The Tsunami Curve and Popular Culture Influences on Given Names

Cleveland Kent Evans
Bellevue University

Though journalists frequently attribute the popularity of certain given names to particular cultural events, they often make errors by focusing on only the top few names. Evidence shows that names do not reach that status immediately after the cultural event that introduces them. However, popular culture does influence parents in the choice of names. I propose that a pattern called a "tsunami curve" is a good indicator that a name has been influenced by a particular cultural event.

One of the common explanations given by journalists and popular authors for an increase in the use of certain given names for infants is to trace that increase to a particular instance of the name in popular culture. A classic example is the attribution of *Jennifer's* rise to number one status for American girls' names in 1970 to the film *Love Story* (Dickson 1993; Dunkling 1983), where Ali MacGraw played the character Jennifer Cavalleri.[1]

These explanations are probably incorrect. Journalists and the general public often focus merely on what the "number one" or "top ten" names are in any specific time and place, and when a name reaches those top ranks, an immediate cause is sought in popular culture events of the last year or so. As researchers such as Stanley Lieberson (2000) have pointed out, correlation is not causation, and it's entirely too easy to find examples of the use of a particular name in some popular culture venue and use that to explain a name's popularity. It is likely that many such connections occur accidentally, or because the writers who name film and television characters are being influenced by the same trends as parents, instead of directly inspiring the trends themselves.

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This is exactly what seems to have happened with *Jennifer*. *Jennifer* first became one of the top thousand names for girls born in the United States in 1938. Already one of the top hundred names in 1956, *Jennifer's* popularity steadily rose until it became the 10th most common name in 1966. After plateauing at that level for one year, *Jennifer* began an incredible boom in 1968 which quadrupled its use by 1972. At its peak in 1973 and 1974, more than 4% of girls born in the United States received the name.[2] These figures make the attribution of *Jennifer's* popularity to *Love Story* untenable; though 1970 was the first year Jennifer reached number one status, the film didn't come out until December of that year. If one wants to attribute the start of *Jennifer's* boom to a particular film character, Jennifer North in the 1967 film *Valley of the Dolls*, played by Sharon Tate, makes more sense than Jennifer Cavalleri. However, one wouldn't want to push that correlation too far, as the name's steady rise for decades before 1967 may have simply made it the logical successor to previously popular similar sounding names such as *Jane*, *Jean*, *Janet*, and *Janice* in the eyes of both screenwriters and parents.

Names simply don't rise to number one or even top ten status overnight on the basis of one popular culture phenomenon. The figures provided by the Social Security administration show that the highest ever initial entry of a name into the list of the top thousand names in the United States was that of *Aaliyah* in 1996, at 202nd place. Though that entry probably was inspired by the release of the popular singer Aaliyah's smash hit album "One in a Million" that year (Farley 2001), this shows that even the most successful sort of popular culture influence doesn't by itself cause enough parents to use a name to catapult it into the top ranks. Names that reach the very top do so only after having been used regularly enough for long enough that most parents will not see them as eccentric. Another example is the use of *Madison* as a girl's name in the United States. Though the regular use of *Madison* seems clearly to be traced to the mermaid character in the 1984 movie *Splash* played by Daryl Hannah, the name entered the list of most common names at 625th place in 1985 and only increased gradually, not reaching the top ten until 1997, and peaking at second in popularity in 2001 and 2002. When *Madison* was at its peak of use as a baby name, the first Madisons inspired by the film were therefore seniors in high school.

So it seems impossible to explain a name's top ten status solely by finding a popular culture reference in the year that status is first obtained. However, *Aaliyah* and *Madison* do seem to show that one can attribute the start of the regular use of many names to particular popular culture events. Enough parents can be influenced by popular culture to start a name on its way. It seems reasonable to attribute Aaliyah's and Madison's rise to the singer and the film, respectively, because these are names which were practically never used for American girls before the phenomenon in question and which then suddenly appear. However, most names which have increases in use have longer histories in English-speaking culture than *Aaliyah's* and *Madison's*. Revival of names from the past is more common than the appearance of completely brand new names at a relatively high point on the list. How, then, can one make inferences that a particular event in popular culture has inspired the start of such a name revival?

