Identifier Readability and Program Comprehension: A PRISMA-Based Literature Review (2004–2024)

Bharat Babaso Mane
Department of Computer Science
Alliance University
Email: bharat.mane@gmail.com

***Abstract*—Identifier naming is a foundational element in software development that significantly influences code comprehension, readability, and maintainability. This paper presents a comprehensive literature review spanning two decades (2004–2024), systematically analyzing empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and tools related to identifier readability within the broader context of program comprehension. Following the PRISMA methodology, we identify and synthesize 52 peer-reviewed studies that examine how naming conventions, lexical features, cognitive models, and automated tools impact developers' understanding of source code. Key findings reveal that meaningful, consistent, and well-structured identifiers substantially improve comprehension and reduce maintenance overhead. The review highlights emerging trends, such as machine learning–driven name suggestion systems and readability metrics incorporating lexical semantics. Despite progress, challenges remain in generalizing findings across domains, measuring comprehension reliably, and integrating naming quality into software quality assurance processes. This paper offers critical insights for researchers, educators, and practitioners aiming to improve software readability and long-term maintainability through better naming practices.**

***Index Terms*—Identifier readability, program comprehension, code readability, naming conventions, semantic clarity, software maintainability, empirical software engineering, machine learning for code, PRISMA, identifier naming metrics**

I. Introduction

Programmers spend a large share of their time reading and understanding code rather than writing it. As early as the 1980s, software psychology research emphasized that identifier names (names of variables, functions, classes, etc.) serve as crucial "beacons" in code, activating higher-level knowledge about the program's intent [1]. In source code, identifiers constitute a majority of the content – by some estimates, around 70% of source code characters are identifiers [2]. Meaningful names thus play a central role in making code readable and comprehensible [2]. Good identifier naming can bridge the gap between code and the problem domain, reducing the cognitive effort needed to infer program behavior.

Conversely, poor or arbitrary naming can hinder understanding, as developers must spend extra mental effort deciphering the purpose of ambiguously named variables or functions. Despite their importance, choosing good identifier names is often challenging. Programming languages typically impose few constraints on identifier naming, allowing almost any sequence of characters [2]. This flexibility, combined with individual differences in naming style, leads to inconsistent or even misleading names in practice [2].

Coding style guides and naming conventions attempt to promote better naming, but they usually offer high-level advice (e.g., "identifiers should be self-describing") without rigorous definitions or enforcement [2]. As a result, naming problems remain common. For example, using single-letter or nonsensical names to save typing effort may drastically reduce code readability [1]. Similarly, inconsistent naming of the same concept in different parts of a codebase can confuse developers and impede program comprehension [1].

Over the past two decades (2004–2024), a growing body of research has explored the impact of identifier naming on program comprehension and software quality. This literature spans empirical studies with human developers, cognitive models of code understanding, automated analyses of codebases, and machine learning techniques for improving names. In this review, we systematically examine the cognitive and computational aspects of how developers understand code, with particular emphasis on identifier readability. We follow the PRISMA methodology for systematic reviews to ensure a comprehensive and unbiased coverage of relevant studies.

Key questions addressed include: How do identifier names affect a developer's ability to read and comprehend code? What frameworks or models describe this relationship? What metrics and tools have been proposed to evaluate or improve identifier naming? We synthesize findings from foundational works and recent advances, highlighting empirical evidence, important themes and trends, practical challenges, and open research gaps in this domain.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In **Methodology**, we describe our systematic literature search and selection process following PRISMA guidelines. We then present **Key Themes** emerging from the literature, including cognitive theories of code comprehension, the influence of naming conventions and styles, empirical studies on naming and comprehension, metrics for code readability and naming quality, and the impact of naming on maintainability. Next, we discuss **Trends** observed over the last 20 years and **Challenges & Gaps** that remain in research and practice. Finally, we conclude with a summary and suggestions for future work in **Conclusion**.

II. Methodology

This literature review was conducted following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology to ensure a transparent and reproducible process. We defined the scope to cover research from 2004 through 2024 on the topic of identifier readability and program comprehension, including both foundational works in the mid-2000s and the most recent studies. Our goal was to identify peer-reviewed publications (conference papers, journal articles, and high-quality theses) that examine how identifier naming influences code understanding or related aspects of software quality. We placed particular priority on highly cited papers and those indexed by major databases such as Scopus, IEEE Xplore, and the ACM Digital Library.

Data Sources and Search Strategy: We performed an extensive search across multiple scholarly databases. The core of our search strategy involved keywords targeting *identifier naming and program comprehension*. Example queries included combinations like **"identifier names"**, **"code readability"**, **"program comprehension"**, **"naming convention"**, **"code understandability"**, and **"software maintenance"**. We searched IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, Scopus, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. To ensure coverage of recent work, we also searched specialized venues (e.g., ICPC, ICSME, ICSE, MSR, and relevant journals such as *Empirical Software Engineering and Software Quality Journal*) and looked for secondary studies or literature reviews on code readability or naming.

Our initial search (after removing duplicate results across databases) returned approximately **350 records** that appeared relevant based on title and keywords. We then applied inclusion and exclusion criteria to filter these results. **Inclusion criteria were:** studies explicitly investigating identifier naming or code lexicon in the context of comprehension, readability, or maintainability; studies proposing or evaluating metrics or tools for identifier quality; and broader program comprehension works that dedicate significant discussion to naming aspects. We included both empirical studies (e.g. user experiments, repository mining) and theoretical works (e.g. frameworks, models) as long as they related to identifier readability. **Exclusion criteria were:** papers focused purely on other code readability factors (like formatting or code complexity) without mention of identifiers; studies on identifier naming only for purposes like security or obfuscation (out of scope for comprehension); non-peer-reviewed articles and anecdotal opinions; and works prior to 2004 (unless commonly cited as a foundational reference).

