with similar relational distance (e.g., parents versus spouse/partner), which did not differ significantly.

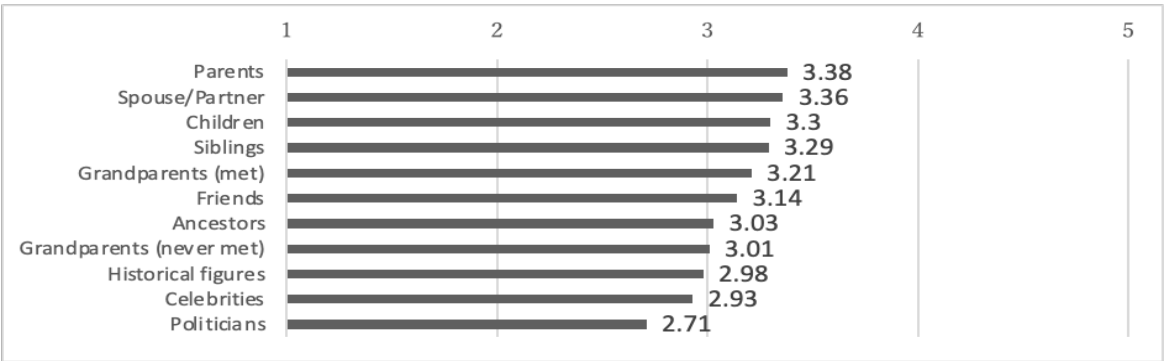

Figure 2: Desire to recreate based on relational target (means, 1–5)

Note. N = 1,000. The response scale ranges from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating a stronger desire to recreate the target.

For cross-tabulation, the five-point responses were classified into three categories—specifically, desire to recreate (responses 4–5), neutral (3), and object to recreating (1–2)—to ensure adequate expected cell counts across the five countries. For each relational target, the proportion of respondents who desired recreation was compared across countries (Table 2). For all 11 targets, the association between country and acceptance was significant (all $p < .001$). The rank ordering of acceptance was largely consistent across countries; however, acceptance was higher for close family members—namely, parents, spouse or partner, and children—and lower for historical figures, celebrities, and politicians.

Comparing overall levels across countries, India exhibited the highest acceptance for every target, followed by South Africa, then the United States and Singapore, with New Zealand ranking lowest. Specifically, for parents, 74.5% of Indian respondents wished to recreate the deceased, compared with 32.0% in New Zealand—a cross-national gap of 42.5 percentage points; for politicians, the gap was narrower (India: 46.5% versus New Zealand: 17.0%, a 29.5-point difference) but remained substantial. Thus, although overall acceptance levels differed across countries, the rank ordering across relational targets was broadly shared.

Table 2: Percentage desiring to recreate based on relational target and country

Percentage desiring to recreate based on relational target and country							
Target	**India**	**South Africa**	**US**	**Singapore**	**NZ**	**Total**	**χ^2 (df = 8)**
Parents	74.5	61.0	45.0	49.0	32.0	52.3	90.76***
Spouse/Partner	72.0	60.0	45.0	49.0	35.5	52.3	75.96***
Children	68.5	58.5	40.5	43.5	35.5	49.3	76.24***
Siblings	68.0	57.5	40.5	40.5	34.0	48.1	75.78***
Grandparents (met)	65.5	52.5	42.5	35.5	30.0	45.2	74.15***
Friends	66.5	51.5	37.5	35.0	30.0	44.1	76.42***
Grandparents (never met)	57.5	43.0	35.5	31.0	28.0	39.0	50.76***
Ancestors	56.0	41.0	41.0	29.0	27.0	38.8	50.87***
Historical figures	56.5	38.0	31.5	26.5	23.0	35.1	66.71***
Celebrities	53.0	33.5	29.5	25.5	24.5	33.2	51.84***
Politicians	46.5	24.0	27.0	20.0	17.0	26.9	61.34***

Note. Cell entries are within-country percentages selecting 'desire to recreate' (response 4 or 5). Each country n = 200; N = 1,000. χ^2 tests were conducted separately for each target (nation × three-level acceptance). *** p < .001 (two-tailed). US = United States; NZ = New Zealand.

4.2 Pearson Correlations (N = 1,000)

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlations between the acceptance scores and other variables. For both Q4 and Q5, the correlation with image-generative AI use was the strongest, exhibiting a moderate level (Q4: r = .550; Q5: r = .477), followed by text-generative AI use and the use of video calling/conferencing. Correlations with SNS and messaging-app use were relatively weak.

Bereavement experience demonstrated a weak positive correlation with acceptance, whereas age cohort exhibited a weak negative correlation. Correlations with gender were not significant. Additionally, the two acceptance scores were highly correlated with each other (r = .822), while image- and text-generative AI use were also relatively strongly correlated (r = .583).

Table 3: Pearson correlations with acceptance (N = 1,000)

Pearson correlations with acceptance (N = 1,000)		
Variable	**Q4 (second-person use)**	**Q5 (first-person approval)**
Image-generative AI use	.550***	.477***
Text-generative AI use	.415***	.379***
Video calling/conferencing	.351***	.290***
SNS use	.196***	.187***
Messaging app use	.175***	.166***
Bereavement experience	.154***	.104**
Generation (age cohort)	−.151***	−.109***
Gender	−.042	−.039

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 (two-tailed). SNS = Social Networking Services

4.3 Multiple Regression (RQ2: Predictors of Acceptance)

Table 4 presents the results of the multiple regression analyses, with the acceptance scores as dependent variables. Both overall models were significant: the variance explained was R^2 = .349 and R^2 = .263 for Q4 and Q5, respectively.

