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.

# A New Meaning to Naming Babies After Friends

### Why Check It Out

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.

### Highlights

* Personally, my favorite part of this data is that the name 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.
  + From 1994 to 1995, not only did use of the name Chandler for boys make a huge leap, but the trend reversed for girls, solidifying it as “more of a boys name.”
* 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. It’s a little harder to say how much of this is cause and effect.
* 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 and Twi-Hards

### Why Check it Out

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?).

### Highlights

* The names Sirius and Draco caught on faster than the name Hermione
* Like Chandler, gender trends for the name Carlisle reversed
* The name Severus catches on only when he’s revealed to be good instead of evil
* The most notable trend across the board is that book releases had far less, if any impact on the usage of names than book releases. It turns out, not everyone grew up with a “you can’t watch the movie until you read the book” rule. This, by and large, hurts my (possibly snobby) nerdy heart. \*\*\*

\*Luna may be the exception to this rule; the trend shifted after the book release but didn’t intensify after the movie release, staying relatively steady.

\*\* The trend for Bellatrix makes total sense for me, movie-wise. Helena Bonham Carter is flawless and I give her a lot of credit for that character/name becoming memorable.

### Bookworms, Take Comfort or Take Cover, I’m not sure which

I did find a series where the book had greater influence than the movie on naming trends. *50 Shades of Gray.*

## Less Sparkly Vampires, Self-Taught Witches, and Slayers

### Why Check it Out?

Again, cultural capital. Everything I picked is a modern work that has become popular enough that people know it even if they haven’t watched it and it gets consistently referenced in minor or major ways in other forms of media.

Also, I love it.

### Highlights

* Completely irrelevant to this analysis but my favorite data point: for a brief, shining moment in 1971, six sets of parents named their sons Buffy
* That said, not even one of, in my opinion, the most badass female characters ever could resurrect the name Buffy’s modest popularity of the mid-twentieth century. That said, I do wonder if it’s reemergence right around the shows end, after a near decade of absence, could be credited to the show.
* The trend for naming boys Angel, already moving up, intensified with the show, but unlike other names, the show’s start also coincides with the start of a trend increasing the use of Angel as a girl’s name.
* Turns out, people are actually named Drusilla, and the names peak popularity was in the 1940s and 50s.
* As hippy-dippy as the name Willow sounds, it wasn’t super popular in the ‘60s, and the start of the show seems to have kickstarted a continually growing popularity for the name.
* The show’s beginning coincides with a trend of naming children Xander outright as opposed to having it as a nickname, and it first appeared on the U.S. Popularity charts in 1999 (2 years after the show’s inception). The big jump, however, occurs the year the show ended. I haven’t found a reason that jump may have occurred (though if you can think of one, please enlighten me), so I’m going to give the credit to the loyal and adorkable Xander Harris.

## Great Singers of the Past Who Now Do Infomercials

### Why Check It Out

I just love this movie, ok?

### Highlights

* There’s obviously a very clear trend on the name’s Cher and Dionne during the heyday of the clueless characters’ namesakes. However, both names do see a much smaller uptick after the two aforementioned, fabulously dressed namesakes were introduced to the world in 1995.

## Animated Royalty

### Why check it out?

Because I’m a princess

### Princess Highlights

* People stared naming their children *Mulan* after the movie was released, but before that it had never been used (or at least not more than 5 times in a year since 1880).
* Trends for Jasmine and Giselle turned downward after the releases of *Enchanted* and *Aladdin*. I have a harder time believing that there’s a negative causal relationship on the well-received movies, but I can’t say for sure.
* *The Little Mermaid* and *The Princess and the Frog* were followed by a major leap in the popularity of the names Ariel and Tiana, but neither were long-lasting. Ariel has remained more popular than it was before the film’s release, Tiana has returned to previous levels.
* It’s too soon to tell long-term trends on the names Merida and Elsa, but both experienced major jumps after the releases of *Brave* and *Frozen* respectively. The early signs show that the name Elsa dropped below its pre-Frozen popularity within two years, but the name Merida may continue to trend upward.

### Prince Highlights

* Unlike Mulan, people did not start naming their children Shang
* Aladdin, Flynn, and Kristoff saw boosts after their movies.

## Keeping Up

### First Gen Highlights

* Kourtney and Khloe with a K were both consistently used but very uncommon until the Kardashians stepped into the spotlight, and then had a big jump.
* Courtney with a C had been trending downward consistently and Chloe with a C was trending upward. Neither trend was disrupted.
* Chloe and Khloe’s popularity declined at the same time

### Next Gen Highlights

* There are very few instances in my analysis where a name that was already relatively popular (1000+ uses) showed a notable response to a pop culture namesake for obvious reasons: it takes a smaller number of uses to be a proportionally large shift, and a more common name means we’re likely to associate it with more than just one character or public figure.
* In the two years after Kourtney Kardashian named her son Mason, the name went from 34th most popular boys name (out of 14,343) to the 12th most popular to the 2nd most popular, an increase of just under 9,000.
* The increased popularity for the name Penelope, though less staggering than Mason, is still one of the more remarkable results.
* It turns out North is mostly a boy’s name.
* Use of Dream and Reign, which had both previously been given to boys and girls, shifted for both genders; saint shifted only for boys.

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.

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.