

# People choose baby names to be fashionable

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Baby-name cycles resemble stock market and real estate bubbles because there are no consistent patterns in when a name starts becoming popular or when it starts dropping. (Karin Higgins/UC Davis photo)

(Phys.org) —Parents these days name their babies Jacob or Isabella instead of John or Mary for similar reasons that people decades ago bought cars with tailfins instead of Edsels—because they are fashionable, according to a new University of California, Davis, study.

Hema Yoganarasimhan, an assistant professor and marketing expert in the UC Davis Graduate School of Management, reviewed favored baby name cycles since 1940. She compared lists of popular names kept by the Social Security Administration with data on people's education and whether they worked in or took part in cultural or arts events. Additional

data came from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

She observed that the so-called "cultured" parents tended to start baby name trends, and then others adopted those names. When the names became popular, the cultured parents were the first to drop usage of those popular names, she said.

"If cultured people live in similar neighborhoods, attend similar cultural events, work in similar environments and overall interact more with each other than with those outside their group, then it is easier for a cultured parent to obtain information on the names that other cultured people have given their children compared to a not-so-cultured parent," the paper said.

Because naming a baby doesn't cost money, it is a good way to study a cycle of behavior, she said. "Name choice is one of the few contexts where individual decisions are uninfluenced by supply-side consideration," said Yoganarasimhan. "Since the choice of a child's name is one of the more important and conspicuous decisions that parents make, it is likely to be at least as affected by [social influences](#) as are other conspicuous decisions."

Steadily used names such as David, James, Jennifer and Sarah peaked and dipped over many generations. Other names such as Jason and Heather trended upward for only a few years.

"There are no consistent patterns in when a name starts becoming popular or when it starts dropping. In this respect, these cycles resemble stock market and real estate bubbles," she said.

Past generations named their children for older relatives, chose names from the Bible or picked names with ethnic roots, but in the last few

decades, people have been more likely to choose names that signify their place in society.

Wealth and celebrity are not major influences on baby names, she found, nor is religion. "...Even though some Biblical names have remained popular (Samuel, Seth) their choice is likely driven by other considerations since many other Biblical [names](#) have declined in popularity (Michael, Paul)," the paper said.

The working paper, "Identifying the Presence and Cause of Fashion Cycles in the Choice of Given Names," can be found at [faculty.gsm.ucdavis.edu/~hema/babynames.pdf](https://faculty.gsm.ucdavis.edu/~hema/babynames.pdf)

Provided by UC Davis

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