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# Mrs. Agentic: Perceptions of Women who Sustain Their Birth Surname After Marriage

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## Abstract

As more women earn higher education degrees every year, it is clear gender roles are becoming more egalitarian within Western society. More common than ever before, women are earning more degrees than men and are taking on different roles than what was once expected of them. With this new freedom, women have shifted from playing a supportive role within society to branching out and creating their own established identity. Not only are women maintaining a separate identity in the professional world, but they are also maintaining a separate identity in their marriages. Correlating with the increased number of women in the professional world, there has been a popular trend of women sustaining their birth surname. Although women who sustain their surname are creating a separate identity for themselves, they are likely to be perceived as violating a traditional gender-role norm. In order to further investigate these perceptions, the current study examined perceptions of women who keep their surname upon marriage. Specifically, I focused on the attributes that are ascribed to women who retain their own surname after marriage.

## Historical Background

- Women were once legally obligated to change their surnames, generating a traditional marriage ritual in Western society (Hoffnung, 2006).
- Due to the inequality social context that women once encountered, women gained certain advantages when they took their husband's name.  
 Ex. The assets and property a woman inherited from her family would automatically become ownership of her husband, allowing her to have access to her property and possessions (Boxer & Gritsenko, 2005).
- In 1975 women were able to sustain their birth surname in every form, however the practice was still seen as a social norm violation in Western society (Twenge, 1997).

## Previous Research

### Gender Roles

- As a result of distinctly segregated gender roles, the public is more likely to categorize a person as masculine or feminine based on her or his role in society.
- Men tend to display agentic characteristics, which are personality characteristics associated with independence, high status, and high power (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012).
- Conversely, women tend to display communal characteristics, which are personality characteristics associated with interpersonal interaction, low social status, and low power (Rudman et al., 2012).
- Previous research has noted that men who display high levels of communion and women who display high levels of agency are likely to be perceived as violating social norms (Rudman et al., 2012).
- As a result, a woman with a nontraditional surname is likely to be classified as being relatively high in agency.

### Reasons Why Women Change Their Surname

- Age is a significant factor involved in traditional marriage rituals, because marriage was seen as a last big step into adulthood (Gilmore, 1990; Schlegel & Barry, 1991).
- Socially, women were praised for their transition into adulthood because of their new role in society (Gilmore, 1990; Schlegel & Barry, 1991).
- The social acceptance that followed a woman who changed her surname generated a common marriage ritual. This identified the notion as being traditional (Gilmore, 1990; Schlegel & Barry, 1991).

### Reasons Why Women Sustain Their Birth Surname

- The two most common reasons for women sustaining their birth surname upon marriage is because of identity and professional lifestyle (Twenge, 1997).
- Women who sustain their birth surname after marriage are more likely to have a separate identity from their spouses' and maintain their separate identity in their profession (Twenge 1997).

## Present Study

The current study sought to shed light on how undergraduates perceived women who kept their surname after marriage. A mixed methods approach was used to assess our hypothesis and further explore the reasoning with a research question.

Hypothesis 1, which was tested with quantitative data, is as follows:

**H1:** Younger students with less relationship experience will be more likely have negative perceptions of women with nontraditional surnames.

We then used qualitative data to assess the following research question:

**RQ1:** Are participants more likely to ascribe agentic characteristics rather than communal characteristics to a woman with a nontraditional surname?

## Method

### Participants

Participants consisted of 283 undergraduates at UC Santa Cruz (76% women). They ranged in age from 17-24 years old ( $M = 19$ ).

### Phase of Education

Frosh: 46%; Sophomores: 20%; Juniors: 16%; Seniors: 18%

### Cultural Background

White/European American: 42%; Latino/Hispanic: 29%; Asian American: 4%; African American: 1%; Other/Multiple: 24%

### Relationship Status

Single: 63%; Dating 1-12 months: 21%; Dating for more than 1 year: 16%

## Method

### Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey that consisted of two parts. Half of the participants completed the first portion of the survey, which evaluated the personality traits that participants allocated to a woman who retained her surname after marriage. The remaining half of the sample completed the last portion of the survey, in which they were asked to rate the marriage commitment of a woman who retained her surname after marriage.

### Personality Trait Allocations Prompt:

"We are interested in understanding the circumstances under which a woman in a heterosexual relationship might decide to keep her own last name after getting married. Take a few minutes to envision a scenario where the woman in the relationship decides to keep her last name. In particular, think about the characteristics of the woman, the man, and their relationship."

### Ratings of Nontraditional Surnames Vignette:

"David and Christina met during their last year of college. They have been together for three years and recently got engaged. Both are extremely happy with their relationships. As the wedding draws closer, Christina realizes that she needs to decide whether she will change her last name to David's or keep her own. *Christina eventually tells David that she would like to keep her own last name.*"

## Results (Quantitative)

**H1:** SPSS analysis was used compare means of age and relationship status with personality attributes, by using two *t*-tests. Also, two correlations were used in order to determine the relationship of relationship status and age with different characteristics.

- Two separate *t*-tests were carried out in order to distinguish if participants' age and relationship experience were associated with the agentic coding category. Therefore we compared the mean-level differences in age and relationship experience with the agentic coding category.
- Next, we examined whether there was a correlation between age and the woman being perceived as agentic, and also if relationship experience had a correlation with the woman being perceived as agentic.
- The quantitative analyses were inconsistent with our hypotheses and no significant results illustrated that age and relationship experience were a direct influences on the woman being perceived as agentic.

## Results (Qualitative)

**RQ1:** Thematic analysis was used to code personality characteristics that participants ascribed to a woman who retained her surname after getting married. A semi- inductive approach was used (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Relevant themes are listed as follows:

### **1. Woman Perceived as Agentic** (76% of responses)

Ex. "The woman could have a very strong personality and feel very confident in who she is. She is probably very independent and doesn't want to take her husband's last name because she is her own person."

### **2. Woman Perceived as Communal** (11% of responses)

Ex. "She feels connected to her family, and she knows that she loves her husband, but she does not need to change her last name to prove it."

### **3. Woman Perceived as Feminist/Egalitarian** (21% of responses)

Ex. "Maybe she is a feminist and feels that women don't have to follow typical female traditions."

### **4. Woman Perceived as Insecure/Noncommittal** (4% of responses)

Ex. "Yes, her insecurity. She doesn't like to rely on her husband for just about anything, including economically."

## Future Directions

Consistent with prior research (Rudman et al., 2012; Etough et al., 1999), the current study illustrated participants were more likely to categorize a woman who retained her surname to play a masculine role within a marriage. Our quantitative analyses that were consistent with our hypotheses illustrated that age and relationship experience were not a direct influence on women being perceived as agentic. Therefore, the future direction of this study will likely benefit from a more diverse set of participants.

One limitation of the current study is the age range of the participants. It would be interesting to compare responses from an older age group in order to relate the negative stigma of nontraditional surnames to a generation gap. With the shift in generations' acceptance of new social norms, an age related study affiliated with nontraditional surnames could be significant in regards to different generations' acceptance of nontraditional marriage rituals.

Lastly, the present study examined participant's reactions to a woman in a heterosexual relationship. It would be ideal to examine marriage rituals in same-sex relationships in order to understand which traditions are more likely to be viewed as social violations.