Despite cultural shifts such as women’s presence in the workforce and the normalization of gender neutral language, the popular tradition of women changing their last names to that of their husbands upon marriage remains the norm in the United States (Hamilton, Geist, & Powell, 2011; Johnson & Scheuble, 1995; Scheuble, Johnson, & Johnson, 2012). About 94% of married women use their husband’s surnames (Gooding & Kreider, 2010) and only an estimated 18.5% of college graduates retained their maiden names at marriage in 2001 (Goldin & Shim, 2004). Women frequently report changing their names for externally motivated reasons such as showing commitment to their marriage, and many women report never having given thought to doing anything other than taking their husbands’ name (Boxer & Gritsenko, 2005). If unmarried women do anticipate changing their names at marriage, they may feel less attachment to their last names than to their first names. Their first names, therefore, may serve as their primary source of identification.

On the other hand, men, who rarely change their surnames and even pass that name to their children, may more strongly identify with their last names than do women.

Allport (1961, as cited in Twenge, 1997) contended that names shape identity because they determine the perceptions of others thereby influencing self-appraisals. Consistent with this idea, research has indicated that women who change their names are viewed as being more relationship oriented, and those who keep their maiden names or hyphenate are viewed as more agentic (Etaugh, Bridges, Cummings-Hill, & Cohen, 1999). Perceptions of women who change their surnames at marriage as more committed to family appear to be fairly stable across time and region (Etaugh et al., 1999; Scheuble et al., 2012). Researchers have found that women who chose to change their names at marriage reported seeing the name change as forming a new identity as a married person (Kline, Stafford, & Miklosovic, 1996). Likewise, women who chose to change their names...
again at divorce reported the name change to be indicative of a reinvented self, detached from their former marriage (Ceynar & Gregson, 2012).

It seems apparent that people’s names formulate a core part of their identities. In fact, starting from infancy, people react to the sound of their own names, even discriminating them from other names when inserted into babble (Newman, 2005). Names function as distinctive social identifiers used to differentiate individuals from each other (Nuttin, 1985, 1987). In his early research, Nuttin (1987) demonstrated that people preferred the letters belonging to their own names and that those letters are preferred over other letters in the alphabet, especially first and last name initials. Nuttin (1987) attributed this name letter effect phenomenon to mere ownership, arguing that an unconscious preference for the self will transfer to objects associated with the self (i.e., names). This name letter effect has been demonstrated across 12 languages, suggesting that people’s preference for their own names is a culturally independent phenomenon (Nuttin, 1987). Name letter preferences have also been found for both maiden names and married names (Stieger & LeBel, 2012).

Research has demonstrated that the positive bias toward oneself (Kruger, 1999), revealed by the name letter effect, is pervasive in many domains. The need to maintain a positive view of the self may unconsciously drive personal behaviors or decisions (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Within the literature on implicit egoism, researchers have proposed that names have the propensity to impact people’s decisions, influencing them to not only choose professions that share letters with their names, but to work for businesses whose names share letters with their own names (Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002). Additionally, decisions to move to a location with similar first name letters are stronger for rarer names than for more ordinary names and stronger for women than for men (Pelham et al., 2002). Although there is some speculation about possible confounds related to ethnicity and reverse causation in these archival studies, laboratory studies have consistently provided valid measures of the name letter effect (Simonsohn, 2011).

One such laboratory study extended the name letter effect to the phenomenon of name letter branding (Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005), hypothesizing that people may favor items with brand names that possess letters corresponding to their own names. Aaker (1997) proposed that this phenomenon may occur because people regard such items as fitting their personalities or similar to themselves. In a sense, people transfer their positive perceptions of themselves to items that share attributes with themselves, specifically name letters (Anseel & Duyck, 2009). In one study testing name letter branding, pairs of passersby volunteered to taste-test two teas with invented nonnative sounding names, one of which was manipulated to contain the first three letters of the person’s first name (Brendl et al., 2005). The participants preferred the tea brand with embedded letters from their own names more often than the nonname letter brand choice of tea (Brendl et al., 2005). If people’s name letters are attached strongly enough to their selves to influence choices in brand names, then name letter branding may serve as a method to compare people’s preferences for their first and last names.

