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Modernity vs. Tradition: The Sociolinguistic Significance of “C” and “K” in Female Names

Abstract

This study investigates the sociolinguistic significance of orthographic preferences in English-speaking contexts, specifically the tendency to favour “K” over “C” in female names. Drawing on mixed-methods data from the *Oxford Dictionary of First Names* (2003), the *Top 1,000 Baby Girl Names in the US* (2025), and discussions on Reddit (*r/namenerds*), we examine how language, gender, and cultural perceptions shape orthographic choices. We identified 14 name pairs (e.g., Catherine/Katherine) for comparative analysis, each pronounced with the same /k/ sound despite the different spelling. Quantitative comparisons of name frequencies confirm a recent shift towards “K”, while a thematic analysis of 481 user comments highlights four main social meanings assigned to “C” vs. “K”: (1) modernity vs. tradition, (2) gendered symbolism, (3) cultural or heritage authenticity, and (4) practical clarity. These findings demonstrate how surface-level spelling decisions reflect broader sociocultural dynamics – from the ways parents “do gender” through naming choices to the ways digital forums shape linguistic trends. Grounded in social constructionism and digital identity frameworks, our study illustrates how naming norms reveal both evolving ideas of prestige and the tensions between individuality, tradition, and cultural identity in contemporary onomastics, sociolinguistics, and digital culture studies.

Keywords: culture; female names; gender norms; identity; orthography

1 Introduction

The spelling of a personal name is far more than a neutral linguistic detail; it constitutes a fundamental component of identity, serving as a vehicle for self-expression and social signalling. Personal names carry significant social and cultural weight, reflecting both individual identity and broader societal norms. In sociological terms, names and their spellings can be viewed as social constructs, their significance created and sustained through collective use, shared beliefs, and cultural conventions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Orthographic choices, in particular, are imbued with social meaning: the way we spell words or names often serves as a “reflection of culture [and] history” and social practices, acting as a “powerful symbol of national or local identity.”

Psycholinguistic research likewise indicates that spelling is not a trivial matter; orthographic processing operates somewhat independently of phonology, influencing perception even independently of pronunciation (Hagiliassis et al., 2006). Therefore, the written form of a name is a pivotal indicator of identity and social positioning, rather than merely a passive representation of its pronunciation. This study investigates one such orthographic phenomenon observed predominantly within female given names: the growing tendency to favour the letter “K” over “C” in cases where both spellings yield the same /k/ sound (e.g., Katherine vs. Catherine). We focus on female names because parents have historically exhibited greater flexibility in naming daughters than sons, making female name orthography a potentially dynamic site of sociolinguistic variation.

Sociological studies of naming practices have long highlighted gender differences; for instance, sons are more frequently given traditional or kin-based names, whereas daughters' names tend to be less conventional and more susceptible to fashion (see Zibin et al., 2024). In a large-scale analysis of New York birth records, Lieberson and Bell (1992) found that parents were significantly more likely to create a name or utilise a unique spelling for girls than for boys, reflecting greater creative latitude in female naming. As Pilcher (2017) observes, naming practices constitute an integral part of the “embodied doing of gender”, helping to produce and reinforce gender distinctions. This “K-over-C” spelling trend – characterised by the substitution of “C” with “K” – thus highlights the intricate intertwining of language, gender, and identity in contemporary naming practices.

Writing systems themselves can be understood as a form of social action embedded in cultural ideologies, rather than merely neutral technical choices. Indeed, orthographic practices both index and influence social identities and hierarchies. In popular perception, “K” spellings often appear stylish, novel, or bold, whereas “C” spellings are viewed as timeless and traditional. For example, the trendsetting Kardashian family famously gave all their daughters “K”-initial names, effectively leveraging the letter “K” as a marker of a glamorous, modern brand. By contrast, many classic English female names historically utilised “C”, which lends them an air of established elegance or even a masculine/androgynous edge (as in Catherine or Claude).

These popular associations – not inherent in the letters themselves but constructed through usage – raise the question of how and why such spelling preferences arise and what they signify. Despite increasing scholarly interest in personal naming conventions and their sociolinguistic implications (e.g., Pilcher, 2017; vom Bruck & Bodenhorn, 2006), the specific gendered aspects of orthographic choice (for example, why “Kaitlyn” might be chosen over “Caitlin”) remain underexplored. Prior research has examined personal names in relation to identity construction and cultural representation, yet it has not extensively addressed how considerations of gender and modernity intersect in spelling decisions. The present study seeks to fill this gap by drawing on both historical and contemporary data to examine how shifting societal norms, media trends, and digital discourse influence preferences for “C” vs. “K” name spellings.

2 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on sociolinguistic theories that conceptualise naming as a socially embedded practice. By integrating social constructionism, identity performance, linguistic capital, and digital identity frameworks, we approach orthographic choices in female names as meaningful social actions rather than neutral technicalities. In essence, the simple decision to spell a name with “C” or “K” is conceptualised here as a site of identity negotiation, influenced by the interplay between cultural norms and individual agency.

2.1 Social Constructionism and Naming as Social Practice

Central to our analysis is the theory of social constructionism as outlined by Berger and Luckmann (1966). They argue that reality is “socially constructed”, meaning that practices such as naming are far from arbitrary, arising instead through repeated social interactions that grant them legitimacy. A person’s name – and even the spelling of that name – is not a random label; rather, it reflects cultural ideologies and social structures. For example, when parents choose “Katherine” over “Catherine”, they are not simply picking a different letter; they are engaging in a broader symbolic act shaped by evolving ideas of modernity, gender, and identity.

