

Female Surname Choice: Historical, Cultural, and Branding Influences at Duke University

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Introduction

In the United States, women have traditionally taken their husband's surnames at marriage. Over the past 50 years, however, both legal and social obstacles to keeping one's name have been removed, leading to a rise in the percentage of "keepers." Claudia Goldin and Maria Shim analyze female surname retention using data from the Harvard graduating classes of 1980 and 1990. They find a decrease in the growth of keepers in 1990, but the lack data to confirm this decrease beyond that year.

Roland Fryer and Steven Levitt (2004) analyze cultural signaling models in black parents' naming decisions for their children. Their theory states that the choice of a distinctively black name defines the child's identity and culture. This model can also adapt to female surname choice depending on the identity a woman associates with her maiden name.

Problem Why do some women keep their birth name at marriage?

Steven Tadelis (1999) outlines a model of company names as valuable, tradable assets. Although prior literature has not yet applied this theory to female surnames, a woman's surname choice can influence her reputation, career, and expected future earnings.

Model

Historical influence: Popular options during the time in history when she makes the decision

Identity & Cultural Influences: How she presents her identity, cultural background or personal values

Branding Influence: The relative importance of her surname to her expected future earnings or success

$$\Pr(\text{kept birth name}|\text{married}) = \alpha_1 1960 + \alpha_2 1970 + \alpha_3 1980 + \alpha_4 1990 + \alpha_5 2000 + x_i \beta + z_i \varphi + \gamma + \epsilon$$

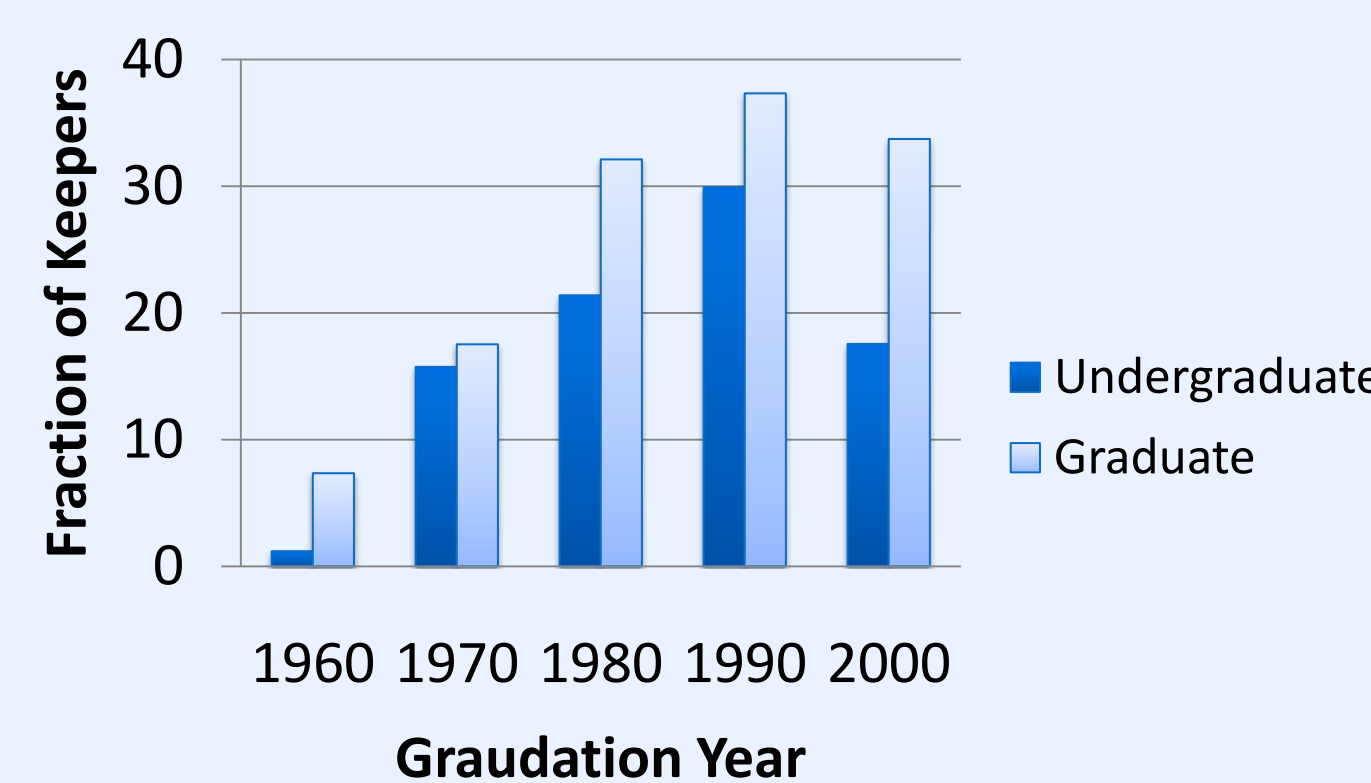
Where x_i is a vector of self-perceived identity and cultural covariates, z_i is a vector of economic the years are dummy variables that capture the graduation date, β and φ are the corresponding vectors of identity/ cultural and economic parameters, γ is the constant and ϵ is the error term. In the survey data, we replace the class dummy variables for age at marriage. We use OLS for our regressions.