Across both models, image-generative AI use was the strongest predictor (Q4: β = .392; Q5: β = .349; both p < .001), while text-generative AI use was a significant positive predictor. Video calling/conferencing was significant only for Q4. Regarding country, India exhibited a positive association only for Q4, whereas New Zealand exhibited a negative association across both models.

Once the other variables were controlled for, bereavement experience, gender, and age cohort were not significant predictors. For reference, in a model excluding the AI-use variables, bereavement experience and some country dummies were significant; adding the AI-use variables substantially increased the variance explained, while bereavement experience's effects and some country effects were no longer significant.

Table 4: Multiple regression predicting acceptance (standardised β)

Multiple regression predicting acceptance (standardised β)		
Predictor	**Q4 (second-person use) β**	**Q5 (first-person approval) β**
India (versus US)	.115**	.064
New Zealand (versus US)	−.079*	−.087*
Singapore (versus US)	.028	.036
South Africa (versus US)	.048	.007
Bereavement experience	.029	.002
Gender	−.012	−.014
Generation	−.039	−.005
Text-generative AI use	.086*	.107**
Image-generative AI use	.392***	.349***
SNS use	.050	.063
Messaging app use	−.020	−.009
Video calling/conferencing	.082**	.047
R^2	.349	.263
Adjusted R^2	.341	.254
F (12, 987)	44.03***	29.31***

Note. US = reference category for country dummies. Standardised coefficients (β) are reported. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. SNS = Social Networking Services

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined, in an exploratory manner, the acceptance of AI-mediated digital recreation of the deceased, focusing on the type of service, relationship to the target of recreation, and associations with individual attributes and experience using AI.

First, acceptance exhibited a gradient across service types. Technologies that complement existing images, such as photo enhancement and portrait extraction, were relatively readily accepted. By contrast, acceptance declined through photo animation and AI video generation and was lowest for highly interactive services that reconstruct and newly generate the deceased, such as AI voice and AI chat. This suggests that, even when people accept the deceased's digital recreation, they remain cautious towards newly generated content. This caution may be interpreted as reflecting a fear of overwriting one's memories (Orita, 2026).

Second, a consistent pattern was noted vis-à-vis the target of recreation. Acceptance was high for close family members—namely, parents, spouses, and children—and declined as relational distance increased, progressing through friends, ancestors, historical figures, celebrities, and politicians. Specifically, the finding that recreations of grandparents whom one had met were rated more favourably than those of grandparents whom one had never met underscores that acceptance is potentially governed by the human relationship and experience actually formed with the deceased, rather than kinship.

Third, although differences according to country of residence were observed, the overall pattern was consistent. In every country, acceptance tended to decline as the target shifted from close relatives to public figures. Nevertheless, country-level differences were evident, with acceptance generally higher in India and lower in New Zealand. This suggests that, while acceptance of AI-based recreation may vary across cultural

backgrounds, the fundamental criteria through which people evaluate technologies and relationships may be broadly shared.

Furthermore, in the multivariate analyses, experience using image- and text-generative AI was the strongest factor accounting for acceptance. By contrast, bereavement experience—significant in the bivariate correlations—was no longer significant once experience using AI was controlled for. This indicates that acceptance of AI-based recreation of the deceased may be accounted for less by bereavement itself than by familiarity with new AI technologies, consistent with prior work suggesting that AI familiarity fosters acceptance.

Based on these results, this study proposes two axes for understanding the acceptance of AI-based recreation of the deceased: the technology's degree of generative intervention and relational distance. As generative AI becomes increasingly widespread, overall acceptance may also shift over time.

This study has several limitations. First, it utilised exploratory convenience sampling; hence, the samples are not representative of their respective countries. Second, although religion is likely a key explanatory variable, it was not included in the survey items for reasons related to ethical review. Third, although the survey did not include attention-check items, post-hoc screening (see 3.2 Data Quality) indicated that the findings were robust to the exclusion of low-quality responses. Fourth, the cross-sectional design cannot establish whether familiarity with generative AI fosters acceptance or whether more accepting individuals simply use such tools more frequently.

Future research should clarify in greater detail why people accept or reject particular forms of recreation; to this end, comparative studies incorporating religion and views of life and death, longitudinal surveys examining the relationship between acceptance and the spread of generative AI, and mixed-methods designs integrating open-ended responses and interviews are needed.

In conclusion, this study makes two main contributions to understanding the acceptance of AI-based recreation of the deceased. First, it proposes a two-axis framework—the technology's degree of generative intervention and relational distance—and demonstrates that acceptance is structured along these axes in a relatively stable manner across cultural contexts, with culture shifting the acceptance level rather than the structure itself. Second, it demonstrates that acceptance is more strongly associated with familiarity with generative AI than with bereavement experience, thereby highlighting the importance of technological familiarity in shaping public acceptance of AI recreations of the deceased.

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Ethics Declaration: This study did not require ethical clearance under the guidelines of the authors' institution. It involved an anonymous online survey that collected no personally identifying information and posed no more than minimal risk to participants; further, participation was voluntary, and questionnaire completion constituted informed consent. The data were de-identified by the panel provider before analysis. Sensitive attributes, such as religious beliefs, were deliberately excluded from the questionnaire.

AI Declaration: This paper was prepared with the assistance of generative AI tools (Claude and ChatGPT). These tools were used to help ensure the accuracy and consistency of data processing and coding, as well as to support drafting and language editing of the manuscript. The study design, research questions, statistical analyses, interpretation of the findings, and conclusions are the original work of the authors. All AI-assisted content was carefully reviewed, edited, and approved by the authors, who assume full responsibility for this paper's content.

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