Within this paradigm, variations in spelling become one of many ways that cultural narratives embed themselves in everyday life. As Berger and Luckmann note, an individual innovation can become normalised through repetition and social acceptance. Indeed, a naming choice that begins as a small departure – such as selecting a “K” spelling for distinctiveness – may, if widely adopted, crystallise into a new norm. This process appears to be underway in the increasing mainstreaming of “K” names in recent decades – a trend that reflects more than a mere aesthetic preference, revealing deeper social affiliations with novelty, distinctiveness, and the individualistic spirit of the digital age.

2.2 Identity, Orthography, and Linguistic Capital

Language and naming also function as performances of identity. This idea aligns with the work of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), who describe linguistic behaviour as a continual negotiation of belonging. Speakers adjust their language to affiliate with desired communities; by extension, name spellings can be chosen to project a certain group identity. Opting for a “K”-initial name may signal alignment with contemporary, creative, or non-traditional circles. In choosing “Kaitlyn” over “Caitlin”, for example, individuals implicitly communicate an identity that values modern flair or a break from convention. From this perspective, orthographic choice becomes a strategy for identity – part of “styling the self” through language (cf. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Building on this, Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of linguistic capital becomes crucial. Bourdieu argues that language operates as a form of symbolic capital – a resource that individuals use to gain prestige, authority, or distinctiveness. Orthographic forms, especially those associated with elite or trendsetting groups (e.g., names influenced by celebrities), accrue social value. The Kardashian family’s use of “K” names is emblematic of this process: by consistently branding names such as Kim, Khloé, and Kylie, the family has transformed the letter “K” into a cultural symbol linked with luxury, visibility, and aspirational femininity. In this sense, choosing a “K” name can be seen as an investment in symbolic capital – one that may yield social advantages through the appearance of modernity or stylistic flair.

2.3 Orthography as Social Action

The seemingly small detail of spelling a name can have an outsized social significance. Sebba (2007) conceptualises orthography not merely as a neutral system of rules but as a social practice embedded in what New Literacy Studies calls the broader literacy environment. According to Sebba, individuals use spelling choices to mark identity positions, signaling who they are, and, at times, who they are not. Orthographic decisions often draw lines of inclusion or exclusion, aligning individuals with particular groups or values. For example, a person might choose to spell their nickname as “Kris” instead of “Chris” not for any phonological reason, but to signal a shift in identity or ideology. In our context, a transgender woman adopting Kris (as in the case of YouTuber Kris Tyson) harnesses orthography to affirm her gender identity and possibly to align with a more modern, feminised stylistic norm, since “K” carries a contemporary feminine connotation in popular culture. Such choices emphasise Sebba’s (2007) argument that spelling is often a deliberate social action.

2.4 Digital Identity, Gender Performance, and Orthographic Innovation

Digital media have introduced new arenas in which naming conventions evolve and take on social meaning. Darvin and Norton’s (2015) investment model of online identity highlights how linguistic resources are mobilised in internet contexts to build social and symbolic capital. In digital spaces such as social networks, forums, and gaming platforms, users actively perform identities that are fluid and context-dependent. A username, screen name, or the spelling of one’s a display name becomes part of an online persona. Notably, visual and orthographic stylisations (such as using a particular letter or character in one’s name) can signal alignment with certain online communities or values. For example, on forums such as *r/namenerds* or social media platforms, we often see deliberate spelling alterations that convey originality or group membership (e.g. using “Kayleigh” instead of “Kaylee” to evoke a trendy vibe). These choices are not arbitrary: they are resources that users invest in, hoping to gain recognition, status, or acceptance within their digital peer groups. In essence, spelling becomes a currency in the online world’s economy of attention and identity.

A vivid illustration of orthographic innovation intersecting with gender and digital identity is the case of Kris Tyson, a prominent YouTube content creator. During her gender transition, she changed the spelling of her name from “Chris” to “Kris”. This alteration was multifaceted in its intent. On one hand, it was a deeply personal affirmation of her feminine identity – a public signal of transformation. On the other hand, it was a strategic choice in terms of digital branding: by retaining a name phonetically similar to her former one,

she preserved continuity for her existing audience and online brand (which had been built under “Chris”) while the switch to “K” marked a new chapter. The alteration of a single letter thus operated on two levels: it maintained recognizability in the digital space (important for someone whose livelihood and influence are tied to online identity), and it communicated authentic self-redefinition. This example demonstrates how spelling can serve as a semiotic bridge between one’s past and present selves, especially in the public eye. It also exemplifies the notion that orthographic choices carry social weight; they can encode nuanced meanings regarding gender and authenticity, particularly in contexts where personal identity and public persona are deeply intertwined.

This view resonates with Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not something one is, but rather something one performs – a continuous act shaped by cultural expectations. In this light, opting for a “K” spelling can be interpreted as a performative act that either conforms to or challenges normative gender scripts. The choice of spelling “Kaitlyn” instead of “Caitlin”, for instance, illustrates how naming participates in the “doing” gender, especially since “K” is often perceived as more trendy, gentle, or expressive of contemporary femininity.

2.5 Media, Celebrity Influence, and Linguistic Commodification

Media and celebrity culture have further accentuated these spelling trends. The “Kardashian effect” exemplifies how popular culture influences naming practices, transforming personal names into lifestyle markers. As Wickens and Haughton (2023) elucidate, platforms such as Instagram have transformed visual and linguistic branding into acts of identity construction. The Kardashian family’s consistent use of “K” names has effectively commodified a single letter, rendering “K” a symbol of prestige and social capital.

