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Social norms and intentions to adopt double surnames in Italy: evidence from two survey experiments

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Abstract
The custom of transmitting only the paternal surname to children remains widespread in most patrilineal societies. Given how societal emphasis on gender equality has increased in other societal domains in recent decades (e.g. employment, wages, domestic chores), the question of why parents refrain from adopting more egalitarian surname practices (such as double surnames) presents a compelling sociological puzzle. This article aims to address this issue by investigating to what extent social norms shape the propensity to give children both parents' surnames (i.e., a double surname) in Italy, where, since a 2022 ruling by the Constitutional Court, children are allowed to take a double surname unless the parents agree otherwise. Using two survey experiments, with Italian online quota samples, respondents were randomly assigned to one of four hypothetical scenarios designed to manipulate their empirical and normative expectations. Results from the first experiment indicate that empirical expectations have a stronger influence than normative ones. The second experiment confirms this but shows that the effect depends on the reference network considered. These findings highlight the importance of changing empirical expectations to encourage the adoption of the double surname, ultimately promoting greater gender equality in family naming practices.

Keywords Surname, Children, Gender equality, Social norms, Innovations, Survey experiment

Introduction

This article examines the propensity to give children both parents surnames (i.e., a double surname), instead of solely the paternal one, among Italian adults. Drawing on social norms theory (Bicchieri, 2016) and using two online survey experiments, we test the role of empirical and normative expectations in promoting or hindering the propensity to give a double surname in a context where this option was recently made legally available but is still rarely practiced.

Transmitting the paternal surname to children is a deep-rooted custom that has been in force in most patrilineal societies for centuries, often enforced by a legal norm

(MacEacheron, 2016). However, names function as key symbolic markers through which people, relationships, and social roles are rendered visible and meaningful in the social world (Davies, 2011; Finch, 2008; Pilcher, 2017). Therefore, alternative and more gender-egalitarian naming practices, such as the double surname, would better reflect women's essential role in the creation and upbringing of children (Craig, 2006; Craig & Mullan, 2011). In contrast, the exclusive passing of the father's surname serves as a powerful reminder of the persistence of patriarchal values (Scheuble et al., 2000).

Currently, the laws of several countries (such as the UK, the US, France, Germany, the Netherlands and, historically, Hispanic countries) allow parents to choose alternatives to the paternal surname: the mother's, both or a combined surname depending on the country (Bundesmisterium der Justiz, 2024; Feschet, 2009; Government of the Netherlands, 2025; Ryskamp, 2012). Even so, the predominant practice remains the transmission of the paternal surname. This begs the question: why do parents continue to prefer giving only the paternal surname, even when more gender egalitarian alternatives are legally available?

Somewhat surprisingly, the scientific literature has devoted very little attention to children's surnames. In survey research, the topic of surname transmission to children is completely absent in the main international comparative surveys (e.g., WVS, ISSP, GGS) and ad-hoc surveys are also scant and limited to few contexts, pointing to a lack of data to study parental practices and societal preferences and motives in this respect.

Against this background, in this article we examine the propensity to give children a double surname instead of solely the paternal one in Italy. The country provides an excellent opportunity to study this topic due to a recent Constitutional Court ruling (2022) that declared unconstitutional the civil code article mandating the automatic assignment of the paternal surname, thus granting parents – for the first time ever – freedom in choosing their children's surnames. Our theoretical framework draws on social norms theory (Bicchieri, 2016), as we argue that choosing a double surname in this context challenges prevailing social norms and can be considered as adopting an "innovation", as defined in Rogers' (1962) seminal work. Specifically, we seek to unpack the role of social norms – understood as empirical and normative expectations regarding others' behavior – in shaping preferences for or against the adoption of the double surname.

To directly test the role of empirical and normative expectations, we conducted two online survey experiments, a methodological approach well suited to identifying causal effects (Mutz, 2011). Two samples of Italian respondents ($N = 2688$ and $N = 1823$) were randomly exposed to one of four hypothetical scenarios intended to alter their expectations and then asked about surname intentions for their children. Our results show that a significant portion of our sample favours giving a double surname to a hypothetical newborn and that empirical expectations have a stronger influence than normative ones. However, the second study also shows that the association depends on the reference network considered. Hence, the results highlight the critical role played by the social context in shaping family-related behaviours (Balbo & Barban, 2014; Nazio, 2008), even in experimental settings.

Background

Surnaming practices: a review

Relatively little sociological research has examined preferences and behaviours concerning children's surname practices. In contrast, more has been written about the practice of women adopting their husband's surname upon marriage. In the US, women are allowed to keep their birth name at marriage. Yet, according to a recent survey by the PEW Research Center (Lin, 2023), only 14% of women do so and another 5% chose a hyphenated double name. Other studies also show that, despite an increase in name keeping between the early 1970s to the mid-1980s, the diffusion of this practice has stalled ever since (Goldin & Shim, 2004; Gooding & Kreider, 2010; Torche et al., 2025). A similar picture emerges for other countries such as Norway (Noack & Wiik, 2008), Britain (Duncan et al., 2020), and Russia (Boxer & Gritsenko, 2005). Attitudes are also mostly favourable towards the practice of women's name changing at marriage, as studies from various countries show (for Canada: MacEacheron, 2024; for the US: Palmwood, 2024; Scheuble et al., 2012; Stoiko & Strough, 2017; for Japan: Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020; for the UK and the US: Robnett et al., 2018; for Germany: Kelley & Hipp, 2025). Thus, despite the advantages that come from preserving one's surname in terms of both personal and professional identity, especially among higher educated and professional women (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; Scheuble & Johnson, 2005; Scheuble et al., 2000) and the obvious gender inequity in this respect – "no husband is expected to change his name" (Risman, 1998, p. 38) – it appears that the desire to share one family name prevails and, with it, the practice of name changing among women at marriage.

It therefore comes with little surprise that the scant research concerning children's surnames indicates that the practice of giving paternal surnames to children is ubiquitous and few parents decide to adopt alternative surnaming choices, such as using both parents' surnames, the mother's surname, or a new name altogether. Moreover, the patrilinear practice appears to be unchallenged not only in countries where legislation on the topic is more restrictive, but also in those where it is less so, like the US, where there is no legal restriction on surname choice.