Screening and Selection: Following PRISMA guidelines, two phases of screening were performed – an initial title/abstract screening for relevance, followed by full-text screening for eligibility. At the title/abstract stage, we filtered out a large number of unrelated or marginally related works, retaining around 120 studies for deeper examination. In the full-text screening, we read each paper to ensure it provided substantial insight into identifier naming and comprehension. We also performed snowball sampling: examining references of included papers to find earlier influential works (some pre-2004 foundational studies were identified this way, e.g., classic comprehension models by Brooks and others) and checking forward citations for significant recent developments. After full-text review and quality appraisal, **we included Fifty-two (52) primary studies** that form the basis of this literature review. A PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the selection process is shown in **Figure 1** (from identification of records to final included studies). *Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of literature search and selection.*

Data Extraction and Synthesis: For each included study, we extracted key information such as: research methodology (e.g., experiment, survey, repository mining, theoretical analysis), the aspects of identifier naming investigated (e.g., name length, semantics, style, consistency), and main findings relating to program comprehension or maintenance. We also noted any proposed frameworks, metrics, or tools. The analysis of the literature was then organized thematically. We grouped studies by common themes (for instance, *human cognitive studies on naming, naming conventions and style guides, readability metrics, naming and software quality, automated rename recommendation tools, etc.*). Within each theme, we compared results across studies to identify consistent findings or contradictions. Throughout the review, we highlight representative studies with their empirical results or theoretical contributions, and we ensure all assertions are backed by citations to the literature.

Following PRISMA, we aim to provide a comprehensive and unbiased aggregation of the evidence on identifier readability. Where quantitative results are available (e.g., from experiments or correlations), we report them to illustrate the magnitude of effects. We also discuss the context of each study (such as participant expertise in experiments, or characteristics of datasets in mining studies) to properly qualify the findings. The next section, **Key Themes**, presents the synthesized findings of this systematic review, structured by topic for clarity.

III. Key Themes in the Literature

A. Cognitive Importance of Naming in Code Comprehension

1) Identifiers as Beacons: A recurring theme in the literature is that identifier names act as cognitive beacons that guide program comprehension [1]. Early cognitive models of code understanding, such as Brooks' theory of "beacons" in 1983 and Soloway & Ehrlich's studies in 1984, posited that recognizable identifier names trigger relevant domain knowledge and programming plans in a developer's mind [1]. For instance, encountering a variable named `totalSales` or a function named `calculateDiscount()` provides immediate clues about the code's purpose, allowing the reader to infer higher-level concepts without diving into low-level details. Modern studies reinforce this idea, demonstrating that meaningful names help developers build accurate mental models of the program more efficiently. Conversely, when identifiers are obscure (e.g., single-letter names like `x` or

misleading names that do not match functionality), comprehension is significantly hindered as programmers must expend additional cognitive effort to deduce the identifier's purpose.

2) Identifiers and Cognitive Load: Several studies have explored why effective naming aids comprehension from a cognitive perspective. One major reason is the reduction of cognitive load through chunking. Meaningful identifiers encapsulate multiple low-level details into a single concept, allowing developers to process code more efficiently. For example, a loop index named `customerIndex` is self-explanatory, whereas an index named `i` requires developers to recall its meaning from context. Using domain-relevant terms like `customerIndex` facilitates cognitive chunking, freeing up working memory for other tasks [1]. This concept aligns with Miller's psychological finding that humans can retain about 5 to 7 items in working memory; items in working memory; clear names effectively *package* information so that fewer distinct items need to be remembered at once [3].

Another relevant cognitive phenomenon is the **word superiority effect**. In natural language reading, people recognize letters more quickly when they are part of familiar words rather than isolated characters. Similarly, in code, developers process identifiers faster when they form meaningful terms rather than random strings [1]. One study explicitly relates this: Single-letter identifiers or unnatural abbreviations force developers to interpret character-by-character, while full-word identifiers enable direct recognition through a developer's mental lexicon. This makes variable names like `count` or `size` far easier to comprehend compared to arbitrary names like `xqzt` [1].

3) Semantic Clarity vs. Brevity Trade-off: Cognitive research has highlighted a common trade-off between short and descriptive names. On one hand, short names (e.g., single letters or abbreviations) are quicker to read, reduce visual clutter, and may be easier to remember for small scopes. This phenomenon is connected to the **word-length effect** in psychology, which suggests that shorter strings are generally easier to recall [1]. On the other hand, longer, descriptive names provide more semantic information, improving comprehension at a glance. Clear variable names convey purpose without requiring additional code examination, which speeds up the understanding process.

Moreover, the use of meaningful words in identifiers can lead to semantic priming. When developers read a familiar identifier, it activates expectations about subsequent variables or functions. For example, seeing a function named `compute()` may prime the developer to recognize a related variable named `result` [1]. This anticipatory processing enhances comprehension.

Ultimately, the literature suggests that in most cases, **semantic clarity** outweighs **brevity** in terms of comprehension benefits. While very short names may reduce reading effort, the loss of meaning introduces greater cognitive strain. Developers generally benefit more from meaningful names than from saving a few keystrokes [1]. Striking a balance between conciseness and informativeness remains a key challenge in identifier naming, a topic we will explore further in the section on naming guidelines.

IV. Effects of Identifier Name Characteristics: Empirical Findings

A number of empirical studies have directly tested how specific characteristics of identifier names (like length, format, and content) impact a programmer's ability to understand code. We summarize key findings from these studies.

A. Name Length – Full Words vs. Abbreviations vs. Letters

A foundational study by Lawrie et al. (2006) titled *"What's in a Name? A Study of Identifiers"* conducted an experiment with over 100 participants to compare comprehension when reading code with different identifier styles [3]. The code snippets were function implementations using **single-letter** identifiers, **abbreviated** identifiers, or **full-word** identifiers for variables. Participants read each function, described its purpose, and recalled the identifiers used.

The results were striking: **functions with full-word identifiers yielded the best comprehension**, with participants providing more accurate descriptions [3]. Single-letter identifiers (e.g., `i, j, k`) resulted in significantly reduced comprehension [3]. Abbreviations (e.g., `initPt` for `initialPoint`) performed better than single letters, but not as effectively as full words. Some common abbreviations, however, were found to be nearly as effective as full words if they were recognizable [3].

Memory performance followed a similar trend: full words were easier to recall correctly, making a stronger impression on the reader's understanding. Lawrie et al. concluded that **information content is paramount** – longer identifiers comprised of meaningful words enhance comprehension. The study suggested an optimal bundle of around five identifiers that a person can handle in working memory, aligning with Miller's cognitive memory model [3].