This type of orthographic branding aligns with Bourdieu’s concept of the “linguistic market”, wherein language carries a distinct “market value”. From this perspective, a letter such as “K” can acquire cultural significance simply by being associated with influential media narratives. Consequently, we can no longer dismiss spelling choices as mere aesthetic whims; instead, we must recognise them as ideologically charged decisions influenced by an individual’s social standing within a broader linguistic market.

This theoretical framework integrates social constructionism, performativity theory, linguistic capital, and digital identity scholarship to conceptualise orthographic variation as a multifaceted arena for identity negotiation. It establishes a conceptual connection between individual agency (for instance, a parent opting for a specific name spelling) and structural influences (such as media narratives, tradition, and gender norms), demonstrating that seemingly minor spelling differences can encapsulate broader sociocultural dynamics.

3 Literature Review

This section delves into the existing empirical research on orthographic variation in personal names, organised around three interconnected themes: (1) the historical evolution of names and orthographic change; (2) gender, identity, and naming practices; and (3) digital identity, celebrity influence, and orthographic trends. By examining these areas, we position our study within ongoing scholarly discussions and identify critical gaps that our research aims to address. Scholars in onomastics and socio-onomastics (the study of names in social contexts) have long recognised that personal names carry social significance and evolve in response to societal changes (Ainiala & Östman, 2017; Alford, 1988). Building on this foundation, we explore how “C” vs. “K” spelling choices have been treated (or overlooked) in previous studies and how our work contributes to the existing literature.

3.1 Historical Evolution of Names and Orthographic Change

Orthographic variation in names has deep historical roots. Dunkling (1993) provides a foundational analysis of how spelling preferences have evolved within English naming traditions, showing that periodic shifts in name forms (for example, from “Catherine” to “Katherine”) often reflected cultural and linguistic

pressures, such as the influence of Latin, French, or Greek. Although Dunkling’s archival work emphasises that spelling variants tend to be cyclical and trend-driven, its reliance on anecdotal evidence and a limited dataset makes it difficult to generalise about the sociolinguistic mechanisms driving these changes.

Dunkling’s insightful work relies on anecdotal examples and limited records, thereby preventing a thorough explanation of the factors underlying naming changes. While he acknowledges patterns, he fails to firmly identify the sociolinguistic mechanisms driving them. Quantitative analyses of naming trends subsequently strengthened our understanding. Stanley Lieberman (2000) examined baby names and concluded that parents’ choices balance the pursuit of novelty with adherence to social norms. Names reflect status, group identity, and the zeitgeist. Historical spelling shifts reflect negotiations between prestige and innovation; at times, a “K” spelling conveys prestige, while a “C” spelling carries classical legitimacy. However, notions of prestige in orthography vary across linguocultural contexts: many Germanic languages use “K” by default for the /k/ sound in names (e.g., “Katarina” or “Karen”), whereas Romance languages traditionally favour “C” (as in “Catherine” or “Catalina”) (Hull AWE, 2021). Dunkling (1993) highlighted that naming patterns are constantly influenced by prestige, novelty, and conformity. Yet, recent data-driven work connecting historical insights to the present day remains scarce. The late 20th and early 21st centuries introduced new influences (e.g., mass media and the internet) that are likely affecting naming in unprecedented ways. Indeed, socio-onomastic trend analyses show a continued rise in unique baby names through this period, suggesting that parents’ drive for individuality has only intensified in recent decades (Pappas, 2016). While we know “C” and “K” usage has always been socially charged, we need to trace how these historical tendencies manifest in the digital age. Our study uses contemporary data (e.g., social media discourse and modern name frequencies) to examine if old patterns of prestige and innovation are being reshaped by current cultural forces.

3.2 Gender, Identity, and Naming Practices

Linguists have long noted that naming is a powerful tool for “doing” gender. From a critical feminist perspective, Cameron (1992) emphasises that linguistic practices (including naming) reinforce gender hierarchies, arguing that even seemingly neutral language choices help to uphold male-dominated social structures. While Cameron’s (1992) argument is conceptually rich, it remains largely theoretical and is not grounded in empirical data on actual naming practices.

Empirical sociolinguistic research has bolstered the claim that individuals use linguistic variation to construct gendered identities. Penelope Eckert’s ethnographic studies (e.g., Eckert, 2003) are illustrative. Eckert examined how adolescents in American high schools employ variables in pronunciation and word choice to align with locally meaningful gender identities (among other social dimensions). For example, in her notable “jocks and burnouts” study, she showed that girls and boys in different social cliques adopted distinctive speech patterns as a way to signal their personae; some embraced a more standard style, whereas others opted for a rebellious vernacular, each carrying gendered connotations. While Eckert’s work focused on phonological and lexical choices rather than orthography, the principle extends to the present topic: youth (and by extension, parents naming infants) can use linguistic form to perform gender in line with their social milieu. A spelling choice might be another such form of performance. If a mother perceives “Kassandra” with a “K” as more playful or empowered compared to “Cassandra”, she is effectively aligning her daughter’s name with a certain gender image. Eckert’s findings support the broader theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) in that they show gender is continually constructed through active choices in language. However, it is notable that explicit discussion of orthographic choices in gender performance has been limited, a gap that this study intends to fill.