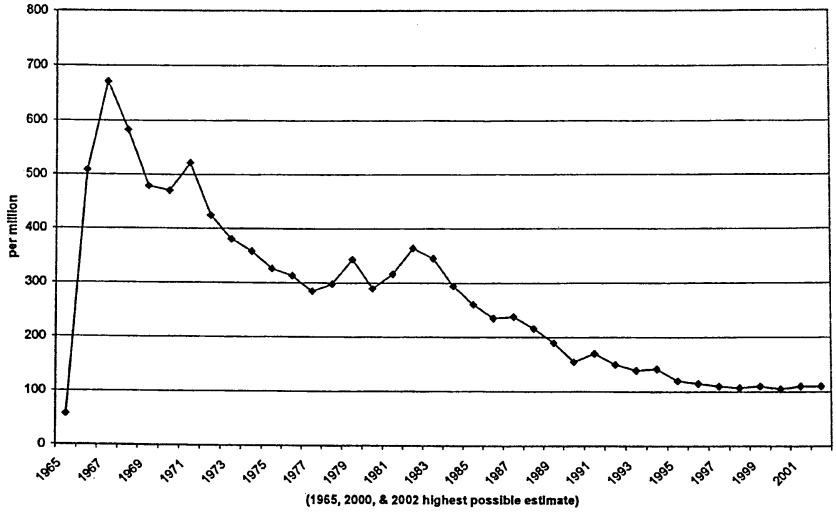
The ideal way would be to interview parents who have given such names to ascertain whether or not they were cognizant of where the name appeared in popular culture. However, with any single name being what social scientists call a "low base rate phenomenon," it's hard to gather a large enough truly random sample of parents of infants with a particular name to do such research adequately. One hopes such research can eventually be done, though even then the results will be problematic as psychologists have shown for years that human beings are often not consciously aware of the true reasons for their aesthetic preferences and choices (Nisbett and Ross 1980).

I would like to propose that in some cases one can make a strong inference that a particular culture phenomenon has been a major factor in the sudden increase of an already existent name if the pattern of that increase follows what I call a "tsunami curve." This pattern is shown when a name very suddenly increases in use and then peaks within three years of that increase, with its use falling thereafter. Just as sudden huge waves along the ocean shore are evidence of some particular geological event, sudden peaks in name use which immediately recede would seem to point to a particular social cause.

A prime example of a tsunami curve is shown by the history of the female name *Audra* in the United States. This alternative form of *Audrey* was in regular if unspectacular use during the late 19th and early 20th

centuries, finding a place on the list of the top one thousand names of the Social Security data for most years between 1881 and 1938. It then disappeared until it suddenly showed up at 283rd rank in 1966, peaked in 1967 at 246th, and then gradually and steadily declined in use until it left the top one thousand names again in 2002. This curve is shown in figure 1. It seems logical to assume that something must have happened in late 1965 or early 1966 that set this sudden revival of *Audra* in motion. Such a phenomenon does exist; the television Western series *The Big Valley*, which premiered in September 1965, featuring Linda Evans as the character Audra Barkley, the beautiful daughter of a ranching family in central California. It seems safe to assume that many young parents discovered Audra as a possible name for their children by watching that program.