Later studies have corroborated these findings. Hofmeister et al. (2017) conducted an experiment with 72 professional developers to measure **defect detection speed** across different naming styles: single letters, abbreviations, and full words [3]. Participants detected bugs **significantly faster when meaningful words were used**. On average, developers were **19% faster** in finding defects with descriptive identifiers compared to those using single-letter or abbreviated names [4]. Furthermore, both single-letter names and abbreviations were shown to slow developers down equally, with no significant difference between the two [4].

B. Format and Word Delimiters: CamelCase vs. Snake_Case

Another aspect affecting readability is the choice of word delimiters in multi-word identifiers. Two common naming conventions are **camelCase** (e.g., `totalSalesAmount`) and **snake_case** (e.g., `total_sales_amount`). Empirical investigations have compared the readability of these styles.

Binkley et al. (2009) conducted a study with 135 participants (a mix of programmers and non-programmers) to evaluate the recognition accuracy of camelCase and snake_case

identifiers [5]. Participants were asked to recognize whether a particular identifier appeared in a code snippet. **CamelCase identifiers resulted in higher accuracy** rates overall, particularly for programmers already familiar with the convention [5]. However, participants who were unfamiliar with **camelCase showed a 13.5% faster recognition** rate with snake_case identifiers, likely because underscores provide clearer visual word separation [5].

A subsequent eye-tracking study by Sharif and Maletic (2010) found that programmers gazed longer at camelCase names, possibly due to the cognitive effort of parsing word boundaries without delimiters [5]. However, **no significant difference in comprehension accuracy was observed between camelCase and snake_case** when participants were experienced programmers [5]. The studies suggest that both styles are effective if used consistently, and familiarity tends to drive preference.

The consensus is that **naming style (case vs underscore)** has a relatively minor effect compared to the actual words used in the name. Both conventions are readable if used consistently, and personal or organizational familiarity often dictates preference. Style guides in industry sometimes vehemently prefer one over the other, but research suggests neither has a definitive comprehension edge in general [5]. What matters more is that multi-word names are readable at all – i.e., developers should use some word separation convention (camelCase, underscores, or even capitalization of words) to avoid run-on strings. A continuous string of letters without clear word breaks (e.g., totalsalesamount) is harder to decipher than either totalSalesAmount or total_sales_amount. Modern IDEs and fonts mitigate this by syntax highlighting or distinguishing capitals, but the principle of **consistent word separation** is well supported.

C. Use of Natural Language and Dictionary Words

Another important characteristic is whether the identifiers are actual words (or composed of actual words) from natural language. Several studies indicate that **using common dictionary words in identifiers improves code understandability**, whereas the use of non-words (made-up acronyms, arbitrary abbreviations) hampers it [6]. Butler et al. (2010) note that empirical studies have shown identifiers containing real words are easier for developers to read and comprehend [6]. This is intuitive – if a name is a recognizable English word (especially one relevant to the domain, like *price, customer, balance*), it conveys meaning immediately. If a name is not a real word (e.g., *XZQ13* or even domain-specific jargon that a developer might not know), the reader must rely on contextual inference. One large-scale empirical finding, from analysis of open-source Java systems, demonstrated a significant association between poorly formed names (such as those not following any dictionary word or known abbreviations) and code quality issues? [6]. In those projects, identifiers that were just acronyms or nonsense tokens correlated with a higher density of software defects (as detected by static analysis), suggesting that when developers struggle to name concepts clearly, it might reflect deeper confusion or complexity in the code [6]. While correlation is not causation, it underscores that *naming is often a proxy for clarity of thought* – clear code tends to have clear names.

D. Developer Experience and Naming Impact

An interesting nuance is that the benefits of good naming can depend on the **experience level of developers**. In an eye-tracking experiment reported in ICPC 2018, Hofmeister and colleagues examined how novice versus experienced programmers fared when reading code with "simple" (short) names versus "compound" (descriptive) names. They found that **experienced developers significantly benefited from descriptive compound names**, completing tasks faster when longer, more informative names were used [7]. Novice developers, on the other hand, showed **little difference** in performance between short and long names [7]. The interpretation offered was that experienced programmers have the knowledge to take advantage of the extra information in longer names – they quickly recognize domain terms and incorporate them into their mental model. Novices might not yet know the domain concepts or may be overwhelmed by longer identifiers, so they derive less immediate benefit. This suggests that while descriptive naming is generally positive, its impact is *amplified by the reader's familiarity with the context*. It also implies that teams consisting of highly experienced developers may place even greater importance on precise naming (since they will use those cues effectively), whereas teams of beginners should still use good names but might not see as dramatic a productivity boost from naming alone. In any case, no study suggests that good naming harms comprehension for anyone – at worst, a newbie finds a long name neutral, whereas an expert finds it very helpful. Thus, adopting clear naming conventions is recommended across the board, with the understanding that more experienced maintainers will leverage it most.

V. Naming Conventions and Guidelines

A. Stylistic Guidelines

Many programming language communities and projects have published naming conventions – for example, Java's official code conventions prescribe camelCase for variables and methods, PascalCase for classes, all-caps for constants, etc. Beyond such syntax and casing rules, conventions also include recommendations like "use descriptive names, avoid ambiguity, be consistent in terminology". An early comprehensive attempt to systematize naming advice is the work of Relf (2004), who proposed achieving software quality through better identifier names [6]. Relf compiled and empirically evaluated a set of **11 naming guidelines** (covering typographic rules and natural language considerations) for Java identifiers [6]. These guidelines included things like: use full English words, avoid abbreviations unless commonly accepted, use consistent terminology for the same concept, avoid misleading names, etc. Studies by Butler et al. adopted Relf's guidelines as a basis to check naming quality in code, indicating these

guidelines were more detailed than most prior literature suggestions [6].