One scholar who specifically addresses name spelling specifically is Pilcher (2016). Her work directly connects naming practices to gender and social change. Through surveys and interviews with parents, she found evidence that many parents choose “non-traditional” spellings, such as those incorporating “K”, for their daughters to convey qualities such as uniqueness, femininity, or modernity. For instance, a parent might feel that “Karley” (with a “K”) seems more distinctively feminine or less conventional than “Carley”. Such motivations tie into perceptions that the letter K adds a certain “edge” or novelty to a name, potentially setting a daughter apart in a positive way. Pilcher also notes that some parents associate “K-spellings” with

a kind of updated femininity, one that is independent and modern, whereas they see “C-spellings” as either masculine-leaning or simply too traditional. Her study, conducted in the UK, aligns closely with the premise of our research by confirming that orthography carries social meaning in gendered contexts. It gives empirical weight to the idea that choosing “K” vs. “C” is an act laden with social intent. However, Pilcher’s research has its limitations: it is geographically focused (on British naming trends) and does not delve into online or media influences. Moreover, it treats the naming decision largely as a parent’s conscious choice, without exploring how community discourse (like Reddit discussions) might also shape or reflect those choices. In framing our contribution, we do not view Pilcher’s findings as flawed, but rather as a springboard. We aim to build on her insights by broadening the scope to include digital and US contexts, and by examining how anonymous interactants (e.g., internet forum users) articulate the social meanings of these spelling choices.

Taken together, these studies reinforce the notion that choosing specific spellings for female names is not a phonetically neutral decision, but a gendered social act. Additionally, naming practices vary across communities and can symbolise broader group identities; for instance, African-American parents in the US began adopting increasingly distinctive names during the 1960s as an assertion of cultural identity and pride (Pope, 2003). This may help explain why creative spellings have historically been more popular for girls than for boys (Pappas, 2016). However, these studies also expose a gap in the research regarding how gendered naming plays out in anonymous online settings, where traditional social pressures might be altered or challenged.

3.3 Digital Identity, Celebrity Influence, and Orthographic Trends

Recent research highlights that digital platforms have become crucial arenas for negotiating language and identity. According to Darvin and Norton (2015), individuals in online environments leverage linguistic resources – including usernames, nicknames, and spelling variants – to project carefully curated identities that respond to the specific context. Their investment model demonstrates how even spelling can serve as a resource for accumulating symbolic and social capital within digital spaces.

This framework is particularly relevant to shifts in name spelling, such as choosing “K” over “C” to signal trendiness, individuality, or alignment with popular culture. A notable real-world example is Kris Tyson, a YouTube personality who altered the spelling of her name from “Chris” to “Kris” as part of her gender transition. This change enabled her to maintain continuity with her existing personal brand while simultaneously expressing a new gender identity, illustrating that orthography can serve both personal and public identity functions.

Wickens and Haughton (2023) examine how orthographic style functions as a form of visual branding on platforms such as Instagram, particularly among young women. Their findings suggest that users make deliberate spelling choices that complement specific aesthetics, notions of femininity, and markers of online prestige. However, because their study centres on visual identity, it only touches indirectly on text-based naming practices, including “C/K” spelling variations.

Celebrity influence is another significant factor shaping spelling norms. The Kardashian family, with their deliberate use of “K” names (Kim, Khloé, Kourtney, Kylie, Kendall), have popularised the letter “K” as a symbol of feminine chic and brand distinctiveness. While few academic studies have systematically analysed this impact, cultural commentary and media discourse suggest that such celebrity branding exerts an influence on popular naming conventions. This trend corresponds with Bourdieu’s (1991) theory of linguistic capital, which frames language use as a means of acquiring prestige and social recognition.

Finally, Jadesi (2022) broadens the scope by examining Persian-language online forums, showing that changes in the spelling of usernames can signal religious, ethnic, or gender affiliations. Through thematic and corpus analyses, she demonstrates that spelling choices on digital platforms involve complex negotiations between local identities and global influences. Her methodology provides a valuable model for examining Reddit-based discourse in the current project. Even beyond English-speaking contexts, similar patterns are evident: Japan has seen a rise in unconventional “kira-kira” (“sparkly”) baby names that push the boundaries of tradition – a trend attributed to Western popular culture influences and increasing individualism (Shamim, 2025).

The literature indicates that variation in name spelling occurs at the intersection of tradition, gender, and digital identity. However, there remains a clear gap in empirical research concerning spelling choices within anonymous, user-driven online spaces. The present study aims to address this gap by combining a thematic analysis of Reddit discussions with quantitative data on naming trends, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how orthographic choices function as sociolinguistic and cultural practices in the twenty-first century.

4 Research Objectives and Questions

This research is guided by the overarching objective of understanding why and how spelling choices for female first names carry sociolinguistic significance. In particular, we examine the preference for “K” vs. “C” initial letters as an entry point into broader discussions concerning language, gender, and culture. The study addresses the following specific research questions:

- What distinct social meanings do English speakers associate with identically pronounced female names when one is spelled with “K” and the other with “C”? Specifically, how do interactants interpret or stereotype a name like “Katherine” versus “Catherine”?
- How do broader sociocultural factors shape these orthographic choices? In particular, to what extent do gender norms, notions of cultural authenticity, celebrity influence, and digital community discourse dictate the preference for “K” or “C” in female naming practices?