Graduate Results (DAA Administrative Data)

Our administrative data from the Duke Alumni Association (DAA) include all married women from the classes of 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. For women completing graduate school at Duke, we have 1040 observations. Of graduates, 31% are keepers and 69% are changers.

In the blue graph to the right, although the fraction of graduate keepers peaked with the Class of 1990, it is not statistically significant. However, a higher fraction of women with graduate degrees kept their names than women with undergraduate degrees, lending support to our branding theory.

The percentage of "keepers" peaked with the class of 1990



Separating Doctors from Nurses (DAA Administrative Undergraduate Data)

To better understand the effects of branding in the healthcare industry, we analyze the differences between doctors and nurses. We use two methods to isolate doctors in the data, both of which find that doctors are around 25% more likely to keep their names than nurses.

Method 1: Nurse*Healthcare

We created an interaction term between women in healthcare and those with undergraduate nursing majors (N*Healthcare). We then eliminated all of these women from the field of healthcare (1-N*Healthcare)

N*Healthcare 27% less likely to keep their names than 1-N*Healthcare

Method 2: Dr*Healthcare

We created an interaction term between women in healthcare and those who use the prefix "Dr" (Dr*Healthcare). We then eliminated all of these women from the field of healthcare (1-Dr*Healthcare).

1-Dr*Healthcare 25% less likely to keep their names than Dr*Healthcare

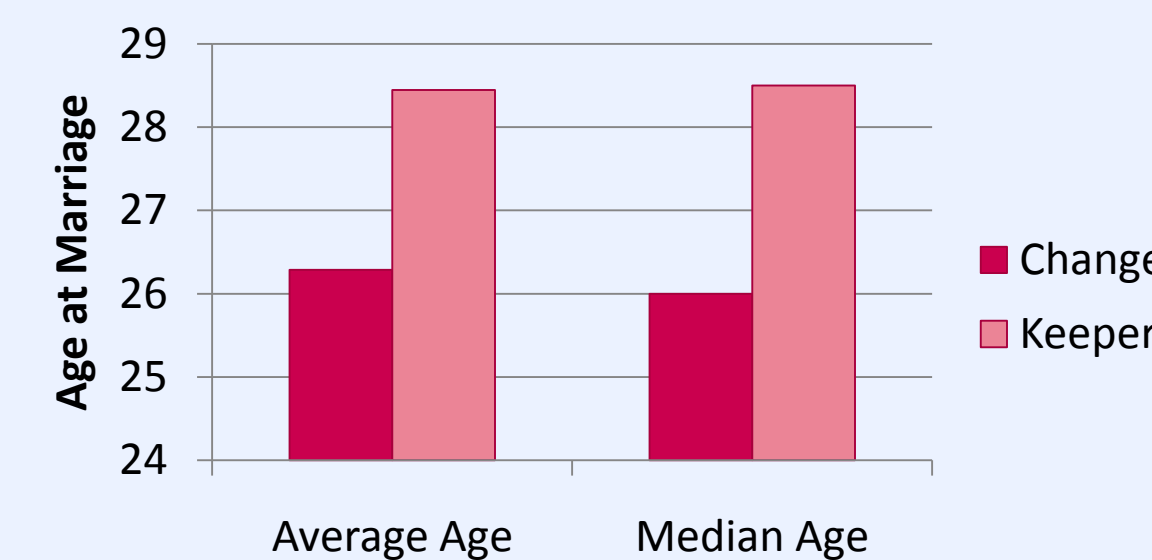
Undergraduate Results II (Survey Data)

Our survey results supplement our original undergraduate DAA administrative dataset. The survey was emailed to all married women in the undergraduate administrative data on the DAA list in March 2010 and had a response rate of 28.2% (384 responses). Of these, 19% are keepers and 81% are changers.