The practice of giving children only the paternal surname is problematic for gender equality as it rests on an unquestioned assumption of male privilege. From this perspective, it is not surprising that previous research univocally indicates that men are more in favour of maintaining patrilinear surnaming compared to women. For example, in a study involving undergraduate students in Canada, Lockwood et al. (2011) show that men were more likely to choose traditional surname practices than women. A similar finding also emerges in the earlier study by Intons-Peterson and Crawford (1985). Pilcher's (2017) review also indicates that men are more in support of both the patrilinear surnaming of children and wives taking their husband's surname. All these results are in line with the notion that 'those benefiting from inequalities have an interest in defending them' (Connell, 2002, p. 142) and that therefore the decision of passing (also) their surname to their children is, ultimately, a woman's problem. A quite different perspective emerges in the study carried out in China by Qi (2018), who argues that the transmission of the mother's surname to children represents a form of 'veiled patriarchy' – rather than a manifestation of a non-patrilineal practice – because mothers who give their surname to their children are, de facto, passing down their father's surname.

In practice, the decision of attributing a surname different from that of father is far from unproblematic. As argued by Nugent (2010), who used online accounts of surname decision-making to study the processes by which parents decide how to name their children, going against the status quo can entail various negative consequences, such as conflict with the partner or with parents and in-laws. In fact, patrilineal surnaming may be used as a means of recruiting patrilineal involvement and investment, as grandparents on the father's side might be more likely to invest in the child if he or she carries their name (MacEacheron, 2024). On top, even parents who agree on the idea of adopting alternative surnaming choices for the sake of gender equality might have doubts tied to the practical and/or social consequences of such choice for their children. Examples of this are the possible confusion of having different family names and the fear of appearing 'different' or lacking family cohesion. In this respect, Nugent (2010) argues that the resistance of opposite-sex parents towards giving children a surname different from that of the father stems from 'moral dilemmas' that arise between the self-interest of the mother – i.e., maintaining her identity and passing down her name – vs. the family unit, the children, and the partner. Indeed, in her analyses she shows that some parents adopt alternative surnaming practices – such as hyphenated surnames or a new family-name altogether – that allow preserving both parental identity and family unity and thus solve the dilemmas posed above. However, these alternatives are chosen only by a minority of the sample and fail to take foot among the wider population.

Unsurprisingly, research shows that those who do challenge the prevailing norm of paternal surnaming are more likely to come from households with higher socio-economic status, and areyounger and better educated (Johnson & Scheuble, 2002; Li et al., 2021). Johnson and Scheuble (2002) also show that gender role attitudes, political liberalism, religiosity, feminist and identity motivations and education were pivotal for women giving their birth surname to their children, although Eshleman and Halley (2016) find that feminism alone is not a sufficient condition for counter-normative surname choices. Recently, the study by Torche et al. (2026) for the US documents that the observed decline in the use of patrilineal surnames is especially pronounced among parents with lower levels of education and, not surprisingly, foreign-born and Hispanic parents.

Finally, the assumption that children will receive their father's surname is obviously challenged among lesbian parents who are shown to adopt alternative strategies such as hyphenated or double-barrelled surnames or creating a new family-name (Almack, 2005; Dempsey & Lindsay, 2018).

Case study: Italy

As with many everyday practices taken for granted, the issue of children's surnames often goes unnoticed: remaining 'invisible' until an unexpected event brings it into focus. In Italy, the case examined in this article, such a turning point came with a 2022 Constitutional Court ruling establishing that children must take both parents' surnames unless the parents agree otherwise. Until 2016, only the paternal surname could be transmitted at birth. Exceptions were limited to cases of children born out of wedlock when the father was absent or refused to acknowledge paternity, in which case the child received the mother's surname. While parents could request a double surname, the process

involved lengthy bureaucracy, valid justification, and written consent from extended family members. As a result, double surnames or maternal ones were rare.

Although several parliamentary bills to allow the mother's surname were introduced over the years, none passed due to lack of consensus. Only in 2016 did the Constitutional Court rule it unconstitutional to require children to take only the father's surname. This decision followed the 2014 *Cusan and Fazzo v. Italy* case, in which the European Court of Human Rights condemned Italy's naming rule as discriminatory and based on gender stereotypes and opened the door to double surnames. In practice, however, it only allowed adding the mother's surname after the father's. Changes in order, omission, or other modifications were not permitted. The issue returned to public attention with a more decisive Constitutional Court ruling in 2022 (No. 131), which declared the automatic transmission of the father's surname illegitimate. The new ruling established that children must take both parents' surnames, in the order chosen by the parents, unless they mutually agree to use only one. Following this decision, since June 2022, it is therefore possible to assign a double surname without any special bureaucratic procedure.

Notwithstanding this new opportunity, the use of double surnames in Italy remains limited. Among all children born in 2023, only 6.2% received both parents' surnames, with an increase of 3.8% points compared to 2020. The share is only slightly higher among first-born children, at 9.1% (ISTAT, 2024).

A relevant point is that, unlike in countries such as the US and the UK, in Italy women generally retain their maiden name after marriage and are formally identified by it. As a result, in most families mothers and children do not share the same surname. The recent possibility of assigning a double surname may therefore be particularly appealing for future generations, as it symbolically affirms a family identity grounded in equal parental contribution. However, it remains to be seen how widely this new behavior will be adopted. This is a critical point considering the persistence of traditional gender roles that delay the 'diffusion in Italy of new family behaviours such as cohabitation, marital dissolution, or non-marital childbearing' (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014, p. 1080).

Theory: the paternal surname as a social norm

Consistent with research on the diffusion of family-related innovations, such as cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, and more gender-egalitarian family arrangements within couples (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Goldscheider et al., 2015), we consider giving a double surname to children an example of an innovative, gender-equal behaviour that clashes with the traditional practice of passing only the father's surname. As with almost all innovations (Rogers, 1962) the diffusion of double surnames depends on their compatibility with societal values and norms. Indeed, studies show that new family behaviors spread through observation of others in one's social environment (Balbo & Barban, 2014; Guetto et al., 2016; Nazio, 2008). Hence, one important reason why parents may abstain from giving a double surname is that they feel such practice is contrary to the norm that prescribes the transmission of the paternal surname. Therefore, we approached the object of study as an application of social norm theory.