By investigating these questions, the study aims to elucidate both the symbolic associations attached to “C” vs. “K” name spellings and the sociolinguistic motivations underlying parental naming decisions. In other words, we seek to understand not only what “K” and “C” signify to interactants, but also why parents might favour one over the other in practice. By integrating qualitative insights from online discussions with quantitative evidence from historical and contemporary naming data, this research examines how a seemingly minor orthographic preference can reflect deeper processes of identity construction and cultural negotiation. Ultimately, this work sheds light on how choices in name spelling serve as a microcosm of broader tensions between modernity and tradition, and individuality and convention, in today’s naming practices.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research Design and Data Sources

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative thematic analysis of online discourse with a quantitative analysis of naming patterns. The goal is to explore public attitudes towards the spelling of names beginning with “C” versus “K” and to triangulate those perceptions with real-world naming data. This is an observational study that utilises naturally occurring data rather than experimental intervention. We prioritised ecological validity, aiming to capture the attitudes towards name spellings as they naturally emerge spontaneously in online discussions. While experiments can isolate specific variables, they often sacrifice the nuance and context of real-world interactions. Consequently, while the findings are context-specific and not broadly generalisable, they offer an in-depth understanding of how spelling preferences are negotiated and understood within the specific digital environment of the *r/namenerds* subreddit.

For the qualitative component, we analysed a Reddit thread posted in mid-2022 and retrieved in July 2024 from *r/namenerds*, a subreddit dedicated to naming discourse. The original post queried: “In general, when a name can be spelled with either an initial “C” or “K”, do you tend to always prefer “C” over “K”, or vice versa?” The thread yielded 481 comments, including both top-level responses and replies. This subreddit attracts a user base with a demonstrated interest in onomastics, often demonstrating awareness of cultural, phonological, and historical naming factors; consequently, it is a relevant community for examining public perceptions of name spellings.

Quantitative data were drawn from two sources: (1) the *Oxford Dictionary of First Names* (ODFN; Hanks & Hodges, 2003), utilised to estimate the historical diversity of female names beginning with “C” and “K”, and (2) the *Top 1,000 Baby Girl Names in the US* (Weiss & Vance, 2025), representing contemporary naming trends within an English-speaking context. Together, these datasets offer a comparative snapshot of past and present naming practices, enabling an assessment of whether Reddit users’ perceptions align with actual usage shifts over time. However, both sources possess inherent sample biases: the *r/namenerds* participants constitute a self-selected group, and the baby name statistics are exclusively US-derived. We acknowledge this US-centric scope and the consequent limitations it imposes on the interpretation of the findings.

5.2 Data Collection and Preprocessing

The Reddit data were manually collated by reviewing the full thread and extracting all comments into a spreadsheet. We included both top-level comments and subsequent replies. During the preprocessing phase, we excluded off-topic posts, humorous diversions, deleted entries, and duplicates. While all top-level comments were retained, replies were only included if they introduced a distinctly new opinion or perspective that had not been previously captured. This refinement process resulted in a final dataset of 255 substantive comments, each treated as a discrete data point for qualitative analysis.

To prepare the data for analysis, we anonymised all usernames and redacted any personally identifying information. Reddit-specific formatting, including emojis, markdown, and hyperlinks, was removed, and the comments were converted to plain text. Importantly, original capitalisation was preserved where relevant – particularly when distinguishing between “C” and “K” spellings – to maintain the orthographic integrity of the data. While demographic information regarding Reddit users was unavailable, the anonymity of the platform may encourage greater candour in expressing opinions. This lack of demographic data is acknowledged as a limitation; however, the analysis focuses on discourse content rather than speaker identity, aligning with ethical guidelines for internet-based research.

For the quantitative component, we extracted name entries from the *Oxford Dictionary of First Names* (ODFN) and calculated the frequency of distinct female names beginning with “C” and “K”. To ensure a representative historical baseline, we excluded diminutives and variant spellings listed under primary entries. From the *Top 1,000 Baby Girl Names in the US* (Weiss & Vance, 2025), we recorded the distribution of names beginning with each letter. This facilitated a comparison of the proportion of “C-” and “K-initial” names in the historical lexicon versus contemporary usage. Furthermore, we examined paired variants (e.g., “Catherine/Katherine”, “Cara/Kara”) to explore potential correlations between orthographic perception and empirical popularity.

All data utilised in this study were publicly accessible. The Reddit data were retrieved from a public thread accessible without authentication, and no direct interaction with users was undertaken. The naming datasets were derived from official or published institutional sources. Consequently, all data were handled with strict adherence to anonymity and in accordance with established ethical standards for internet-mediated research.

5.3 Data Analysis

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of the Reddit comments, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach. After familiarising ourselves with the dataset, we performed open, inductive coding to identify patterns in how users justified their spelling preferences. Codes were developed directly from the data and subsequently grouped into higher-order categories through thematic mapping.

From this process, we identified four dominant themes:

- **Modernity versus Tradition** – This theme captures the prevailing perception of “K” as a marker of trendiness or contemporary innovation, contrasted with “C” as a symbol of classicism, stability, and historical tradition.

- **Gendered Symbolism** – Participants frequently attributed specific gendered qualities to each orthographic variant, associating certain spellings with heightened femininity or, conversely, a more masculine aesthetic.
- **Cultural and Heritage Authenticity** – Discussions often revolved around the linguistic or “correct” cultural origins of a name, with users employing arguments about etymological authenticity to justify their preference for one spelling over the other.
- **Practicality and Clarity** – This theme encompasses pragmatic concerns regarding phonetic transparency, the potential for spelling ambiguity, and the general ease of use in daily administrative and social contexts.

Themes were defined and refined through iterative coding rounds and researcher reflection. Cross-coding was applied where comments intersected multiple themes, ensuring the full complexity of user perspectives was captured.

