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.

Why look at these trends? In part, just because it’s cool, but also:

* Just as arts and media shape our overall language and lexicon, they create names that didn’t exist or pull them out of obscurity
* Visualizing these trends creates a tangible display of the relationship between pop culture and society overall
* They sometimes solidify something as a “girl thing” or a “boy thing,” and sometimes they make something that was only for one gender ok for both, exposing the relationship between gender and media
* They show the ripple effect of these works. Some of these trends came and went, but others lasted decades because of secondary impact.

## Notable Examples

### Merfolk

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated

This one may surprise you—people in my generation are way more likely to know someone named Madison than to know the movie *Splash*, but if you do a quick search of the name’s history you’ll know that it came from a movie character who got it from a street sign.

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 famous east side Avenue, 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.

### Can You Wiggle Your Nose?

Chart

Description automatically generated

Similarly impactful on baby girls’ names was the TV show *Bewitched*; an average of 25 baby girls per year were named Samantha from 1880 to the early 60s. In 1963, 72 girls were given the name Samantha. In 1964, the number of girls given the name rose to 418. It continued to climb, nearing 2000 uses by 1965.

The name’s popularity lasted longer and extended further than Madison. It peaked 26 years after it’s initial rise to popularity, when 25,866 girls born in 1990 were given the name.

### Additional Highlights

* 1965 was also the first time on record that boys were given the name Samantha.
* Though not nearly to the same extent, the names of Samantha’s husband and daughter also gained popularity. A few parents also gave their children the eccentric name of Samantha’s mother.
* The name Madison actually trended up for boys, though it was brief and small-scale, after *Splash* was released

## A New Meaning to Naming Babies After Friends

Chart

Description automatically generated

### 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 “boy’s 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

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generatedChart, scatter chart

Description automatically generatedChart, scatter chart

Description automatically generatedChart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated

### HP Highlights

* The names Sirius and Draco caught on faster than the name Hermione
* The name Severus catches on only when he’s revealed to be good instead of evil

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated

### Twilight Highlights

* Like Chandler, gender trends for the name Carlisle reversed

### Across the Board

* The most notable trend 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.

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated

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

Chart

Description automatically generated

### Highlights

* It’s completely irrelevant to this analysis, but my favorite data point: for a brief, shining moment in 1971, six sets of parents named their son 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. I do wonder if its small reemergence right around the show’s 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 does not disrupt the trending popularity of Angel as a girl’s name.
* Turns out, people are actually named Drusilla, and the name’s 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.

## Animated Royalty

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated

### 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.

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated

### Prince Highlights

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

## Keeping Up

Chart

Description automatically generated

### 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

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated

### Next Gen Highlights

* 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 very strong.
* 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.