B. Conciseness and Consistency (Concept-based Naming)

Deissenboeck and Pizka's influential 2005/2006 work introduced a *formal model of naming* that revolved around the concepts of conciseness and consistency [2]. They argued that each identifier should have a *bijective mapping* to the concept it represents – in other words, one concept, one name, and one name, one concept, within a given context [2]. *Conciseness* means an identifier's name should not carry extraneous information beyond the concept (no overly verbose or redundant wording), while consistency means the same concept should always be referred to by the same term throughout the codebase [1]. For example, if one part of a code uses CustomerList to denote a collection of customers, another part should not call a similar structure ClientArray – this would violate consistency and likely confuse maintainers. Similarly, if a variable's concept is just a "count", naming it totalNumberOfUsersCountValue is unnecessarily repetitive (violating conciseness). Deissenboeck and Pizka formalized these ideas by relating identifiers to a project domain dictionary: ideally, a project should maintain a dictionary of concepts and approved names [2]. They even developed a tool that builds an *identifier dictionary* as code is developed, to assist programmers in choosing consistent names [2]. This tool would suggest suitable names based on the established lexicon or flag potential naming deviations. The approach was a proactive enforcement of naming standards, beyond what typical linters did at the time.

Their study highlighted that while general coding standards exist, truly consistent naming requires project-specific agreement on terms. They noted that **most style guides only scratch the surface** of the naming problem, offering broad rules that are hard to enforce (e.g., "names should be self-descriptive") [2]. A formal model can provide precise rules (e.g., each concept in the domain model maps to a unique term in code) and thus be enforced with automated checks. The idea of building a project glossary has resonated in later works on *domain-specific naming*: essentially treating the codebase as its own language where certain words have specific meaning (for example, in a banking application, "Account" vs "User" vs "Customer" might have distinct defined meanings and should not be interchanged arbitrarily).

C. Empirical Validation of Conventions

While many guidelines sound reasonable, not all have strong empirical backing. Some conventions are based on folklore or personal preference. Researchers have thus tested certain common rules. For instance, one rule is "**Use nouns for class names and verbs for function names**" (to reflect that classes represent entities or concepts, and functions represent actions). This was generally supported by a study that found most developers naturally follow this, and when the convention is violated (e.g., a function named as a noun), it can create confusion [1]. Another guideline says to avoid **ambiguous abbreviations** – this has clear support from comprehension studies: abbreviations that can expand to multiple words or meaning (like addr for address or add rate?) are problematic.

An interesting convention is whether to allow "Hungarian notation" or prefixes/suffixes encoding type (e.g., szName for string name, or m_ for member variables). Modern practice has largely moved away from these in high-level languages, as they are seen as noise that can even mislead if code changes (e.g., a variable name implying an outdated type). There isn't much recent empirical work specifically on Hungarian notation's cognitive effect, but it's generally discouraged in favor of semantic naming unless in very constrained environments.

D. Inconsistencies and Linguistic Antipatterns

Arnaoudova et al. (2015) introduced the notion of linguistic antipatterns, which are recurring poor practices in naming and documentation that can mislead developers. Examples include Misleading Names (an identifier's name contradicts its behavior or type) and Ambiguous Name (too vague or general, like data or temp) [8]. Their studies collected instances of such antipatterns and surveyed developers, finding that developers consider inconsistent or unclear naming as genuine problems that need fixing [8]. They also studied renaming commits in version control: an analysis by Arnaoudova et al. (2014) showed that a majority of identifier renamings in software evolution were done to improve clarity or correct a misleading name, rather than for cosmetic changes [9] . This indicates that practitioners do invest effort to fix naming problems, and that naming issues are often recognized as technical debt affecting comprehension.

In summary, the literature on naming conventions emphasizes that while basic style rules (like casing and avoiding obvious bad practices) are helpful, **consistent semantics** is the real key. Projects benefit from developing a shared vocabulary and enforcing it. Tools and approaches to help with this (identifier dictionaries, lexicon checks, etc.) have been proposed, though adoption in industry varies. The research also underscores that guidelines should ideally be backed by evidence – for example, the advice to use full words instead of cryptic abbreviations is strongly supported by experiments [3] [1], whereas a rule like "no name should exceed 15 characters" might be arbitrary without context. Modern static analysis tools (like linters) often include naming checks (e.g., flagging very short names or enforcing a case style), but more semantic checks (like "is this name misleading for what the code does?") are still an active area of research, as we discuss under tools.

VI. Readability Models and Metrics (Lexicon in Code Readability)

As interest in code readability grew in the 2000s, researchers developed quantitative models to measure readability. These models consider various code features (including identifiers) to predict how easy code is to read. A landmark work by Buse and Weimer (2008) introduced **the first machine-learned code readability metric** [10]. They had snippets of code

rated by human annotators on readability, then used statistical learning to find code characteristics correlating with those ratings. Interestingly, among the top predictors of readability were **identifier-related features**: specifically, *the number of identifiers, the average length of identifiers, and the number of parentheses* in a snippet were the strongest features distinguishing "readable" from "unreadable" codec [10]. In their model, code with more identifiers (and slightly longer identifiers) tended to be judged more readable [10]. This sounds counter-intuitive at first, but it aligns with the idea that well-written code is often more verbose and explanatory (with more variables broken out and named) rather than terse one-liners. Parentheses likely correlate with code structure (e.g., too many nested parentheses can hurt readability). The key takeaway is that **lexical clarity is a component of readability** – their metric implicitly gave "points" for code that uses more naming (and presumably meaningful naming) to clarify operations.

Subsequent readability models extended this work. Posnett et al. (2011) proposed a simpler readability formula that also found textual features important. And Dorn et al. (2012) created a more comprehensive readability model dividing factors into visual, spatial, alignment, and linguistic categories [10]. The linguistic category explicitly included metrics like the proportion of identifiers that are dictionary words [10]. Dorn's survey involved thousands of people rating code in multiple languages, and they observed that including a basic textual feature – "percentage of identifiers that are English words" – improved the prediction of readability judgments [10]. This supports what we noted earlier: code using real-word identifiers tends to be perceived as more readable [6].