Reports of sex differences with respect to the name letter effect are scarce. Research with Japanese participants replicated the name letter effect showing that participants preferred letters from their own names more than other letters, but also showing that men preferred the first letter of their family names and women preferred the first letter of their first names compared to their other names (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997). Additionally, Joubert (1985) found that men rated their last names more favorably than women rated their last names. Although these findings may be attributed to women feeling less attached to their last names in anticipation of a marital name change, it might also have occurred because women prefer first names that are more unique or unusual and men prefer more common first names (Erwin, 2006). The preference a man may have for his last name may result from it being a more unique source of personal identification. The present study examined whether preferences for first or last names were found between unmarried people and whether sex differences in name preference may be due to the association with identity and sense of individuality.

In the present study, first and last names were pitted directly against each other, using both explicit and implicit measures of name preference. We expected that women would demonstrate a greater preference for their first names than their last names, whereas men would prefer their last names over their first names on two implicit measures, the Implicit Associations Task (IAT) and the name letter branding effect. In addition, we anticipated that women would express more
fondness for their first names than their last names and that men would do the reverse. It was hypothesized that identity and individuality would be more connected to last names for men and to first names for women. Furthermore, we predicted that women would be more willing to change their last names than men, but neither would be willing to change their first names.

**Method**

**Participants**

A sample of 91 undergraduate students (21 men and 70 women) from a private liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest participated in the present study. Participants were unmarried and between the ages of 17 and 23 ($M = 18.63, SD = 1.11$). Most of the participants (79.10%) identified their race/ethnic background as White or Caucasian with 9.0% Asian and/or Pacific Islander, 2.2% Latino/a or Hispanic, and 8.7% other or multiple categories.

**Materials**

Participants completed a survey designed to measure their explicit attitudes toward their names. In addition to demographic information, the questionnaire contained questions pertaining to their fondness for their first and last names, attitudes about name change, and the meaning of their names. Participants rated statements regarding attitudes about names (e.g., “My first name is important to my sense of identity”, “I am proud to carry my family name”) on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and provided written explanations for their ratings.

The IAT, which measures implicit attitudes using a categorical pairing task, was adapted to measure participants’ attitudes about their first versus last names (see Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009 for a detailed description of the IAT). We created two overarching groups of words: Good (joy, love, peace, wonderful, pleasure, glorious, laughter, and happy) versus bad (agony, terrible, horrible, nasty, evil, awful, failure, and hurt). Participants’ first and last names were manually embedded into the IAT program so that each participant had to categorize his or her own first and last name. Because the IAT is robust to variations in the number of trials and the number of exemplars per category (Greenwald et al., 2009), using eight exemplars for the good and bad categories and one exemplar for the first and last categories should not affect the validity of the measure. The categorization trials included three practice trials and four test trials, which were randomly counterbalanced within the program.

The four test trials presented two of the four categories on each side of the screen and the word to be categorized in the middle of the screen. The combinations were good/first on one side of the screen with bad/last on the other side; good/last with bad/first; bad/last with good/first; and bad/first with good/last. Researchers recorded participants’ reaction times (in milliseconds) in order to determine whether participants had a stronger preference toward their first or their last names.

Additionally, we employed SuperLab™, a computer program that displays stimuli and measures reaction times, to test the name letter effect (see Brendl et al., 2005). The stimuli used to measure the name letter effect were three images of abstract paintings with manipulated titlesootnote{Digital images of the paintings were used with permission of the artist, David Kessler.}. The individual paintings were selected from a single series of artwork. The paintings featured nearly identical colors and stroke techniques creating difficulty in differentiating between each painting from slide to slide, therefore controlling for the possible confound of participants actually preferring particular paintings based on distinctive characteristics. Similar to the method used by Brendl et al. (2005), the title of each painting either incorporated the first three letters of participants’ first name or the first three letters of participants’ last names. A neutral name of Orsugi was also included. The prefixes of the names were combined with the versatile suffixes of (t)aku, or (m)uta. For example, Jane Smith would see Janaku, Smimuta, and Orsugi, or Januta, Smitaku, and Orsugi depending on condition. The $t$ and $m$ were added when prefixes ended with vowels. Name combinations were counterbalanced to account for possible confounds associated with the suffixes themselves.