Subsequently, these themes – most notably “Modernity versus Tradition” – were compared with quantitative trends in naming frequency. For instance, where Reddit users perceived “K” spellings as more modern, we assessed whether the *Top 1,000 Baby Girl Names in the US* (Weiss & Vance, 2025) reflected a statistical increase in “K-initial” names relative to the ODFN baseline. Case studies of paired names were further utilised to observe shifts in both connotation and empirical popularity. This approach served as a form of data triangulation, allowing us to determine the extent to which subjective user perceptions align with, or diverge from, real-world usage patterns.

We analysed contemporary naming trends using the *Top 1,000 Baby Girl Names in the US* (Weiss & Vance, 2025), which provides comprehensive data on parental naming choices. This dataset, renowned for its up-to-date coverage, offers significant insights into current US-based naming conventions. The analysis identified 39 names beginning with “C” and 67 beginning with “K”. By comparing this contemporary dataset with historical ODFN (Hanks & Hodges, 2003) data (55 “C” versus 25 “K” names), we observed a notable shift in orthographic preferences over time, highlighting broader sociocultural trends (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Female Names Starting with “C” and “K” in Historical and Contemporary Datasets.

Category	Dictionary of First Names	Top 1,000 Baby Names (US)
Names starting with “C”	55	39
Names starting with “K”	25	67

5.4 Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis involved identifying all pairs of names that differed solely by their initial letter, being either “C” or “K”. Each pair was defined by phonetic identity (homophony) notwithstanding the initial grapheme (e.g., “Catherine” versus “Katherine”). Fourteen such pairs were identified, including “Catherine/Katherine” and “Chloe/Khloe”, drawn from across both datasets. These pairs were selected for their linguistic and cultural significance within contemporary English-speaking contexts.

The analysis examined trends in the popularity of these paired variants over time, correlating those shifts with broader cultural constructs, such as “Modernity versus Tradition”. This approach enabled us to address the sociolinguistic and gendered dimensions of orthographic preferences (see Table 2).

6 Results

The analysis of the 255 Reddit comments revealed four dominant themes regarding public perceptions of “C” versus “K” initial spellings in female names: (1) Modernity versus Tradition, (2) Gendered Symbolism,

Table 2. Comparison of “C” and “K” Name Pairs in Historical and Contemporary Data.

Name Pair (C)	Name Pair (K)
Catherine	Katherine
Cathleen	Kathleen
Cassidy	Kassidy
Carla	Karla
Camila	Kamila
Camryn	Kamryn
Cali	Kali
Cara	Kara
Chloe	Khloe
Christina	Kristina
Christy	Kristy
Clara	Klara
Clarissa	Klarissa
Cora	Kora

(3) Cultural and Heritage Authenticity, and (4) Practicality and Clarity. Table 1 presents the thematic distribution of these findings, illustrating the frequency with which each motive was invoked by participants (see Table 3).

Table 3. Thematic Distribution of Reddit Comments on “C” vs “K” Name Spellings ($N = 255$).

Theme	Count (%)	Brief Description
Modernity vs. Tradition	100 ($\approx 39\%$)	“K” perceived as modern/trendy; “C” as classic or traditional.
Gendered Symbolism	40 ($\approx 16\%$)	Specific gendered associations or aesthetics linked to each letter.
Cultural Authenticity	70 ($\approx 27\%$)	Spelling linked to cultural/ethnic origin or linguistic correctness.
Practicality & Clarity	45 ($\approx 18\%$)	Concerns regarding pronunciation, spelling, and sibling alignment.

6.1 Modernity vs. Tradition

The most common theme (39%) involved contrasts between “K” as modern/trendy and “C” as traditional or elegant. Comments reflected a perception that “K” names are increasingly prevalent in contemporary naming practices (e.g., “K” names are everywhere nowadays; “C” is more classic). Some users provided examples such as “Kayla” and “Kylie” to highlight the modern appeal of the letter “K”, while others framed “C” as being connected to historical figures and classic elegance.

Our quantitative data support these perceptions. In the historical lexicon (Oxford Dictionary of First Names), there were 55 female names starting with “C” and only 25 with “K”. In contrast, data from the Top 1,000 Baby Girl Names in the US (Weiss & Vance, 2025) showed a reversal: 67 names start with “K”, while only 39 begin with “C”. This confirms a recent cultural shift towards favoring “K” names for girls.

Some users noted that the trendiness of the letter “K” has become so mainstream that “C” now feels more unique, suggesting an evolving cycle of naming fashion. While “K” remains associated with novelty, “C” may be regaining distinctiveness.

6.2 Gendered Symbolism

Approximately 16% of comments referenced gender associations. “K” was perceived by some as more feminine or “bubbly” (e.g., “Kaitlyn”, “Kristina”), while “C” was often regarded as neutral or more serious (e.g., “Caitlin”, “Christina”). For example, one user remarked: “Kristy feels girly; Christy feels older or more formal.”

These impressions may be reinforced by pop culture (e.g., the influence of figures like Kris Jenner, or the perception of names such as Kayla as “cheerleader-like”), and some respondents observed that these were social perceptions rather than inherent traits. Nonetheless, such associations influenced name preference. A few users also suggested that “C”-initial names may appear more androgynous or historical.

One comment encapsulated this tension: “I love how Katherine with a ‘K’ looks; it is like giving the name a modern upgrade, but Catherine with a ‘C’ will always have that refined, classic feel”.

6.3 Cultural/Heritage Authenticity

Approximately 27% of comments addressed cultural or historical authenticity. Participants debated which spelling aligned more closely with a name’s origin (e.g., “Catherine” from the Latin/French tradition vs. “Katherine”, which is closer to the Greek original). One user observed: “Catherine is saintly and English; Katherine is Greek and international.”