There is no universal definition of social norms across the social sciences. This article employs Cristina Bicchieri's definition for its usefulness in operationalizing the concept. According to Bicchieri, a social norm is a rule of collective behaviour such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that (1) they believe that most people in their

reference network conform to it (*empirical expectation*) and (2) most people in their reference network believe they ought to conform to it (*normative expectation*).

The proposed definition calls attention to three issues. First, a behaviour is influenced by a social norm when individuals have both types of social expectations: empirical and normative. This distinction serves to separate simple conventions (or descriptive norms), relying on empirical expectations only, from social norms (sometimes called injunctive norms) that also require normative expectations. In real circumstances it may become difficult to disentangle them, as sometimes a behavioural pattern perceived to be common is also overlaid with a sense of oughtness. Sanctions for non-conformity usually accompany the existence of a social norm and help its enforcement, but do not define it. What is most important in Bicchieri's definition is the conditionality of conformity preferences to social expectations. That is, a norm is *social* if individuals condition their conformity to it depending on *relevant others'* behaviours and beliefs. In the literature on the diffusion of innovative behaviours in the family domain (Balbo & Barban, 2014; Guetto et al., 2016; Vignoli & Salvini, 2014), the effect of social expectations is understood through the analogue concept of peers' influence, as peers often represent a reference point when individuals must decide on the adoption of a new family behaviour (e.g., cohabiting vs. getting married). The kind of social influence taking place among peers can be *informational* (i.e. empirical, based on how many peers have already adopted an innovation) or *normative* (i.e. based on value judgments and fear of sanctions from peers). However, according to Nazio (2008, ch. 2.7) it is empirically difficult to distinguish between the two kinds of influence and not even necessary, given that they often operate simultaneously.

Second, Bicchieri's definition highlights that social expectations relate to the beliefs and behaviors of specific reference groups, not just anyone nearby. In choosing a child's surname, parents are likely influenced by relatives and friends. However, the normative force of a social norm grows with its broader diffusion in society beyond close networks, but which reference network actually matters for parents' decision making is ultimately an empirical question.

Third, Bicchieri's definition implies that expectations have a causal impact: if expectations change, behavior should change as well. In surname choices, if individuals no longer believe that most people in their reference network use the paternal surname and view it as the right choice, they may be more likely to opt for a double surname. While associations between expectations and behavior are easy to observe, establishing causality is more difficult and often requires experimental designs that can separate normative from empirical expectations.

If an innovation clashes with an existing social norm, its widespread adoption requires a shift in that norm. According to Bicchieri, abandoning a norm involves a change in expectations, but it is often unclear whether normative or empirical expectations change first. Empirical expectations usually shift first, as the belief that others will behave differently tends to weaken existing normative beliefs, and when normative and empirical expectations conflict, the latter tend to prevail (Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009). Applied to surname choices, this suggests that for double surnames to spread widely, the norm of giving only the paternal surname must be abandoned, which first requires a shift in empirical expectations.

Research question and hypotheses

In countries like Italy, where the law allows parents to give a double surname to children, the paternal surname can be abandoned. However, an immediate shift is unlikely.

Several factors may slow the spread of the new practice (see Rogers, 1962), among which – we argue – the persistence of a social norm favoring the paternal surname plays an important role. Given the definition of norm we adopted, what remains unclear is how empirical and normative expectations shape the choice between the paternal and double surname. To assess and disentangle their role, it is useful to consider the different ways in which these expectations may align in favor of, or against, the use of both parents' surnames. This yields four alternative scenarios capturing all possible combinations of congruent or conflicting empirical and normative expectations regarding the double surname: (A) empirical and normative expectations coincide in favour of the paternal surname; (B) normative expectations support the double surname while empirical expectations support the paternal surname; (C) normative expectations support the paternal surname while empirical expectations support the double surname; (D) empirical and normative expectations coincide in favour of the double surname (Table 1).

In line with the discussion above, we expect the lowest propensity to give children both parents' surnames if empirical and normative expectations coincide in favour of the paternal surname (A) and the highest propensity when empirical and normative expectations coincide in favour of the double surname (D). Thus, we hypothesize that the propensity to give a double surname will be higher in scenario D than A (H1). When empirical and normative expectations are dissonant – B and C – the theory offers less clear-cut guidance, and predictions become less straightforward. When empirical expectations support the double surname and normative expectations support the paternal surname (C), the propensity to give a double surname should be higher than that in A and B (H2). In virtue of the stronger role played by empirical expectations at the beginning of the norm change process, if empirical expectations are in favour of the paternal surname (i.e., the current norm) and normative expectation favour the double surname (B), the propensity to give a double surname will be about the same as in A (H3). In scenario C, instead, the propensity to give the double surname will be lower than in D (H4), as normative expectations in the latter scenario reinforce such propensity.

Finally, based on the conjecture that, when it comes to deciding on the surname of children, relatives and friends represent the natural interlocutors, we further expect that the role of normative and empirical expectations will be stronger when the reference network is made of relatives and friends rather than other people in general. Thus, we hypothesize that the differences in double surname propensity between scenarios D vs. A and C vs. A will be higher when normative and empirical expectations refer to "relative and friends" rather than "most people" (H5).

Table 1 Total possible combinations of coinciding or opposing empirical and normative expectations concerning the children's surnames

	Normative expectation	
	Paternal surname	**Double surname**
Empirical expectation		
Paternal surname	A	B
Double surname	C	D

Method

Data

We test the above hypotheses using two survey-based experiments, an approach that enables the identification of causal effects through experimental manipulation embedded in a survey design (Mutz, 2011). The experiments were carried out in two different studies. Data from Study 1 comes from the sixth wave of the ResPOnsE COVID-19 survey (Response of Italian Public Opinion to the COVID-19 Emergency), a research project started in 2020 with the aim of monitoring Italian public opinion during the COVID-19 pandemic (Biolcati et al., 2021; Vezzoni et al., 2020). The survey included questions on several social and political attitudes, together with socio-demographic characteristics. The sample was drawn from the opt-in online community of a commercial research institute (SWG S.p.A), stratifying by macro-area of residence and, subsequently, quoting by gender and age class. 3,087 individuals aged 18 and above were CAWI-interviewed in the sixth wave of the survey carried out between June 6th and July 6th, 2023, about one year after the ruling of the Italian Constitutional Court on the transmission of parental surnames to children.