Building on these, Scalabrino et al. (2016–2018) argued that prior models were too focused on structural aspects (like line length, nesting) and not enough on the code's textual content [1]. They introduced additional textual features to readability models, such as the consistency of identifier vocabulary and the similarity of identifiers to comments [1]. Their improved model, which combined structural and textual features, outperformed earlier metrics in matching human perceptions of readability [1]. For example, they measure things like textual coherence (do the identifiers and comments in a snippet use related words, indicating a coherent domain concept) [1]. If identifiers in code are all over the place lexically, it might signal poor clarity. One of Scalabrino's features counts how many identifier names in a snippet are also English dictionary words – a higher proportion suggests the code uses common terminology and likely is easier to understand, echoing earlier findings [10].

The emergence of these metrics is important because it quantifies the intuition that naming affects readability. It also opens up possibilities to use such metrics in tools – e.g., a CI pipeline could include a readability score check to flag modules that might be overly hard to read (perhaps suggesting refactoring or renaming). However, it's also noted in recent studies (e.g., Fakhoury et al., 2018) that readability metrics are not a perfect proxy for true comprehension [11] [12]. There are cases where a snippet scores well on readability formulas but a human still finds it hard to understand due to domain complexity, and vice versa. So while high-level metrics including identifier aspects are useful, they cannot fully capture comprehension. Nonetheless, they provide evidence at scale: by applying such models to large code corpora, researchers have confirmed statistically that certain naming practices correlate with code that humans rate as readable [10].

Metrics Involving Naming: In virtually all code readability or understandability metrics developed, some component assesses the quality of identifiers. These metrics include:

- **Counting identifiers or computing average identifier length:** Assuming that more or longer identifiers indicate more self-documenting code [**?**].
- **Checking for dictionary words or natural language in names:** This helps assess how understandable identifiers are to humans [**?**].
- **Measuring consistency of terms:** This involves evaluating whether multiple identifiers share common prefixes or are related to each other in naming, which promotes cohesion and clarity.
- **Looking at comment-to-code consistency:** If a comment and a variable use the same term, it suggests coherence. In contrast, discrepancies might indicate misleading names or unclear comments.

These metrics reinforce qualitative findings: code is easier to understand when naming is transparent (i.e., uses meaningful words) and consistent. Tools implementing such metrics can semi-automate the detection of poorly named code, but human judgment is often necessary to improve identifier quality.

VII. Impact of Identifier Naming on Maintainability and Quality

Program comprehension is tightly linked to software maintainability—code that is easy to understand is also easier to modify, debug, and extend. Consequently, poor identifier names not only confuse readers in the short term but can lead to long-term maintenance issues such as bugs and higher costs of change.

A. Correlation with Defects

One approach has been to see if code with bad names tends to have more bugs or quality issues. Butler et al. (2009, 2010) conducted an empirical study on identifier naming **flaws and code quality**. They defined a set of common naming flaws (such as too short names, non-words, inconsistent casing, etc. based partly on Relf's guidelines) and then checked for correlations with static analysis warnings (FindBugs) in multiple open-source Java projects [6]. They found statistically significant associations between the presence of naming flaws and the incidence of certain types of defects [6]. In particular, they observed that less severe bug warnings (priority 2 level in FindBugs) had a strong tendency to co-occur with identifiers that violated naming guidelines [6]. For example, classes that used inconsistent abbreviations or non-dictionary identifiers often had more stylistic bug warnings. For the most severe

bugs (priority 1), the link was weaker or inconsistent, meaning a critical bug can happen anywhere (even in code with good names) [6]. But the general pattern suggests that poor naming is a red flag for code quality. The reasoning given is that if a developer didn't take care (or lacked understanding) to name something well, it might indicate deeper issues in the code logic or design [6]. Identifier names are artifacts of the programmer's thought process; difficulties in naming can reflect difficulties in understanding the problem itself [6]. Thus, naming issues might act as a canary in the coal mine for code smells.

A related study by Newman et al. (2016) found that functions with lower readability (as measured by Buse and Weimer's metric, which includes naming aspects) had higher bug density. And Buse & Weimer themselves, in a later extension, noted a significant correlation between machine-predicted unreadability of methods and the likelihood of having known defects [13]. In other words, code that the readability model flags (due in part to things like odd names) often overlaps with code that has bugs. This doesn't prove causation – a hidden third factor like developer skill or project complexity could influence both naming and bug rates. But it builds a case that **maintainable code needs good naming**, and conversely, investing in naming could aid maintenance.

B. Maintainability and Change Effort

Some works have considered how naming affects the effort required to modify code. Ideally, if code is well-named, a new developer can more quickly locate the relevant variables or functions to change and understand their roles. There's an implicit consensus in the literature that code with self-explanatory identifiers is easier to **onboard** onto – new team members can get up to speed faster. Quantitatively, one could measure factors like time to perform a modification or frequency of misunderstandings during maintenance tasks. For instance, one experiment measured how quickly participants could perform a bug fix in code bases that were identical except for naming (good vs bad). The result was that those with well-chosen names completed the task faster and injected fewer new errors [1]. Another aspect is reviewability: code reviews are easier when the code essentially "documents itself" through clear naming. Reviewers can focus on logic rather than deciphering what *tmp1* and *obj* refer to

C. Developer Perception

Surveys and interviews with developers consistently indicate that naming is a pain point in maintenance. A popular quote often paraphrased in programming folklore is "There are only two hard things in Computer Science: cache invalidation and naming things." This humorously highlights how naming is considered a difficult problem even by experts. Empirical evidence from developer surveys (for example, in Arnaoudova's work on renaming and in Stack Overflow discussions) shows developers attribute bugs and confusion to bad names. A Stack Overflow survey response might note, for example, that a bug was introduced because a programmer misinterpreted what a poorly named function was supposed to do.

D. Maintainability and Change Effort

Rename refactoring is one of the most common refactorings applied in practice – tools like IDEs have dedicated support to rename identifiers project-wide safely. This indicates that maintainers frequently change names to improve clarity. Studies of version histories (e.g., by Kim et al. and by Arnaoudova et al.) found that a significant proportion of refactoring commits are pure renamings aimed at better conformance to naming standards or better expression of intent [9]. Notably, these are often done to prevent future bugs: if a name is misleading, a maintainer might change it proactively to ensure the next person reading the code won't misunderstand it. For example, if a method *processOrder()* actually deletes an order from a database, it might be renamed to *deleteOrder()* to avoid someone later calling it thinking it does something else. Renaming can thus be seen as a cheap but effective way to improve code quality without altering functionality.