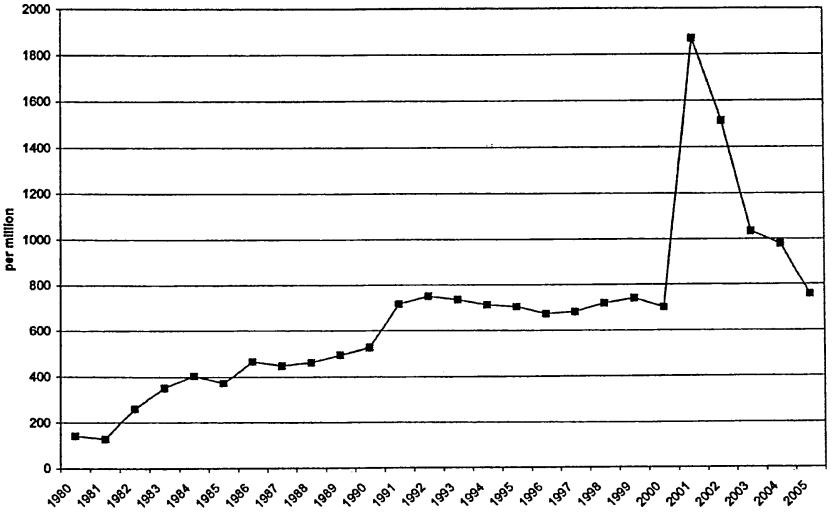
Figure 1. Frequency of *Audra* (per million female names), 1965-2002



A much more recent example of a tsunami curve is shown by the male name *Colby* (see figure 2). *Colby* first appeared on the Social Security top thousand list in 1968 at rank 844. It then slowly increased in a very un-tsunami-like way until peaking at rank 197 in 1992. *Colby* was probably discovered by many parents as an alternative for previously well-used similar sounding names such as *Corey* and *Cody* without much specific popular culture influence. After 1992, *Colby* slowly receded in

use until 2000, when it was at rank 233, then it suddenly increased in use by 163% to reach rank 99 in 2001, immediately falling off again the next year. The only logical explanation seems to be the appearance of the photogenic American actor Colby Donaldson as a contestant on the television "reality" program *Survivor: The Australian Outback*, which aired between January and May of 2001.

Figure 2. Frequency of *Colby* (per million male names), 1965-2002



Some other tsunami-curve patterns include those of *Shanice*, which entered the top thousand list in 1988 at 163rd place following the release of singer Shanice Wilson's first album; *Denzel*, associated with the first Oscar nomination of actor Denzel Washington in 1989; *Yahir*, appearing in 2002 after the young Mexican singer Yahir appeared on the Spanish language equivalent of *American Idol*; and *Litzy*, jumping into prominence at 396th place in 2000 after the Mexican singer Litzy was featured on the Spanish language television serial *DKDA*. These examples show that names which appeal primarily to minority cultures also can show this pattern.

Particularly interesting are names which seem to show more than one tsunami-like increase and fall. *Shelby*, as a female name, seems to have been introduced by Barbara Stanwyck's portrayal of the character Shelby Barret Wyatt in the 1935 film *The Woman in Red*, and then decades later shows a more spectacular up and down move after Julia Roberts played

Shelby Eatenton-Latcherie in 1989's *Steel Magnolias*. *Sabrina* seems to show at least three ups and downs inspired by Hollywood, being introduced by the 1954 Audrey Hepburn film titled *Sabrina*, and then peaking in both 1977 and 1997 because of characters on the television programs *Charlie's Angels* and *Sabrina: the Teenage Witch*.

Equally fascinating are cases where a tsunami curve seems to show a sort of feedback loop in operation between the tastes of the general public and Hollywood screenwriters. *Emma* had been steadily increasing in the United States since 1978, reaching 13th on the Social Security administration list in 2001. If the name had maintained its fairly steady rate of increase, it would have reached around 10th place in 2003. Instead *Emma* suddenly shot up to fourth place in 2002 and second place in 2003, with the percentage of girls given the name falling off somewhat after that year. This seems to coincide with the birth of the baby named Emma on the television comedy *Friends* in May 2002. It seems that the writers of that program chose the name *Emma* because it was an up-and-coming name at the time, but they then caused a sort of small tsunami to be imposed on top of what was a fairly steadily increasing name. A similar process may be occurring with *Addison* as a female name. American parents probably discovered *Addison* as an alternative for *Madison* on their own. *Addison* entered the top thousand list of names for girls in 1994 and steadily rose, but that rise seems to have been suddenly accelerated by the appearance of the character Dr. Addison Montgomery-Shepherd on the television series *Grey's Anatomy* in 2005.