Data from Study 2 were collected as part of stand-alone project on attitudes toward the double surname in Italy. The online survey ($N = 3{,}000$) was distributed through Qualtrics between December 2024 and January 2025 on a quota sample of the adult population representative of gender, age class and, crucially, education level (as Study 1 underrepresents low educated respondents). The survey included several questions on knowledge of the double surname option, reasons for not adopting it, perceived behaviours and attitudes about the double surname by relatives, friends and other people, and respondent's gender role attitudes.

Experimental design

Following the four-part scheme outlined in Table 1, respondents were presented with a single scenario describing a hypothetical future in which people from a specified reference network actually adopt and approve (or disapprove) of a certain type of surname (paternal or double) for their children. The wording of the experimental conditions in Study 1 and Study 2 is presented in Table 2.

After reading the scenario, respondents answered the following question: "In this case would you give your children a double surname?" Answers were given on a scale that ranged from 0 (*I certainly would not*) to 10 (*I certainly would*).

Though the treatments are conceptually similar, Study 2 is not merely a replication of Study 1. First and foremost, we added a manipulation of the reference network for expectations: specifically, in Study 2, this reference network could randomly be either "most people" or "most of your relatives and friends", whereas in Study 1 it was fixed to the latter. This allowed us to investigate an important element of social norms functioning that we could not address in Study 1. Second, we strengthened the normative manipulation by using the verb "disapprove" in order to emphasize the sanctioning dimension of normative expectations.

The more survey time available in Study 2 also allowed us to include a factual manipulation check (FMC) after the experiment. An FMC serves to assess individual-level attentiveness to experimental information (Kane & Barabas, 2019). In this case, we evaluated whether respondents correctly reported which surname most of their relatives and

Table 2 Wording of experimental conditions in Study 1 and Study 2

Condition	Study 1	Study 2
A	Imagine that in the future **most of your relatives and friends** believe it is **right** to give children only the **father's surname** and in fact give only the **father's surname** to their children.	Imagine that in the future **most of your relatives and friends** will give their children only the **father's surname** and will **disapprove** of those who give them a **double surname**
B	Imagine that in the future **most of your relatives and friends** believe it is **right** to give children a **double surname** (the father's and the mother's), but in reality give their own children the **father's surname**.	Imagine that in the future **most of your relatives and friends** will give their children only the **father's surname**, but **will not disapprove** of those who give them a **double surname**
C	Imagine that in the future **most of your relatives and friends** believe it is **right** to give children only the **father's surname**, but in reality, give their own children a **double surname** (the father's and the mother's).	Imagine that in the future **most of your relatives and friends** will give their children a **double surname**, but **will not disapprove** of those who give them only the **father's surname**
D	Imagine that in the future **most of your relatives and friends** believe it is **right** to give children a **double surname** (the father's and the mother's) and in fact give a **double surname** to their children.	Imagine that in the future **most of your relatives and friends** will give their children a **double surname** and will **disapprove** of those who give them only the **father's surname**

In Study 2 the reference network is randomly varied between 'most of your relatives and friends' and 'most people'

friends (or most people) gave to their children in the hypothetical scenario presented in the experimental question. To reduce respondent burden, we chose not to include an FMC for normative expectations in the survey design (Mancosu et al., 2019).

Analytical strategy

To test hypotheses H1-H4, for each study we estimated a bivariate regression model (M1) where the dependent variable is the propensity to give a double surname to children. Because the variable ranges from 0 to 10, it was treated as approximately metric, and we estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. As a robustness check, we re-estimated the models using ordered logit regression instead of OLS. The conclusions remain substantively unchanged, and the corresponding results can be provided upon request.

The independent variable is the experimental condition, which we included in the model as a categorical variable contrasting experimental conditions B, C and D against the control group A. In Study 2, this model also includes the control for the reference network ("most people" vs. "most of your relatives and friends" as reference category).

For each study we estimated a multiple linear regression model (M2) that also controls for gender (men vs. women), educational level (up to lower secondary, upper secondary, tertiary), religiosity (a typology combining religious denomination and attendance at religious services in three or four categories depending on the study: practicing Catholics, non-practicing Catholics, non-religious, other or missing), and political ideology (four categories derived from the original 0–10 scale: 0–3 'Left'; 4–6 'Centre'; 7–10 'Right'; 'Not declared'), together with age (6 classes) and area of residence (North, Centre, South). Because treatment assignment is exogenous by design, the inclusion of control variables is not required for identification. However, they were included to improve precision and, in Study 2, to adjust for observable differences associated with respondents who did not pass the factual manipulation check (see below). Finally, to test H5 we

ran an additional model only for Study 2 by including an interaction between expectation dummies and reference network type (M3).

After list-wise deletion of missing values on the dependent and the independent variables the final samples consist of 2,688 respondents in Study 1 and 2,993 in Study 2. Since it can be argued that those who failed the FMC in Study 2 were not affected by the manipulation in the intended way, we first present results for those who passed it ($N = 1{,}823$) and then run the analysis on the entire sample as a robustness check. Information about sample size and all variables included in the models are reported in Table 3.

