

## TECHNOLOGY

# I Love My Pretentious, Ugly, Inconvenient Name

Why is everyone so worked up about hyphens?

By Rachel Gutman-Wei



Illustration by The Atlantic. Source: Getty.

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When my husband and I got married, we decided we should share a last name, and that the name should be hyphenated. He didn't want to lose a marker of his Chinese heritage, and I didn't want to co-opt one—or give up my name if he wasn't giving up his. So we just smushed our names together on the marriage license, figuring this was a normal thing: unobjectionable.

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But objections have indeed been raised. Not yet to my face—the worst I've heard has been along the lines of “I'd never hyphenate, but that's great for you.” But I also know that anti-hyphen sentiment is widely shared: Very few American newlyweds hyphenate their names, survey data show, and it's not hard to find op-eds that describe the practice as “crazy” and “pretentious”—the sort of arrangement that might produce a maladjusted, antisocial human

being along the lines of, say, Sam *Bankman-Fried*.

My husband and I were both bemused to discover that names like ours could inspire so much antipathy. Why does a silly little hyphen make so many people uncomfortable, or unsettled, or even—God forbid—uncomfortable-unsettled?

If Americans are overly concerned with one another's surnames, most of that concern is directed at women. The most basic *New York Times* wedding announcements for opposite-sex couples describe what the bride will do with her name as the second detail offered about her—after her age, before her job. (“The bride, 23, will take her husband’s name.”) What the groom does with his name is not mentioned.

Sociologists find that women also bear the brunt of judgment for making nontraditional surname choices. For a study that came out in 2017, Kelley, a sociologist now at the American Institutes for Research, asked about 500 people of various ages and education levels to assess a fictional engaged couple, “David Miller and Amanda Taylor,” who planned to use one of several surname arrangements: They would either keep their own names, call themselves the Millers, or change both their names to Miller-Taylor. Kelley found that “Amanda Miller-Taylor” was perceived as being a less committed and ideal spouse than “Amanda Miller,” and that “David Miller-Taylor” was seen as less ideal than “David Miller.” (The penalty for hyphenation was only half as big for David as it was for Amanda.)

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An earlier survey of such attitudes, from 2002, found the opposite tendency among a set of about 200 mostly white freshmen at a small, private university in Illinois. When asked to compare married people with hyphenated names to “average” married people, the students generally had very favorable impressions, describing the female partners as more outgoing and sociable, and the male partners as especially committed and nurturing.

These different survey results could be a function of education and class, with those from more privileged backgrounds more willing to accept an unconventional naming choice. But the older study was also conducted at a time when hyphenated names may have seemed more novel. Today's freshmen of that era would have been children of the 1980s, and grown up among the naming trends associated with second-wave feminism. According to the 2002 paper, 11 percent of the college’s female faculty used a hyphenated name. Compare that with a Pew survey conducted last April, which found that only 5 percent of women with postgraduate degrees who married men chose to hyphenate their names.

The exact prevalence of hyphenate naming in the ’80s, and its trajectory since then, are frustratingly unclear. The nice people at the U.S. Census Bureau couldn’t help me track hyphens over time; neither could the nice people at the wedding company The Knot. We do know that hyphenation rates have been flat at roughly 5 percent among professional women’s basketball players since the 1990s, and that the rate among congresswomen was 3 percent in 2015 and is around 4 percent today.

Among men, the practice is even less common. The Pew survey found that fewer than 1 percent of men who marry women choose to hyphenate their names, while 5 percent take their wife’s name outright. Perhaps some men choose the latter because it’s more discreet. “If your name is hyphenated, it’s maybe pretty obvious that you changed it when you got married,” Emily Shafer, a sociologist at Portland State University, told me. But if you take your wife’s name, people may simply assume that she took yours.

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These tendencies are even built into the legal system: W [12ft.io - You can talk 3x faster than you can type. Checkout our new dictation app.](#)  
Haksgaard, a law professor at the University of South Dakota, cataloged the state-level statutes concerning marital name change in 2019, she found that many states still technically disallow men from swapping their surnames at marriage. Those rules are unenforceable, she told me, because they violate the Fourteenth Amendment's equal-protection clause. But they reflect a surprisingly popular, surprisingly extreme attitude toward marital naming: In one survey from 2006, half of respondents agreed that past laws requiring women to adopt their husband's name had been a good idea.

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I've never heard this thought expressed out loud, though one of my college friends did once insist that he'd never marry a woman who wouldn't take his name. In fact, my hyphenation gets less attention than my husband's: Every so often he will reveal to a friend or colleague that he's hyphenated, and I can all but hear the record scratch. "Oh, really?" they might say, sometimes followed by a "Huh, that's cool"—or, better yet, "I've never heard of anyone doing that." I don't think they're passing moral judgment, but they do seem a bit uncomfortable-unsettled.

Some may worry that a name like ours is a burden. "Hyphenating names is basically a pain in the ass in all the practical ways that you can think of," Laurel Sutton, a professional namer and the president of the American Name Society, told me. It can lead to mismatches between pla [12ft.io - You can talk 3x faster than you can type. Checkout our new dictation app.](#) and driver's licenses, for example. (I've found that flying comes up a lot in anti-hyphenation arguments.) Sutton also cited some people's concern for future generations: What if your hyphenated child gets married? Does a double name turn into a triple, or even a quadruple?

I've also heard the claim from friends and colleagues (and, of course, on the internet) that hyphenated names in general—or combinations of two particular names—are unpleasant and unwieldy, just too *ugly*. But such aesthetic preferences are largely a product of our cultural conditioning, Kelley told me, and may serve as a cover for unease with challenging a well-established practice. "A lot of people just are grossed out by the idea of having a hyphenated surname," she said. They may find it easier to say *That's an ugly name* than to cop to their unwillingness to violate a social norm. And as a recent hyphenator, I can say with some authority that *Gutman-Wei* rolls off the tongue just fine. It's also not in fact a bureaucratic nightmare (at least not yet). I've flown with this name several times, including internationally, and never had a problem.

As for the future-generations problem, it's true that my potential kids could end up having to make a fresh decision about *their* married names. (Neither my husband nor I will be offended however they decide to proceed; in his words, "They can do whatever they want.") But really, everyone who gets married makes that choice. As a culture, we simply overlook many of those choices, most notably when they're made by the 92 percent of men who keep their name.