This theme also captured ethnic naming practices. Some participants preferred “C” or “K” based on heritage: one user chose “Kamila” with a “K” to reflect Polish roots, whilst another chose “Clara” with a “C” for its Latin clarity. Others cited Scandinavian norms (e.g., “Klara” and “Katrine” as the standard forms in those languages). These decisions highlighted how orthographic choices can serve as a means of expressing cultural alignment.

Debates also revealed historical nuances; some respondents argued that since the original Greek root utilised the letter “Chi” (“X”), neither English letter is truly “authentic”. Nevertheless, users frequently invoked perceived authenticity to justify their preferences.

6.4 Practicality & Clarity

Approximately 18% of comments discussed pragmatic reasons, including ease of pronunciation and alignment with family naming patterns. “K” was often perceived as more phonetically transparent: “K is always a /k/, but ‘C’ can be soft or hard.” For example, users preferred “Kiara” over “Ciara” to avoid phonetic ambiguity.

Family considerations also played a role. Some chose “K” to match siblings (e.g., “Kevin”, “Kyle”, and “Kara”), while others avoided alliteration. A few preferred spellings they believed would be more intuitive to teachers or peers, or easier to write and pronounce internationally.

A small number mentioned visual or aesthetic reasons: one user remarked, “I just like how ‘K’ looks in cursive,” while another noted that “K” is more consistent across languages.

6.5 Minor Theme: Aesthetic and Pattern-Based Choices

Whilst not a dominant theme, a few comments suggested that aesthetic preference or consistency across sibling names could influence orthographic choice. Several users mentioned favouring the visual appearance of a particular letter or wanting to maintain a cohesive pattern (e.g., “All our children’s names start with K”). Although less frequent, these insights support the notion that personal visual preference or family cohesion might guide naming decisions.

7 Discussion

This study’s findings address the research questions by revealing how seemingly minor orthographic choices carry considerable social significance. Concerning the first research question, our analysis uncovered four

key sociolinguistic themes associated with the selection of “C” vs. “K” in identically pronounced female names: (1) Modernity vs. Tradition, (2) Gendered Symbolism, (3) Cultural/Heritage Authenticity, and (4) Practicality & Clarity. These themes suggest that name spellings extend well beyond aesthetic preference; participants consistently linked the choice of letter to broader narratives of contemporary style, gender identity, cultural allegiance, and pragmatic concerns. In other words, the decision to opt for “C” or “K” is not arbitrary, but rather imbued with social meaning across those four domains.

Regarding the second research question, which investigated how factors such as gender norms, cultural authenticity, and media influence shape these preferences, the results indicate a clear pattern. “K” spellings are widely viewed as modern, edgy, and youthful, whereas “C” spellings are perceived as classic, traditional, and elegant. Many participants in the Reddit forum invoked historical and ethnic arguments to justify their orthographic preferences – for example, referencing original Greek “K” spellings versus Latinised “C” forms, or favouring the letter that aligned with family heritage. This suggests that even a single character can symbolise authenticity or modernity, depending on the individual’s cultural frame of reference. Such behaviour resonates with the notion that personal naming is a key site for performing and negotiating identity in society (vom Bruck & Bodenhorn, 2006). Indeed, our findings illustrate how linguistic choices (even at the level of a single letter) can reflect and reproduce gendered norms, echoing the concept of “doing gender” through naming practices (Butler, 1990; Pilcher, 2017). Although the Reddit forum data were anonymous (limiting the availability of certain demographic details), the breadth of commentary, often explicitly phrased from a parental perspective, revealed prevalent social understandings of what “C” and “K” signify in a name.

Moreover, the quantitative evidence converges with these qualitative insights. Historically, “C” was the dominant initial for English female names; according to *A Dictionary of First Names* (Hanks & Hodges, 2003), there were more than twice as many well-established female names beginning with “C” than with “K” (55 vs. 25). However, contemporary name records show a dramatic shift: in the 2024 US baby name data, names beginning with “K” now outnumber those beginning with “C” (67 vs. 39 among the top 1,000 names). This reversal objectively confirms the community’s perception that “K” has become highly fashionable and mainstream. In sociolinguistic terms, such a shift in orthographic usage reflects evolving social values, much as changes in spoken language signal broader cultural change. What was once a novel or edgy choice (a “K” name) appears to have gained prestige and popularity over time – a reminder of the cyclical nature of language trends, wherein an innovation can become the new norm as it spreads (Labov, 1990). Our participants even noted this cycle: some observed that “K” names, though originally seen as unique, are now so common that they may no longer feel distinctive. This alignment between attested naming trends and folk perceptions further strengthens the validity of our interpretation.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that name spellings function as sociolinguistic markers tied to broader patterns of innovation and identity. Consistent with variationist research on language change, communities gravitate towards certain linguistic forms over time for reasons related to prestige, identity, and generational change (Labov, 1990). Here, the rise of “K” reflects its current social prestige as a marker of modern, individualistic identity, while the persistence of “C” reflects the value placed on tradition and stability. To address the role of linguo-cultural factors more directly, it is important to consider the specific cultural meanings attached to language and naming practices within the studied context. For instance, the association of “C” with classic elegance might be linked to the historical prevalence of “C” names in Western European aristocratic traditions, while the modern appeal of “K” could reflect the influence of contemporary media and celebrity culture, particularly the Americanisation of Western naming traditions (e.g., the Kardashian “K” names). Similarly, the invocation of Greek or Latin roots when justifying spelling choices reveals a cultural awareness of etymology and a desire to connect with specific historical lineages. Furthermore, the US-centric nature of our dataset necessarily privileges the specific cultural values and norms of American society, where individuality, innovation, and a certain degree of cultural blending are often highly valued. Understanding these linguo-cultural contexts allows us to move beyond simple descriptions of preferences and begin to analyse how spelling choices are actively utilised to construct and negotiate cultural identities within a specific social context. Further research is needed to explore these dynamics in more diverse cultural settings and to examine how broader historical and social forces shape the changing meanings of letters and names.