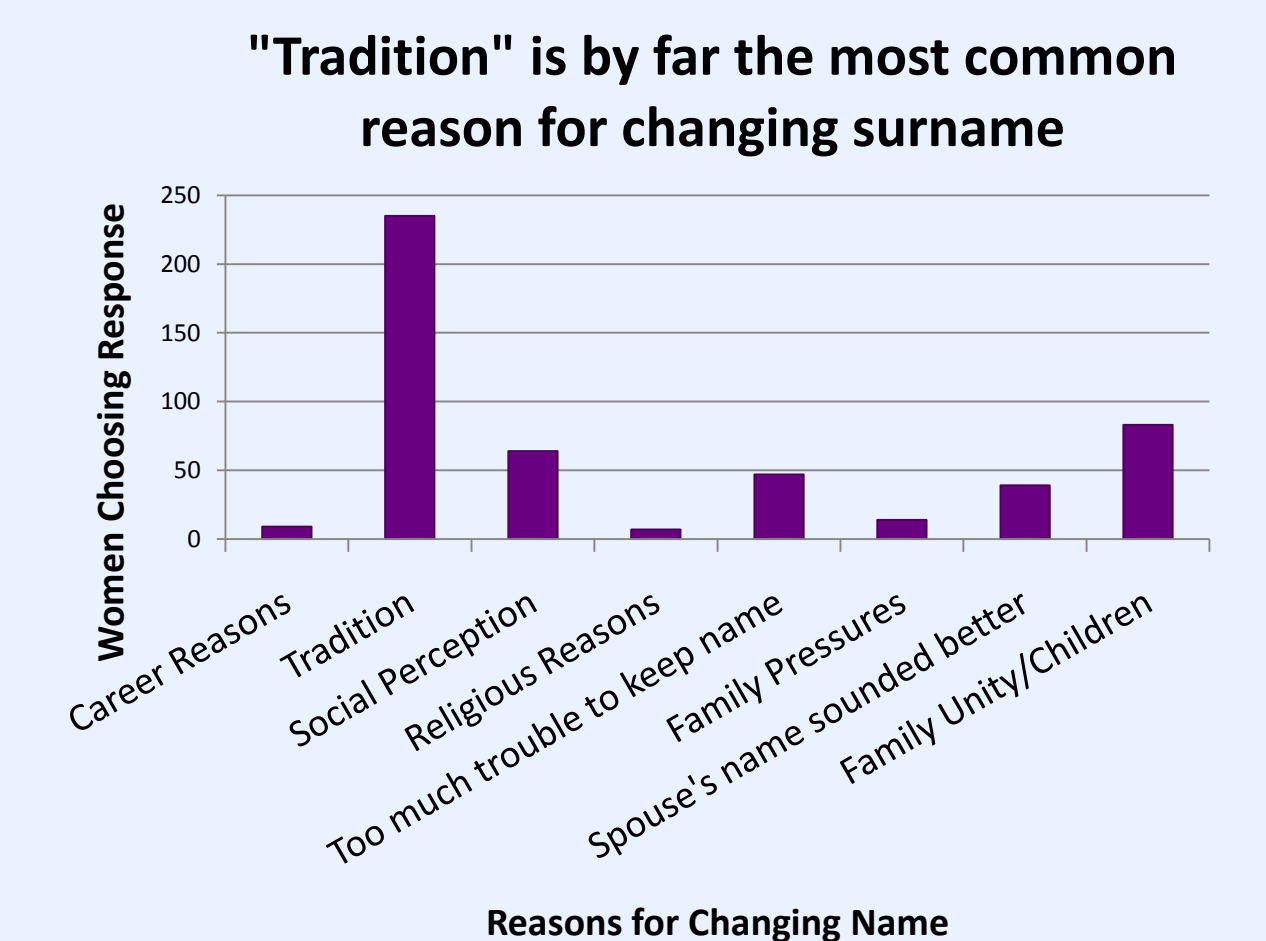
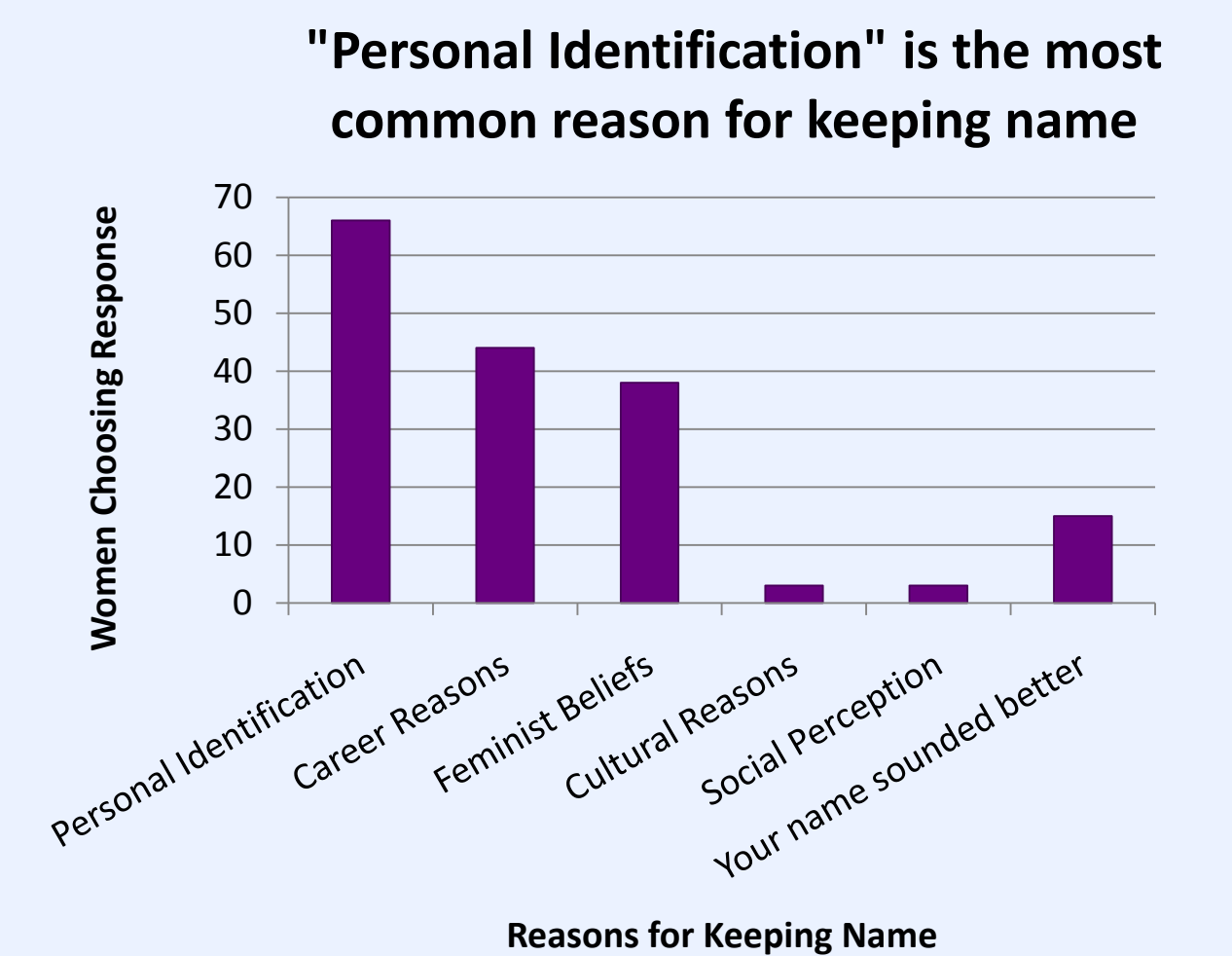
The pink graph shows the difference in average and median age at marriage between keepers and changers. On average, keepers marry two years later than changers, lending further support to the branding and identity hypotheses.