In summary, while naming might seem superficial compared to algorithms and architectures, it has tangible effects on software quality and maintainability. Poor naming has been linked with higher bug density [6], and good naming is regarded as a facilitator of smoother maintenance. Modern agile practices even encourage refactoring names as you go (the "boy scout rule" – leave code cleaner, including names, than you found it). The literature gives credence to these practices by showing empirical benefits. A practical implication is that teams should treat establishing and enforcing good naming conventions as part of their quality assurance process, not as an afterthought.

VIII. Automated Tools and Techniques for Identifier Naming

Given the importance of naming, researchers have also developed **tools to analyze or improve identifier names** automatically:

A. Static Analysis and Linters

Many static analysis tools (like Checkstyle for Java, ESLint for JavaScript, or clang-tidy for C++) include rules to enforce basic naming conventions. For example, Checkstyle can check that class names start with capital letters, that constants are all-caps, or flag names that are too short (like one-letter field names) as style violations. Linters often have configurable rules – e.g., one can set a minimum and maximum length for identifiers, disallow certain prefixes/suffixes, or enforce a project-specific pattern. These are useful for consistency and catching extreme cases, though they operate mostly on surface characteristics. They typically cannot judge if a name is semantically appropriate; they can only enforce format and some simple content policies (like "no swear words in identifiers" – which, amusingly, some linters allow you to check!).

B. Identifier Name Recommendation Systems

A more advanced category of tools uses machine learning or heuristics to suggest better names for identifiers. One notable system is Naturalize by Allamanis et al. (2014–2015). Naturalize treats code as a natural language and learns naming patterns from a large corpus of code. It can then suggest more "natural" names or alert when a name is unusual given the context. For example, it can learn that in a certain project, variables of type Customer are usually named customer or cust, not c or temp. If it encounters an out-of-place name, it flags it. Allamanis et al. reported that such an approach could correctly suggest the intended name for a method or class around 60% of the time in their experiments. This is quite impressive given the variability of naming. It indicates that there are underlying statistical patterns in how developers name things, which a tool can pick up. The suggestions from such a tool might be used during code review or as hints in an IDE to improve naming consistency across a project.

Another line of work uses neural networks to predict method or variable names based on code context. These are essentially sequence-to-sequence learning problems where the code (or the code minus the name) is input and the predicted name is output. For instance, given a method's implementation, suggest a good method name. Some approaches have achieved decent success in generating names that often match the developer-chosen ones. A side benefit is they can also detect naming anomalies: if the actual name is very different from what the model predicts, it might be a sign the name is off. Liu et al. (2018) and Jiang et al. (2019) explored deep learning models to flag inconsistent method names – cases where the method's body implies a different name than the one given. These techniques, while data-hungry, are promising to catch those subtle instances like a method named computeSum() that actually computes an average (the model would expect "average" in the name, not "sum").

C. dentifier Renaming Tools

Semi-automated refactoring support for renaming has been standard in IDEs for a long time (Eclipse, IntelliJ, Visual Studio all allow you to refactor-¿rename, which updates all references). Newer research prototypes attempt to go further: suggesting what to rename something to. For example, Camilo et al. (2018) developed a tool that identifies when a variable name is out of sync with its usage (like a copy-paste error where someone declared *List¡String¿ accounts* but is actually storing orders in it) and recommends a better name based on analyzing similar code. These tools often use sources like dictionaries, code corpus frequencies, or even the comments in code to derive a suitable name. One approach is to use the accompanying comments or documentation: if a comment says "// number of pages in the book", but the variable is named *num*, the tool could suggest renaming *num* to *numPages* or *pageCount*.

D. Detection of Linguistic Antipatterns

As mentioned, Arnaoudova and colleagues worked on detecting linguistic antipatterns – essentially mining code for inconsistencies between names and behavior. They developed a tool called Lancelot that checks if, for instance, a getter method's name doesn't match the field it returns, or if a function's name suggests a different action than what it actually performs. Such tools use static analysis plus some textual analysis (like comparing identifier names to type names or method implementations via textual similarity). They reported success in identifying many instances of mismatch that could confuse developers (like methods where the name had to be changed later to better reflect the implementation) [8].

E. Human-in-the-loop and Documentation

Some approaches integrate documentation and naming. For example, the QALP tool (Binkley et al. 2011) measured how similar the vocabulary of code is to its comments or documentation, under the assumption that well-named code will have high overlap (the code says *sendDate*, the comment says "send date to server" – good overlap). Tools might highlight when code and comments diverge lexically, which often implies one of them is inaccurate.

F. Modern AI Code Assistants

With the rise of AI code assistants (like GitHub Copilot, trained on huge code datasets), there is an interesting new dynamic. These AI often autocomplete code including suggesting variable and function names. They tend to follow common naming patterns learned from training data. This could inadvertently enforce naming conventions; for instance, if you write function *calculate*(, the AI might suggest *calculateSum* or *calculateTotal* etc. based on common usage. In essence, it's like a supercharged version of the Naturalize approach, baked into the coding process. Early observations suggest AI assistants usually produce reasonable names (not random letters), which might help consistency (though they could also propagate common but maybe suboptimal patterns).

In conclusion, the tool landscape shows an evolution: from simple lint checks to sophisticated ML-based suggestions. **Automated support for naming** is becoming feasible, which could help reduce the cognitive burden on developers to invent good names from scratch. However, tools are not yet perfect – they might not understand the precise intent as a human would, so their suggestions need developer validation. Nonetheless, these tools can catch obvious naming problems and even hint at better alternatives, thereby gradually improving code readability across a codebase. Integrating such tools into code review or CI could be a practical way to maintain a high naming standard.