Table 3 Summary statistics of variables included in the analyses

	Study 1	**Study 2**	**Study 2**
	(*N* = 2688)	**All sample (*N* = 2993)**	**FMC passed (*N* = 1823)**
Propensity to give the double surname (mean and sd)	6.67 (3.38)	6.27 (3.32)	6.31(3.29)
Expectations	*%*	*%*	*%*
A: norm=paternal, emp=paternal	24.8	25.3	33.4
B: norm=double, emp=paternal	24.9	24.8	30.7
C: norm=paternal, emp=double	24.7	24.7	16.2
D: norm=double, emp=double	25.6	25.3	19.7
Reference network			
Relatives and friends		50.7	49.6
Most people		49.2	50.4
Gender			
Men	50.3	49.5	48.1
Women	49.7	50.5	51.9
Age class			
18–34	14.0	24.6	26.4
35–44	17.5	18.6	18.6
45–54	21.5	22.1	22.1
55–64	21.9	17.9	17.9
≥65	25.1	16.8	16.8
Education			
Lower Secondary	8.7	34.6	31.4
Upper Secondary	54.9	44.2	45.6
Tertiary	36.4	21.2	22.9
Area of residence			
North	49.0	48.8	50.1
Center	18.0	18.0	17.9
South and Islands	33.0	33.1	32.0
Religious typology			
Practicing Catholic	23.7	18.4	17.7
Not practicing Catholic	38.4	48.4	48.8
Not Religious	29.1	21.4	22.5
Other or missing	8.7	11.9	11.0
Political leaning			
Left-wing	34.9	21.8	23.4
Center	24.3	24.3	24.4
Right-wing	24.6	25.9	24.1
Not declared	16.1	28.0	28.1

Results

Study 1

M1 in Table 4 reports the results of the bivariate regression, while M2 reports the findings of the multivariate regression with the inclusion of the control variables. The results do not substantially differ between M1 and M2: the main findings referring to the relationship between the combination of normative and empirical expectation and the propensity to give children a double surname do not substantially vary after adding the control variables.

To facilitate the interpretation of the results, we present the predicted values with 95% confidence intervals obtained from M2 in Fig. 1. Results confirmed our expectation that – compared to the reference group A where both normative and empirical expectations support the paternal surname – both subjects in condition C (normative=paternal and empirical=double surname) and D (normative and empirical=double surname) have a higher propensity to give the double surname to a hypothetical child. Specifically, on a 0–10 scale the propensity is 0.52 ($p = 0.004$) and 0.56 ($p = 0.002$) higher for respondents in condition C and D respectively compared to those in condition A. In terms of effect size, this amounts to 15.5% and 16.6% respectively of the standard deviation of the dependent variable.

Furthermore, we observe no statistically significant difference between conditions A and B ($\beta = 0.32$; $p = 0.072$). These results support the hypothesis that empirical expectations have a larger role than normative ones. Indeed, compared to the 'status quo' situation of coinciding normative and empirical expectations in support of the paternal surname, both conditions where at least empirical expectations are in favour of the double surname (C and D) elicit a higher propensity to make the innovative choice. In contrast, if only the normative expectation is in favour of the double surname (B), we find no difference compared to the control group. We also find no statistically significant difference in the propensity to give the double surname between conditions C and D, contrary to our expectation. To summarize, our results indicate that H1-H3 are supported by the data, whereas H4 is not.

Study 2

Table 5 reports the output of the linear regression model regarding the relationship between the combination of normative and empirical expectations and the propensity to give children the double surname, controlling for the type of reference network (M1) and the control variables (M2). Again, no substantial differences emerge between M1 and M2.

M2 in Table 5 shows that, regardless of the type of reference network presented to respondents, individuals in conditions C (normative = paternal and empirical = double surname) and D (normative and empirical = double surname) have a higher propensity to give a double surname compared to individuals in conditions A (normative and empirical = paternal surname) and B (normative = empirical and empirical = double surname). The average difference in propensity between respondents in conditions C and D compared to those in condition A is even larger than in Study 1 (respectively, beta = 0.93 and 0.83, $p < 0.001$, equal to 28.3% and 25.2% of the standard deviation of the dependent variable). Similarly, the difference between conditions A and B is not statistically

Table 4 Linear regression models with (M1) and without (M2) control variables. Dependent variable: propensity to give the double surname (Study 1)

	M1	**M2**
Experimental condition (ref: A: norm=paternal, emp=paternal)		
B: norm=double, emp=paternal	0.32	0.32
	(0.18)	(0.18)
C: norm=paternal, emp=double	0.46*	0.52**
	(0.19)	(0.18)
D: norm=double, emp=double	0.61**	0.56**
	(0.18)	(0.18)
Gender (ref: Men)		
Women		0.93***
		(0.13)
Age (ref: 18–34)		
35–44		−0.45*
		(0.23)
45–54		−0.02
		(0.22)
55–64		−0.04
		(0.22)
≥ 65		−0.19
		(0.22)
Education (ref: Lower Secondary)		
Upper Secondary		−0.01
		(0.23)
Tertiary		−0.12
		(0.24)
Area of residence (ref: North)		
Center		−0.03
		(0.17)
South and Islands		−0.29*
		(0.14)
Religious typology (ref: Practicing Catholic)		
Not practicing Catholic		0.20
		(0.17)
Not Religious		0.76***
		(0.19)
Other/Missing		−0.05
		(0.25)
Political leaning (ref: Left-wing)		
Center		−0.97***
		(0.17)
Right-wing		−1.44***
		(0.18)
Not declared		−1.07***
		(0.19)
Constant	6.32***	6.61***
	(0.13)	(0.37)
Observations	2,688	2,688
R-squared	0.005	0.08

*: $p < 0.05$ **: $p < 0.01$ ***: $p < 0.001$; unstandardized coefficients reported and standard errors in parentheses