First, the program presented each of the three abstract paintings with titles manipulated as described above. Participants evaluated the paintings on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly dislike) to 5 (strongly like). Second, the program presented pairs of paintings with the manipulated titles and participants chose one painting from each pair. Each pair was presented twice with the position of the paintings counterbalanced. We further counterbalanced for order effects by creating six different conditions that varied the presentation order of manipulated...
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painting titles and which of the paintings was associated with each of the titles.

Procedure
Half of the participants completed the survey followed by the IAT, and half completed the IAT followed by the survey. Participants then completed the name letter effect task, which asked them to report their preferences for abstract paintings with letters from their own names embedded in the titles. At the conclusion of the task, participants received verbal and written debriefing. This research was approved by the Human Participants Review Board as being in accordance with ethical standards for the treatment of human participants.

Results
To examine the hypothesis that implicit measures would reveal that women favor their first names more than their last names and men favor their last names more than their first names, scores on the IAT were examined. Results of a t test failed to support this hypothesis, revealing that women’s IAT latencies (M = 226.41, SD = 182.29) did not differ from men’s IAT latencies (M = 219.40, SD = 220.46), t(89) = 0.147, p = .88, r = .016. A one-sample t test on the participants’ IAT latency scores revealed that all participants had a significantly stronger preference for their first names over their last names, t(90) = 11.26, p < .001, r = .76.

We predicted that the ratings of the paintings associated with participants’ first and last names would reveal that women would have a stronger preference for their first name letters and men would have a stronger preference for their last name letters. Five participants were excluded from this analysis because four had first and last names beginning with the same letter and one had a last name beginning with O, the letter of the neutral name. A 2 (participant sex) x 3 (painting name [first, last, neutral]) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the ratings of the paintings. The main effect for sex was significant such that women (M = 3.70, SD = 1.05) rated the paintings more favorably than men (M = 3.10, SD = .97), F(1, 84) = 12.35, p = .001, η² = .13. The expected main effect for painting, F(1, 84) = 0.049, p = .83, η² = .001, and interaction of painting and sex, F(1, 84) = 1.66, p = .20, η² = .019, failed to reach significance.

To examine the hypothesis that men would express more fondness for their last names and women would express more fondness of their first names, a 2 (participant sex) x 2 (participant name [first, last]) mixed factors ANOVA was conducted on participants’ ratings of fondness for their names. Results revealed a significant main effect such that all participants reported being more fond of their first names (M = 4.23, SD = 0.80) than their last names (M = 3.79, SD = 1.16), F(1, 89) = 7.75, p = .007, η² = .08. Additionally, the main effect of sex was marginally significant, revealing that there was a tendency for men to report more fondness for their combined names than women, F(1, 89) = 3.80, p = .055, η² = .04. The expected interaction of sex and name failed to reach significance, F(1, 89) = 0.23, p = .63, η² = .003.

To examine the hypothesis that men may derive their identity from their last names whereas women would derive their identity from their first names, a 2 (participant sex) x 2 (participant name [first, last]) mixed factors ANOVA was conducted on participants’ ratings of the importance of their names to their sense of identity. Results revealed a significant main effect of sex, such that men (M = 4.38, SD = 0.63) viewed their names as more important to their sense of identity than women (M = 3.98, SD = 0.71), F(1, 89) = 5.46, p = .02, η² = .06. The expected interaction of sex and name failed to reach significance, F(1, 89) = 2.32, p = .13, η² = .03.

To examine the hypothesis that women view their first names as describing them as an individual and men view their last names as describing them as an individual, a 2 (participant sex) x 2 (participant name [first, last]) mixed factors ANOVA was conducted on participants’ ratings of the importance of their names to their sense of identity. Results revealed a significant main effect such that first names (M = 3.66, SD = 1.04) were viewed as more descriptive than last names (M = 3.19, SD = 1.18), F(1, 89) = 7.71, p = .007, η² = .08. The expected interaction of sex and name failed to reach significance, F(1, 89) = 0.69, p = .41, η² = .008.