In Bourdieusian terms, an orthographic choice can even serve as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991): parents and name-givers select the letter that best aligns with the image they wish to project, whether that is a sense of trendiness and youthful flair, a connection to cultural roots, or simply a guarantee of phonological clarity. Furthermore, from a performativity perspective, choosing “C” or “K” is an act laden with indexical meaning; it is one small way in which individuals perform gender and cultural identity. As prior scholars have argued, personal naming is not merely reflective of identity but constitutive of it (Butler, 1990; Pilcher, 2017). Our study vividly demonstrates this principle in practice. The open discussion in the online forum showed participants consciously negotiating what a name “should” look like to convey a desired persona or heritage. In sum, the social interpretations attached to “C” and “K” in female names provide a concrete illustration of how language, even at the level of orthography, actively constructs social reality. By choosing one letter over the other, individuals signal their alignment with or resistance to norms of femininity, modernity, and cultural belonging.

8 Limitation

This study is not without limitations. As an observational and descriptive analysis, it cannot establish causality for the observed associations, nor can its insights be assumed to generalise to all contexts. The use of an anonymous online forum (*r/namenerds* on Reddit) provided candid opinions but also introduced sampling bias: we lack demographic information regarding contributors and cannot determine whether the views expressed reflect the broader population of English-speaking name choosers. Moreover, our quantitative naming data were drawn from the United States; therefore, the patterns observed primarily reflect a US-centric cultural context, and findings may differ in other linguistic or cultural settings. These factors necessitate caution in interpretation, confining our conclusions to this specific dataset and social context.

Looking ahead, future research could build on these findings by employing novel methodologies and exploring alternative populations. For instance, comparative studies might examine whether the “C” vs. “K” preference occurs in different languages or cultures, investigating how similar orthographic choices play out in non-US-centric naming traditions. Controlled perception experiments could directly test the impact of spelling on social perception; for example, by examining whether participants attribute different traits to a figure named “Catherine” versus “Katherine” when all other factors are held constant. Such studies would extend our work and further illuminate how orthographic choices intersect with social perceptions across diverse settings.

9 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that orthographic spelling preferences – specifically the choice of “C” vs. “K” in female given names – carry significant sociolinguistic weight in contemporary English-speaking contexts. Using a mixed-methods design that combined qualitative analysis of online discourse with quantitative data on name usage, we aimed to show how naming decisions reflect and reinforce social norms. We acknowledge from the outset that, as an observational study with data primarily from the US, our findings should be interpreted with caution and may not fully generalise to other cultural and linguistic contexts.

The thematic analysis of Reddit discussions identified four predominant social meanings attached to the letters “C” and “K”: Modernity vs. Tradition, Gendered Symbolism, Cultural/Heritage Authenticity, and Practicality & Clarity. These user-generated themes make clear that a name’s spelling is perceived as far from a trivial quirk. Rather, it operates as a shorthand for broader values, with a “K” initial often associated with a bold, modern flair or youthful femininity, and a “C” initial potentially evoking timeless elegance or classical respectability. It is crucial to note that these are social perceptions arising from cultural associations rather than inherent properties of the letters themselves.

Quantitative findings on naming trends, while predominantly drawn from the US, offer some corroboration of these perceptions. Whereas historically, the majority of common female names were “C”-initial (e.g., Catherine, Caroline), in recent years, “K”-initial names have surged in popularity. In our data, the 2024 US baby name rankings contained markedly more top girls’ names beginning with “K” than with

“C” (67 vs. 39), effectively reversing the ratio found in earlier historical records (Hanks & Hodges, 2003). This shift in real naming practices aligns with the perception of “K” as emblematic of modern identity and individuality, though we acknowledge that factors beyond this (such as changing immigration patterns and broader trends in the adoption of unique names) might also play a role. At the same time, the enduring presence of many “C” names in the charts indicates that traditional forms still hold appeal, often associated with classic beauty or neutrality. It is important to emphasise that we are not demonstrating a direct causal link, but rather a correlation between the attitudes expressed and the naming choices observed.

Through triangulating these quantitative patterns with qualitative insights, we found a reasonably high degree of concordance: the social attitudes expressed in the forum tended to mirror the actual usage trends. For example, the perception of “K” as modern is generally consistent with the increasing popularity of “K”-initial names. This convergence lends credibility to our interpretation that the letter choices are meaningful signals within a specific sociocultural context.

In effect, public discourse both reflects and potentially helps to drive the ongoing naming shift, as people articulate their reasons (modernity, authenticity, etc.) and make naming decisions accordingly. While our study’s scope is limited and further research is needed to explore these dynamics across different languages and cultural settings (perhaps employing experimental designs to assess the impact of spelling on social perceptions more directly), it highlights the ways in which even seemingly minor linguistic choices can reflect broader sociocultural changes and how individuals negotiate identity within a framework of cultural expectations.

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