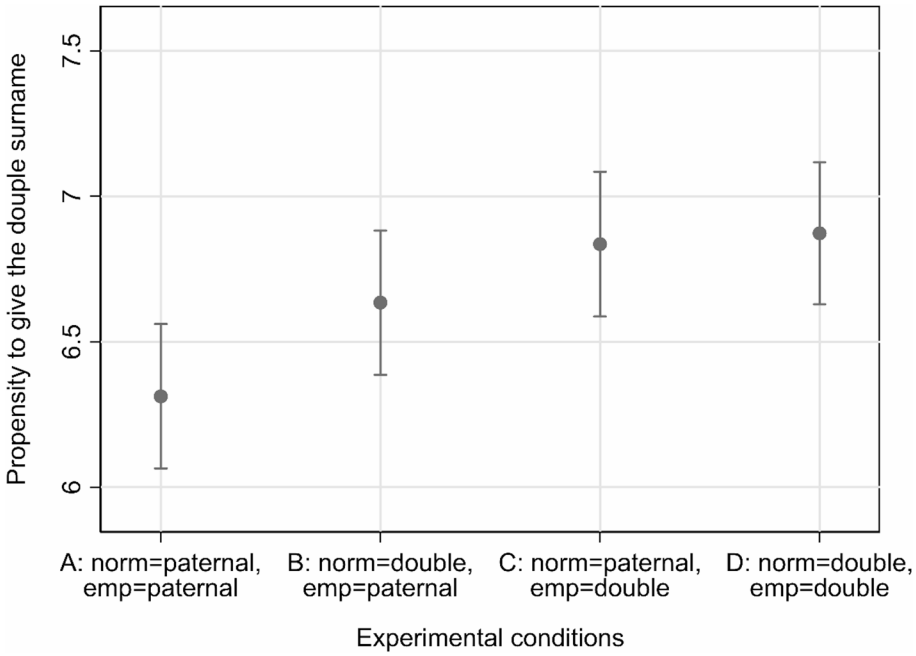

Fig. 1 Predicted values and 95% confidence intervals of the propensity to give a double surname. Predictions from M2 of Study 1 (Table 4, N = 2688)

significant ($\beta = 0.33$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, while there is substantial evidence supporting H1, H2, and H3, the results do not support H4.

After adding the interaction term between the experimental condition and the type of reference network (M3 in Table 5 and predicted values with 95% confidence intervals in Fig. 2), the findings offer a more nuanced picture. When the reference network is represented by relatives and friends (the reference category in M3), only individuals in condition C (normative = paternal and empirical = double surname) show a significantly higher propensity to give the double surname compared to condition A (normative and empirical = paternal surname). However, the role of the combination of empirical and normative expectations in favour of the double surname becomes particularly strong when the reference network is represented by the majority of people ("most people"). The interaction term between "most people" and the combination of normative and empirical expectations of the double surname is equal to 1.07 – amounting to 32.4% of the standard deviation of the dependent variable – and statistically significant at the 5% level. When the reference network is most people, the predicted average difference between condition D and condition A from M3 is equal to 1.34, amounting to 40.7% of the standard deviation of the dependent variable, while such difference is equal to 0.27 when the reference network is represented by relatives and friends. This finding is contrary to the expectation in H5.

Robustness analysis

While it is reasonable to assume that not passing the FMC could mean that respondents were not affected by the treatment in the intended way, it is important to note that the FMC outcome is not distributed at random, as more educated respondents were more likely to pass the check. Additionally, failure in the FMC occurred more frequently among subjects in experimental conditions C and D, i.e., the two scenarios where

Table 5 Linear regression models for respondents passing the FMC. Dependent variable: propensity to give the double surname (Study 2)

	M1	M2	M3
Experimental condition (ref: A: norm=paternal, emp=paternal)			
B: norm=double, emp=paternal	0.23	0.33	0.01
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.27)
C: norm=paternal, emp=double	0.95***	0.93***	0.59
	(0.23)	(0.23)	(0.33)
D: norm=double, emp=double	0.89***	0.83***	0.27
	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.31)
Reference network (ref: relatives and friends)			
Most people	0.06	0.08	−0.44
Experimental condition#Reference Network	(0.15)	(0.54)	(0.26)
B: norm=double, emp=paternal # Most people			0.65
			(0.38)
C: norm=paternal, emp=double # Most people			0.69
			(0.46)
D: norm=double, emp=double # Most people			1.07*
			(0.43)
Gender (ref: Men)			
Women		0.64	0.63***
		(0.15)	(0.15)
Age (ref: 18–34)			
35–44		−0.27	−0.27
		(0.23)	(0.23)
45–54		−0.35	−0.35
		(0.22)	(0.22)
55–64		0.09	0.08
		(0.24)	(0.24)
≥ 65		−0.11	−0.13
		(0.26)	(0.26)
Education (ref: Lower Secondary)			
Upper Secondary		0.61***	0.63**
		(0.18)	(0.18)
Tertiary		0.86***	0.88***
		(0.22)	(0.22)
Area of residence (ref: North)			
Center		0.07	0.07
		(0.21)	(0.21)
South and Islands		0.14	0.13
		(0.17)	(0.17)
Religious typology (ref: Practicing Catholic)			
Not practicing Catholic		0.06	0.07
		(0.21)	(0.21)
Not Religious		0.35	0.35
		(0.25)	(0.25)
Other/Missing		0.28	0.29
		(0.30)	(0.30)
Political leaning (ref: Left-wing)			
Center		−0.64**	−0.64**
		(0.22)	(0.22)
Right-wing		−0.94***	−0.95***
		(0.23)	(0.23)
Not declared		−0.76**	−0.76**
		(0.22)	(0.22)

Table 5 (continued)

	M1	M2	M3
Constant	5.88***	5.57***	5.83***
	(0.15)	(0.38)	(0.39)
Observations	1,823	1,823	1,823
R-squared	0.01	0.05	0.06

*: $p < 0.05$ **: $p < 0.01$ ***: $p < 0.001$; unstandardized coefficients reported and standard errors in parentheses