We find that more religious women are more likely to keep their names, as are those with higher levels of educational attainment. Women whose mothers kept their own maiden names are also more likely to retain their surnames.

Keepers marry later in life compared to changers



We also conduct an analysis of divorce and surname retention. A popular belief is that taking her husband's name shows "commitment" to the marriage, and therefore, a keeper should be more likely to get divorced. However, we find that a subsequent divorce has no correlation to whether a woman took her husband's name at marriage.



Undergraduate Results (DAA Administrative Data)

Our undergraduate dataset includes 1919 observations, 19% of which are keepers and 81% of which are changers. There is a statistically significant peak of keepers in 1990, lending further support to our historical analysis. This peak can be attributed in part to a backlash from the feminist movement. It could also be because the current population of married women in the Class of 2000 likely places a lower emphasis on brand (and thus are more likely changers) than older classes.



As shown in the figure to the left, nursing majors are the least likely to keep their names, and natural science majors are the most likely to do so. Women with natural science majors often attend medical school, and have built a professional identity before marriage.

Analyzing the field of work, we find that women in healthcare and social assistance are more likely to keep their names than women in any other field. Again, these women likely have a strong professional connection to their surnames.

Conclusion

We find that the fraction of keepers has increased over time, with a statistically significant peak of keepers in 1990 for undergraduates. We also find highly statistically significant results supporting our branding theory: women who develop their brand, their name, more through their education or in their career are more likely to be keepers. Women with higher educational attainment keep their names more often, particularly those in the medical profession, lawyers, and PhDs.

Using survey data, we find evidence of identity and cultural influences: women who practice more fundamentalist religions are likely to be changers, while women who lack religious beliefs are likely to be keepers. Women who marry at a later age are more likely to retain their surnames, as are those whose mothers kept their own maiden names. Keepers and changers are equally likely to get divorced, signaling that a name change does not indicate a higher level of commitment to the marriage. Future research should expand the sample to determine if these results apply to all college-educated women.

Literature Cited

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