What’s in a Name? A Window into Pop Culture’s Influence On Society

Some of us got names our parents just liked. Some of us are named after parents, grandparents, or family friends. And some of us are named after vampires, Disney princesses, witches, wizards, Kardashians, or the mermaid from *Splash.*

The US SSA has a database documenting popularity for every name given to more than five babies of a given gender in a given year from 1880 through 2017, letting me take a look at trends in the names of fictional and nonfictional pop-culture icons and their relationship to a name’s popularity.

# Girls Named Madison

This is one of the most obscure, and arguably coolest, examples, though others have noted it before me. From 1880 to 1983, Madison was a used consistently year to year but infrequently overall for boys, with an average of about 34 uses per year.

From 1880 to 1983, the name Madison was used a **total** of 30 times for girls. In 1984, the main character from *Splash* christened herself “Madison” based on the street name, and by the end of the year, more girls were given the name Madison (42) than in the last 100 years combined.

By the end of the decade, 3, 789 girls had been named Madison. The popularity peaked in 2001, when 22,164 girls were named Madison in a single year.

# A New Meaning to Naming Babies After Friends

I started by looking at *Friends* because as a show, it just has such extraordinary cultural capital. It still airs on multiple networks, and was the second most streamed show in 2018, which is why competing platforms have paid hundreds of millions for the streaming rights. This show clearly means something to American society, and it looks like it meant enough to influence how we name our children.

## Ross, Rachel, and Joey

Although a first look at this data had some people suggesting I compare it to sentiment analysis, it’s hard to argue any trends distinct enough for the names Ross and Joey to make a claim here. The name Rachel does have a marked trend shift, but with a name that common, there’s too many other factors at play.

## Phoebe

By the mid-90s, the name Phoebe was already trending upward, but it does jump a bit from 1994 to 1995, and the trend gets much steeper from there. Whether that’s direct cause and effect is hard to say, but that’s not so with some of the other names.

## Chandler

Personally, my favorite part of this data is that Chandler had been trending upward for both genders from the mid-80s, and 1993 was the first time it was more popular for girls than boys. It feels very on brand for Ms. Shandellar Bong.

The fact that the number of baby boys named Chandler increased by over 1000 from 1994 to 1995 makes a pretty compelling case for the impact of friends, as does the fact that the trend for naming girls chandler completely reversed itself within the year.

## Monica

The downward trend on the name Monica *may* have been subtly reversing after *Friends* began airing, but when the Lewinsky-Clinton Scandal began making headlines, the name’s usage went off a cliff.

## Potterheads, Twi-Hards, Kinksters, and the influence of books versus movies

With the current controversy around J.K Rowling, I’m wrestling a fair bit with my present feelings about Harry Potter, but there’s no denying the importance this series had for me, and millions of others, growing up.

Also, I definitely had a Twilight phase (like the rest of middle-school aged children at the time, okay?).

Individually, there are only a few really interesting trends, like the differences between genders for the name Carlisle, but taken together, across the board the book release had far less, if any, impact on name trends than movie releases.

A part of that is that books are less aggressively advertised and in a more saturated space than movies and TV shows, especially in the pre-streaming era, and therefore don’t enjoy the same immediacy of popularity as these other media.

However, these franchises were made into films precisely because they were so popular, and some of these Harry Potter characters weren’t introduced until later books, or in the case of Severus, weren’t revealed to be heroes instead of villains until later books.

Still, the trends, with the exception of Luna, which may have been started by the bookworms after all, are near immediate after the movie releases, regardless of which of the films is pertinent.

Admittedly, I think Helena Bonham Carter deserves more credit than anyone for the name Bellatrix getting traction, but beyond that, this sort of hurts my nerdy heart.

Perhaps an even greater blow to the literary snobs out there? Guess which name *did* respond to the release of a book more than a movie.

Anastasia, from 50 Shades of Gray.

For the book snobs out there, though, I will say this:

You won’t see a trend unless there *is* a viral factor, which I already conceded is a different animal with books and movies, not to mention that some of the most famous works of literature today were written earlier than these records (looking at you Jane Austen), or before the US (and SSA) existed (Shakespeare, anyone?).

Moreover, at least with Harry Potter and Twilight, there’s an element of fantasy here, meaning the names are either made up completely or intentionally old-fashioned. Those names are going to be associated most closely with these characters, but names like Harry, Ron, Edward, Christian, and have so many other associations to contend with.