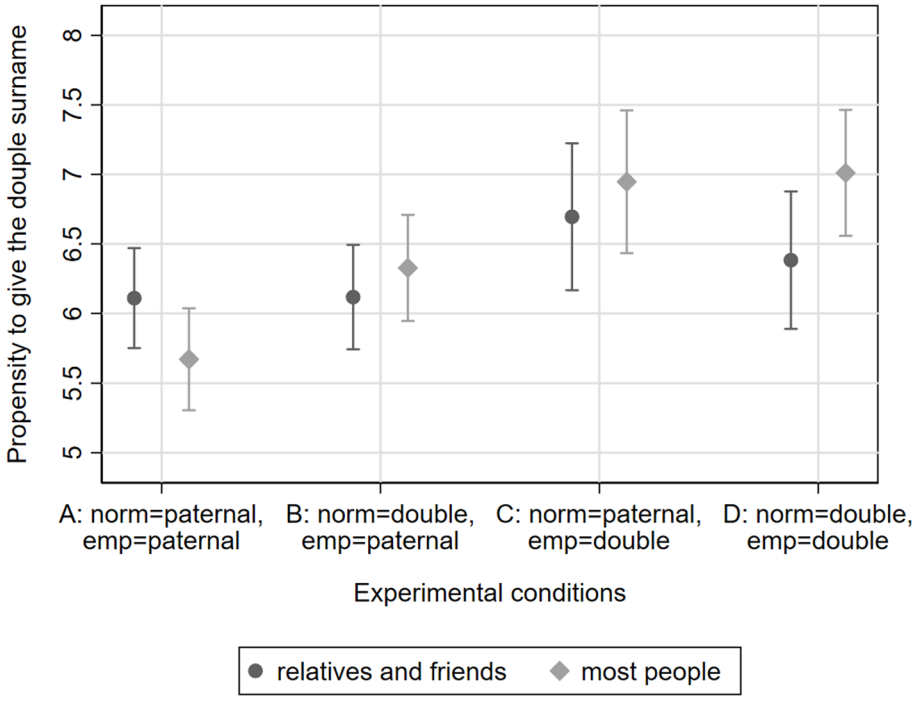

Fig. 2 Predicted values and 95% confidence intervals of the propensity to give a double surname. Predictions from M3 of Study 2 (Table 5, N = 1823)

empirical expectations support the double surname. Therefore, to check for the robustness of our results, we estimated the regression models on the whole sample (Table 6). The results from M1 and M2 indicate that, net of the reference network type, when considering the entire sample of respondents – thus including those less attentive to the wording of the experimental condition – there are no substantial differences in the average propensity to give the double surname across the experimental conditions. However, M3 provides evidence in line with the analysis conducted on the more attentive respondents, as we find a significant and positive interaction between the "most people" reference network and the combination of normative and empirical expectations favouring the double surname (see the positive and statistically significant coefficient, equal to 1.21, $p < 0.001$).

As part of the robustness checks, we re-estimated the models on a subsample of respondents aged 18–44, as this group more closely approximates individuals of childbearing age, for whom decisions about children's surnames are likely to be more salient. In the 18–44 subsample, the direction of the effects aligns with expectations, although confidence intervals are wider due to the substantially reduced sample. We also tested for heterogeneity by gender, education, and age. Some baseline differences across

Table 6 Linear regression models for the entire sample. Dependent variable: propensity to give the double surname (Study 2)

	M1	M2	M3
Experimental condition (ref: A: norm=paternal, emp=paternal)			
B: norm=double, emp=paternal	0.22	0.29	0.03
	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.24)
C: norm=paternal, emp=double	0.10	0.18	0.03
	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.24)
D: norm=double, emp=double	0.03	0.10	−0.49*
	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.24)
Reference network (ref: relatives and friends)			
Most people	0.17	0.17	−0.34
Experimental condition#Reference Network	(0.12)	(0.15)	(0.24)
B: norm=double, emp=paternal # Most people			0.54
			(0.34)
C: norm=paternal, emp=double # Most people			0.29
			(0.34)
D: norm=double, emp=double # Most people			1.21***
			(0.34)
Gender (ref: Men)			
Women		0.80***	0.78***
		(0.12)	(0.12)
Age (ref: 18–34)			
35–44		−0.35	−0.33
		(0.18)	(0.18)
45–54		−0.21	−0.21
		(0.18)	(0.18)
55–64		0.12	0.13
		(0.19)	(0.19)
≥ 65		−0.07	−0.07
		(0.20)	(0.20)
Education (ref: Lower Secondary)			
Upper Secondary		0.38***	0.39***
		(0.14)	(0.14)
Tertiary		0.79***	0.79***
		(0.18)	(0.18)
Area of residence (ref: North)			
Center		0.02	0.02
		(0.17)	(0.17)
South and Islands		0.03	0.04
		(0.14)	(0.14)
Religious typology (ref: Practicing Catholic)			
Not practicing Catholic		−0.24	−0.23
		(0.17)	(0.16)
Not Religious		0.20	0.20
		(0.20)	(0.20)
Other/Missing		0.03	0.05
		(0.23)	(0.23)
Political leaning (ref: Left-wing)			
Center		−0.45**	−0.46**
		(0.18)	(0.18)
Right-wing		−0.61***	−0.62***
		(0.18)	(0.18)
Not declared		−0.76***	−0.76***
		(0.18)	(0.18)

Table 6 (continued)

	M1	M2	M3
Constant	6.10***	5.94***	6.19***
	(0.13)	(0.30)	(0.32)
Observations	2,993	2,993	2,993
R-squared	0.001	0.04	0.04

*:$p<0.05$ **: $p<0.01$ ***: $p<0.001$; unstandardized coefficients reported and standard errors in parentheses

subgroups emerge. As could be expected, men and respondents with lower levels of education appear slightly more responsive to the treatment, while no systematic age differences are observed. size. Full results are available upon request.

Discussion

Our experimental findings show that empirical expectations matter in shaping intentions to give the double surname. Respondents who read the fictitious scenario where most individuals in their reference network opt for the double surname were more likely to prefer the double surname for their children, compared to those who read the paternal surname scenario.

On the one hand, our results are consistent with the idea that the compatibility of an innovation like the double surname with societal norms and values enhances its spread (Rogers, 1962). It is also consistent with a strand of family literature (Balbo & Barban, 2014; Guetto et al., 2016; Nazio, 2008) maintaining that the diffusion of innovative behaviours is affected by what people observe around them, which is another way of saying that empirical expectations matter by means of informational social influence. On the other hand, the results of the two studies do not fully corroborate our hypotheses derived from Bicchieri's social norm theory. In both studies, normative expectations are not associated with subjects' surname intentions independently from empirical ones. Moreover, differently from what we hypothesized, our study reveals that the influence of empirical expectations is stronger when expectations refer to the behaviour of "most people" rather than "relatives and friends".