To test the hypothesis that women would be more willing to consider changing their last names at marriage than men, a 2 (participant sex) x 2 (participant name [first, last]) mixed factors ANOVA was conducted on participants’ ratings of their willingness to change their names. The results revealed significant main effects for sex and name, such that women (M = 1.89, SD = 0.74) were more willing to consider a name change than men (M = 1.50, SD = 0.71), F(1, 89) = 4.63, p = .03, η² = .05, and all participants were more willing to
consider changing their last names (M = 2.13, SD = 1.31) than their first names (M = 1.47, SD = 1.72), F(1, 89) = 5.22, p = .025, η² = .06. These main effects, however, were mediated by the expected interaction of sex and name, F(1, 89) = 6.50, p = .01, η² = .07. These results showed that women were more willing to consider changing their last names (M = 2.33, SD = 1.36) than their first names (M = 1.46, SD = 0.70) than men to changing either their last names (M = 1.48, SD = 0.87) or their first names (M = 1.52, SD = 0.81).

**Discussion**

The results revealed that all participants preferred their first names over their last names. These findings supported the first hypothesis that women would prefer their first names over their last names but did not support the hypothesis that men would prefer their last names over their first names. However, the results did reveal that men, more than women, believed that names were important to their identities. Although not precisely how we expected the gender difference to surface, this result may reflect the reality that men tend to retain both names throughout their lives while women may anticipate relinquishing their last names and therefore be less likely to consider it an important factor in their identities. Congruently, all participants reported more fondness for their first names, but men tended to express more fondness for their full names than women in the sample. Not surprisingly, women reported more willingness to change their last names than did men.

Taken together, the results of the present study supported the idea that women choose to change their names at marriage for different reasons than simply because they are not attached to their maiden names. Research has suggested that women who take their husbands’ surnames at marriage are perceived by others to be more nurturing and committed to their marriage (Etaugh et al., 1999; Scheuble et al., 2012). Women, therefore, may choose to change their names at marriage in order to conform to societal expectations that they are nurturing and committed to their family. This interpretation would be consistent with research finding that in interviews women frequently talk about their name changes at marriage in terms of establishing a connection to their husbands (Ceynar & Bednark, 2012).

The results of the present study also aligned with what appears to be a trend of declining formality in American social relationships. One may deduce that knowing someone on a first-name basis has nearly lost its functional connotation. Where some have suggested that perhaps a woman’s surname choice may disclose information about her personality (Etaugh et al., 1999), the fact that both men and women have resorted to using first names in many spheres of daily life may produce a diminished significance of marital name choice in the future.

The present study added to literature with respect to name attitudes because it analyzed attitudes about name ownership across gender and compared first versus last names using two implicit measurements that have not been previously utilized to explore this question. Additionally, we explored perceptions of men with respect to their names as part of their identities, which has not been addressed as thoroughly as women’s preferences. Although the choices of the paintings in the name letter effect task did not affect participants’ preferences, the method of the study may possibly be strengthened for future research by presenting the painting titles on a separate slide from the paintings to ensure that the paintings do not confound the name letter effect. The method for assessing the name letter effect should also be strengthened by using stimuli that might produce an actual preference. Because participants could not clearly distinguish between the three paintings, they may have failed to associate the names with the paintings altogether.

This research delved into implicit attitudes about names and explored possible implicit motivations for women continuing to choose to take their husbands’ last names at marriage. Further research could employ the present name letter effect task to test married women’s preferences for their maiden versus their married last names, expanding it to explore preferences for different last names in cases where women have been married multiple times, and incorporating a measure of the impact of how long they have been married and how many times they have been married. It may also be useful to test the effect under some sort of self-threat (see Brendl et al., 2005) because Jones, Pelham, Mirenburg, and Hetts (2002) discussed the idea that people who possess higher self-esteem are more willing to protect feelings of self-worth in the face of threat. Self-threat may add an interesting component to women’s preferences for their name letters if names are indeed connected to identity.

A significant limitation of the present study was the sample. The study could be improved
by increasing the number of men and also by increasing the diversity of the sample. Because the current sample is primarily composed of White women, generalizing the findings must be done cautiously. Future research should explore name preferences among people of more varied backgrounds. Cultural naming practices are likely to impact how people view the importance of their first and last names. In cultures, for example, where women do not take their husbands’ names at marriage, women may favor their full names as strongly as men.

Overall, this research provided an important methodological contribution to the literature about naming preferences. Using implicit measures of naming attitudes and directly comparing first and last names, we were able to dispel the notion that women choose to change their names at marriage because they do not have as strong ties to their surnames as do men. Those name changes, therefore, may come at a bigger personal cost to women than has been traditionally believed. Knowing this, women and men may be encouraged to consider their naming decisions carefully at the time of marriage.

References

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