Entertainment programs are not the only part of the media that can suddenly give a name publicity, of course. Indeed, one of the most striking tsunami-curves of recent years happened with the name *Laci* in 2003, undoubtedly inspired by the publicity given the Laci Peterson murder case starting in December of 2002. Not only was Ms. Peterson's unusual spelling affected, but the alternative spellings *Lacey*, *Lacie*, and *Lacy* also showed a similar sudden up and down movement in 2003 and 2004 on the Social Security administration list. Such examples show once again that parents are probably not naming children "after" the public figures whose names they are exposed to, but are more likely simply choosing names whose sound fits in with the "different but not too different" criterion that guides so many in their choice of infant names in the early 21st century.

The tsunami curve probably gives the best evidence by itself that some particular cultural event is associated with the increased use of a name. But there certainly seem to be names introduced by such events that do *not* immediately recede but go on to steadily rise over the years. *Madison* was one such example. Another is *Heath*, which first entered the top thousand list for American boys in 1966 at 359th place, the same year as *Audra*, probably being inspired by the same television program, *The Big Valley*, where Lee Majors played Audra's half-brother, Heath Barkley. But unlike *Audra*, *Heath* did not almost immediately recede in use again, but instead only peaked in 1974, five years after *The Big Valley* left prime time television. It seems likely that after television introduced the name to them, American parents of the 1970s accepted it as a masculine version of *Heather*, which was incredibly popular for girls at the same time, peaking at third place in 1975. Another name which seems to have been revived by a particular media event is *Savannah*, which first came back on to the Social Security list in 1982, the same year the comic film *Savannah Smiles*, where the title character is a young girl who charms her bumbling kidnappers, was released. But instead of showing a tsunami pattern, *Savannah* stayed at about the same level of use for about a decade and then began steadily increasing, with its rank of 30th in 2006 being its highest ever.

Cases like *Heath's* and *Savannah's* show that the tsunami curve phenomenon raises as many questions as it answers. Why do some names introduced by the media make this impact while others do not? Would a higher percentage of parents who use names which show the tsunami pattern be from a particular educational or social group than parents who choose names which don't show this pattern? Can similarities in sound to other popular names, such as the relation between *Heath* and *Heather*, be quantified to help predict which pattern a newly popular name will show? One of the names most recently reintroduced by television seems to be *Leland*, which bounced back on to the Social Security top thousand list for boys in 2005 after an absence of several years, probably due largely to its being the name of the photogenic son of *Dog the Bounty Hunter* on that "reality" television series. Can we expect *Leland* to continue to increase, or to fall back again in the next couple of years? At this time such predictions are difficult, and more research needs to be done to fully understand how various factors operate in name revival.

Another question is whether or not every name which shows the tsunami pattern will have the cause of its sudden success discovered. One

of the few that remains a mystery at this time is *Joelle*, which suddenly appeared at 468th place on the Social Security list for girls in 1966 and has been slowly retreating from that position ever since.

Finally, if I may end this article on a personal note, it is a great honor to be able to make a contribution to the Festschrift for Ed Lawson. Over the years he has encouraged me, a psychologist whose research interests include names, to become active in the American Name Society and to continue with my research, even though I haven't always been able to do it in a way that academic psychologists would consider traditional. I am very grateful to him both for his support, and for the role model he has provided in his own research and dedication to the field of onomastics.

Notes

1. Information on films and television programs is from the Internet Movie Database (2007).

2. Information on name frequencies is from Social Security Online (2007) and Evans (2006).

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