Regarding the weak or null role of normative expectations, we conjecture that the problem lies in the difficulty of manipulating them in the context of a simple information treatment. It is probably easier to manipulate subjects' expectations regarding what others *do* rather than what others think *it is right to do*. We also know from the theory that to abandon a norm like the paternal surname, empirical expectations must change first. Moreover, when empirical and normative expectations are at odds (as in scenarios B and C of the experiments), subjects may have found it more difficult to imagine a situation in which others do something but also think it is right to do the opposite. Consequently, they might have focused on what is more relevant in real circumstances, i.e. what can be directly observed: others' behaviour. In the long run, however, the repeated observation of a behavioural pattern by others can make that behaviour take on a normative character or a *sense of oughtness*: what is recurrently done often also becomes what is perceived the right thing to do (Horne, 2001; Opp, 1982).

At the same time, it seems unlikely that a meaningful practice such as passing on one's surname (Finch, 2008) can be assimilated to a simple convention, changeable at will through mutual agreement. It is more plausible that in deciding which surname to give to their children, individuals are influenced both by what they see others around them

do and by their own values (e.g., importance of tradition vs. gender equality), that is, by internalized values that are part of their identity.

On the role of the reference network, for which we observed a greater impact when it concerned "most people" rather than "relatives and friends", three not incompatible explanations can be advanced. First, homophily may play a role. While individuals do not choose their relatives, they do choose their friends, and these relationships are often shaped by similarity in values, attitudes, and lifestyles. As a result, friends are likely to share similar orientations toward gender roles and family practices, whereas relatives may reflect a wider range of, and potentially more traditional, views. Consequently, the influence of kin and friends may pull in different directions, with the normative pressure exerted by relatives potentially counterbalancing the attitudinal alignment found within friendship networks. Second, considering the experimental setting of this research, it is easier to imagine a future in which a generic group of "most people" behaves in an unusual way rather than attributing this unusual behaviour to known people such as relatives and friends. Therefore, the manipulation of expectations might have been stronger in the case of "most people". Third, concerns about the potential consequences of assigning a double surname to children may lead individuals to look beyond their immediate social circle and pay greater attention to what most people do. For example, parents might worry that a double surname could create administrative complications at school or expose their child to teasing if it remains uncommon. In such situations, broader societal norms may become a more relevant reference point than the practices of a restricted network.

Conclusion

We conclude with some implications of the research, its limits and indications for future developments. Our findings suggest that for the double surname to spread, empirical expectations need to change first (on this point see also Bicchieri, 2016, p. 111). This can happen spontaneously (if it happens) only in the long run, since children's and adults' surnames (unlike their first names) are visible only on a few formal occasions and this lack of observability reduces its diffusion. Probably only a more stringent legislative intervention would have the power to change habits dramatically, for example by making the double surname a real *default rule* of the silence-assent type. In the Italian context, a push could be given by a law implementing the constitutional ruling, but it is doubtful that there are currently favourable political conditions.

We acknowledge some limits in our research. First, both studies are based on non-probability online samples that might not represent Italian population accurately. Although this does not undermine the internal validity of our findings, as both studies employ a survey experiment design, it may constrain their external validity, since responses elicited in a survey context do not necessarily translate into real-world behavior. This is especially true for what concerns the correspondence between stated intentions and actual behaviours which cannot be guaranteed. A further limitation of the study is that our sample includes a broad age range, including many respondents who are unlikely to have (more) children in the future. This may limit our ability to fully capture the decision-making process involved in choosing a double surname. Although robustness checks showed no differences when the models were limited to individuals between 18 and 44 years old, future research could address this by focusing on the intentions and

actual behavior of individuals who are actively planning to have children or had them recently, as this group may offer clearer insights into the social influences shaping surname choices. However, reaching such a specific population poses its own challenges in terms of sample accessibility and feasibility. Finally, results from Study 2 should be taken with some caution as truly attentive subjects included in the main analysis were not distributed at random across experimental conditions, though we controlled for variables associated with failure in the factual manipulation check.

We conclude with a reflection on the symbolic relevance of names. This article is the result of the intellectual effort of four authors, one of whom is a female scholar. Imagine that her name were removed from the title page because, in her country, only men are allowed to author journal articles. Most academics would find this outrageous – how could anyone in the scientific community, in 2026, be denied authorship based on their sex or gender? And yet, *mutatis mutandis*, a similar practice goes largely unnoticed and unquestioned when it comes to the naming of newborns whose mothers are normatively discouraged or legally excluded from passing on their own surname. Given the growing societal emphasis on gender equality in general and parental equality in particular (Neyer et al., 2013; Olafsson & Steingrimsdottir, 2020), the persistence of this tradition is "a perplexing historical paradox" (Suter, 2004, p. 58).

Promoting the double surname is therefore not just a matter of legal change but of reshaping social expectations that sustain symbolic forms of male dominance within the family. The finding that empirical expectations have a stronger influence than normative ones suggests that efforts to promote egalitarian naming practices should focus on making visible the growing number of parents who choose double surnames. Public campaigns, media visibility, and administrative practices that normalize and highlight this option could help shift perceptions of what is typical, thus fostering broader adoption. In this sense, the diffusion of the double surname would not only reflect changing norms but also serve as a "barometer of women's status in society" (Noack & Wiik, 2008, p. 507), signaling progress toward greater gender equality in the symbolic sphere of family life.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-026-00286-3.

Supplementary Material 1

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Authors' contributions
RC developed the theoretical background and co-designed Study 2. GMDS conducted the literature review and co-designed Study 1. RL contributed to the design of Study 2 and performed the Study 2 data analyses. FM co-designed Study 1 and performed the Study 1 data analyses. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data availability
The datasets generated during and analysed for Study 1 of the article are available here: Vezzoni C, Chiesi A M, Biolcati F, Dotti Sani G M, Guglielmi S, Ladini R, Maggini N, Maraffi M, Molteni F, Moroni M, Pedrazzani A, Piacentini F, Sarti S, Segatti P, 2024, ***ResPOnsE COVID-19. Cumulative file: Wave 1 to Wave 6 (English version)***, https://doi.org/10.13130/RD_UNIMI/IJD

SVS, UNIMI Dataverse, V1, UNF:6:dq692rELzJWWm138ubfJuw== [fileUNF]. The datasets used and analysed during study 2 are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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