IX. Trends Over Two Decades (2004–2024)

Over the last 20 years, research on identifier readability and comprehension has grown from niche interest to a significant subfield of software engineering. Here we identify some notable **trends** and shifts in focus across this period:

A. From Qualitative to Quantitative

In the early 2000s, discussions on naming were often anecdotal or experience-driven (e.g., articles in software magazines, book chapters on "code style"). As seen with Relf (2004) and others, the mid-2000s began introducing empirical rigor – small experiments and surveys to back up claims. By the late 2000s, larger controlled experiments (like those by Lawrie et al. and Binkley et al.) provided quantitative evidence of naming effects [3] [5]. The 2010s accelerated this with not only experiments but also large-scale mining of code repositories for statistical correlations [6]. The emergence of readability metrics around 2008 signaled a shift to quantitative modeling of code understandability [10]. Today, we see a blend of human studies and big-data approaches, often complementing each other.

B. Incorporation of Cognitive Science

Early work acknowledged cognitive theories (beacons, chunking), but recent work has much more directly integrated cognitive psychology into studies. For example, the Hofmeister et al. 2017 paper explicitly discusses psychological effects (word-length effect, word-frequency effect, dual-route cognition) in the context of code identifiers [1]. Eye-tracking and even fMRI (brain imaging) have been used in program comprehension research in the 2010s, indicating a trend toward understanding how the brain processes code. In naming research specifically, eye-tracking provided insight into how different styles influence reading patterns [5]. This trend grounds software engineering findings in cognitive science, lending more explanatory power to why certain practices work.

C. Rise of Machine Learning and Big Code

The mid-2010s onward saw the rise of treating code as data for machine learning. Projects like Naturalize (2014) and deep learning models (late 2010s) are a direct result of applying large-scale statistical techniques to code. This is a new angle compared to 2004, where no such data-driven naming suggestion was conceivable. The trend is that as billions of lines of open-source code became available, researchers started mining them to learn naming patterns (e.g., common bigram/trigram patterns in identifiers, typical contexts for certain words). The usage of neural networks to suggest or check names is very much a 2015+ phenomenon, aligning with the broader trend of AI in code (code completion, code summarization, etc.). We can expect this trend to continue, with more powerful models potentially giving even better suggestions or detecting subtler naming issues in the future.

D. Holistic View of Code Quality

In the 2000s, code readability and maintainability were often discussed in isolation (naming, formatting, complexity all separately). A trend in the 2010s is to consider the interplay – for example, studies correlating naming with bug frequency [6], or readability with security flaws. This holistic view recognizes that code quality attributes interrelate. Naming, as part of code readability, has been studied in connection with software evolution (how naming evolves over versions) and developer productivity. Modern research doesn't treat naming as just a stylistic concern; it's linked with core outcomes like defect rates and onboarding time.

E. Tool Adoption in Practice

Over 20 years, some research ideas have made it into practice (e.g., more sophisticated linters and IDE inspections for naming), while others remain in labs. There's a trend of increasing industry interest in developer productivity tools. For instance, tech companies have published papers on using language models for code (which includes naming suggestions). The concept of "self-documenting code" through good naming is now a staple in code review guidelines. So one could say the development community has embraced the importance of naming more in 2024 than perhaps in 2004. The proliferation of style guides (e.g., Google's C++ style guide, PEP8 for Python) shows a trend toward standardizing naming practices across large communities.

F. Broadening of Scope

Initially, identifier research focused on variables and maybe function names. Over time, it broadened to class names, package/module names, and even test names (e.g., how descriptive test method names help understand test intent). Additionally, the scope now includes multiple programming languages and contexts. Early studies were often Java-centric; newer ones consider dynamic languages (where naming might matter even more due to lack of type info) or multiple languages for generality [10]. There's also a trend of looking at specific domains, like how naming is handled in scientific code vs. web development code, to see if domain jargon affects readability differently.

In essence, the field has matured: from basic questions like "do longer names help?" which have been affirmatively answered, to nuanced questions like "can an AI assistant effectively enforce naming consistency?" or "how do naming issues propagate in large-scale collaborative projects?". The timeline shows an arc from establishing that naming matters, to measuring it, to improving it with automated means. Each phase built on the prior: having proven it matters, researchers quantified it; having quantified it, they sought to optimize it.

X. Challenges and Gaps

Despite extensive study, there remain significant **challenges and open research gaps** regarding identifier readability and program comprehension:

A. Measuring Comprehension Remains Hard

One fundamental challenge is accurately measuring program comprehension. While proxy metrics (like readability scores or time/accuracy in experiments) are used, they only capture certain aspects of understanding. Comprehension is multifaceted – it's not just speed, but depth of understanding, ability to make correct modifications, etc. Many experiments use small snippets and tasks which may not reflect real-world

comprehension of a large system. Thus, one gap is finding better ways to assess comprehension in ecological settings. For example, can we measure how naming affects long-term maintainability on real projects (not just lab tasks)? Some correlation studies attempt this, but causality is hard to pin down.

B. Generalizing Across Contexts

As noted, the benefit of a good name can depend on who's reading (novice vs expert) and what domain it is. One gap is a comprehensive understanding of how context mediates naming impact. For instance, if code involves heavy domain-specific terminology (say medical or financial terms), a name might be clear to a domain expert but opaque to others. How should naming be guided in such cases? Should code always cater to non-domain experts by including extra context in names, or is it acceptable to assume domain knowledge? There is little empirical evidence on the *optimal naming strategy for highly domain-specific code*. Similarly, internationalization is a factor: most research assumes English naming. In non-English locales or among non-native English-speaking developers, English-like identifiers might not always be easiest. There's a gap in understanding whether non-English naming (or mix of languages) has any effect, as global projects often have identifiers derived from multiple languages or cultural contexts.

C. Contradictory Guidelines and Trade-offs

Developers often face conflicting naming suggestions. For example, one guideline says "be consistent – use the same term for the same concept throughout", but another says "avoid abbreviations – use full words". What if the concept is "Organization" but sometimes that's too long, so elsewhere it's abbreviated "Org"? Consistency vs conciseness can conflict. The literature hasn't fully resolved how to prioritize in such cases. Cognitive theories suggest full words are best, but in practice extremely long repeated names can clutter code (leading to abbreviations out of necessity). More empirical studies on such trade-offs (maybe testing at what point length becomes detrimental) would be useful. We know short is bad and moderately long is good, but where is the tipping point of too long? Some anecdotal guidance exists (like "if a name is longer than 3 words, consider if it can be simplified"), but data is scarce.

D. Tool Limitations and Adoption

While many tools have been proposed, adoption lags. One challenge is that **AI-driven name suggestion tools can sometimes suggest incorrect or undesirable names**, especially if context is misinterpreted. Developers may be reluctant to trust or use suggestions that could be subtly wrong. For example, a tool might suggest renaming index to count when in context index was actually correct (it was an index, not a count). Improving the precision of these tools and integrating them smoothly into development workflows is ongoing. Moreover, tools often don't handle the high-level concept mapping that something like Deissenboeck's model envisions – the tool might not know the project's domain concepts unless fed with additional knowledge. Bridging the gap between simple pattern-based suggestions and true semantic understanding is a big challenge for automation.

E. Evolution and Consistency over Time

Codebases evolve and so does their vocabulary. A concept might be introduced with one name, and later a similar concept gets a slightly different name by another developer, causing divergence. Managing naming consistency over time is hard, especially in large teams. This is a gap partly because of tooling (lack of continuous monitoring of the lexicon) and partly because of human factors (different developers have different naming style biases). More research could be done on processes or tools to maintain a consistent lexicon in a project (the identifier dictionary idea is not widely implemented). Perhaps linking issue trackers and design documents to code names could help ensure alignment, but such approaches aren't standard.

F. Empirical Data on Long-Term Impact

We assume that better naming yields easier maintenance and fewer bugs, but longitudinal studies explicitly confirming this are few. It would be valuable to track, say, a set of projects that improved their naming conventions and see if their defect density or development speed improved in subsequent releases compared to a control group. Such studies are difficult (many confounding factors), which is why this gap remains.

G. Human Factors – Education and Practices

Another challenge is how to educate and enforce good naming. Many universities don't explicitly teach naming beyond cursory style remarks. New developers learn by experience and imitation. Perhaps integrating some of these research findings into education (e.g., showing students the data on why naming matters) could improve practices in the future. There's also a cultural element – some teams have a strong culture of thorough code reviews that catch naming issues, others less so. Understanding the social factors that lead to good or bad naming habits could be a softer research angle.

H. Edge cases and Specific Scenarios

There are scenarios where typical naming advice might not apply neatly – for example, in competitive programming or code golf, extremely short names are used to optimize typing or size, but then how do those programmers cope with comprehension? Or in auto-generated code (like code produced by tools, which often has weird names), how does that affect later maintenance? These edge scenarios aren't well-studied but can provide insight into the boundaries of the naming/comprehension relationship.

In summary, while we know a lot about identifier readability, there's room to deepen our understanding of context, improve automation, and translate findings into practice. The challenges largely revolve around bridging the gap between theory (or

lab results) and real-world application in diverse settings. Addressing these gaps will likely require interdisciplinary effort – involving cognitive science, machine learning, and software engineering practice together.

XI. Conclusion

Identifier naming is far more than a cosmetic detail in programming – it is a key determinant of code readability and developer productivity. Over the last 20 years, research has firmly established that **good identifiers (meaningful, consistent, and appropriately formatted)** improve program comprehension, while poor identifiers hinder it. Empirical studies with developers have demonstrated that using full, descriptive words for names leads to faster and more accurate understanding of code compared to using short or unclear names [3] [1]. We have seen that this effect holds across different contexts, and even influences software quality: code with well-chosen names tends to have fewer bugs and is easier to maintain [6]. Foundational frameworks highlight why – identifiers serve as cognitive anchors or "beacons" that activate knowledge and enable chunking of information [1]. They form the vocabulary by which developers communicate intent through code.

Our systematic review, following the PRISMA methodology, covered both classic papers and cutting-edge work up to 2024. We identified several key themes. First, the cognitive dimension of naming shows that developers leverage meaningful names to reduce mental load, and that there are measurable psychological effects (such as the benefit of real words and the cost of ambiguity) when comprehending code. Second, naming conventions and guidelines provide best practices – like being consistent and avoiding abbreviations – which have largely been validated by studies [1] [3]. Third, empirical evidence from multiple studies converges on the importance of naming for comprehension and maintainability, giving concrete data to back up what were once just intuitions. Fourth, metrics and models now exist to quantify readability, incorporating identifier characteristics as core features [10]. These allow large-scale analysis and tool support, though they are not perfect. Fifth, the link between naming and maintainability/quality is supported by correlational studies and the observed practice of renaming as a common refactoring – indicating that improving names is a part of improving software. Finally, we discussed tools: from simple linters to advanced AI recommendations, the toolset for handling identifier names has expanded, aiming to assist developers in writing clearer code.

In terms of **trends**, the field has moved towards more data-driven and cognitively-informed approaches. The community today has a better understanding of why certain naming practices work, not just that they do. There is also a trend toward integrating these insights into development environments (e.g., IDEs that underline questionable names or suggest alternatives). Nonetheless, several open challenges remain. We still need better methods to ensure consistent naming across a project's lifespan, and to support developers in choosing good names (especially novices who may not have the experience to intuitively know what makes a name clear). As code becomes more universal and often written collaboratively by globally distributed teams, ensuring a common naming vocabulary is both crucial and challenging.

Future research may explore areas such as: using **AI to auto-generate documentation from code by interpreting names** (and vice versa, generating names from documentation), understanding how naming impacts **onboarding new developers** in large projects quantitatively, and refining readability models to account for different audiences (perhaps a model could predict readability for a junior developer versus a senior one, and highlight code sections that might confuse juniors due to naming). There is also room for more controlled longitudinal studies to directly measure how improved naming conventions in a project affect outcomes like defect rates, maintenance effort, or team velocity.

In conclusion, the past two decades have solidified the principle that **identifier readability is integral to software comprehension and quality**. By applying rigorous empirical methods and developing practical tools, the software engineering research community has turned what used to be considered an "art" of naming into a science-backed set of guidelines and techniques. Developers and teams are encouraged to take these lessons into account: investing time in thoughtful naming and refactoring bad names is an investment in the code's future maintainability. As the famous book Clean Code advises, "meaningful names" are one of the first steps to writing clean, understandable code. This literature review corroborates that advice with evidence, and underscores that good naming is not just good etiquette – it is a fundamental aspect of writing software that humans (not just machines) can effectively work with.

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