

Exploring South African Perspectives on Husbands Adopting Their Wife's Surname in Marriage: The Case of or Tambo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province

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Abstract

Background: Surname practices in South Africa are deeply rooted in African cultural traditions, Christian belief systems and patrilineal kinship structures. Recent legal developments, particularly the Constitutional Court ruling allowing husbands to adopt their wife's surname, have introduced a new dynamic into marital identity formation. However, limited research has examined how South Africans understand and interpret this shift, especially in communities where cultural norms remain strong. Aim: To explore South Africans' views and opinions on men taking their wife's surname within the context of legal rights, African cultural traditions, and Christian beliefs. Study setting: The research was conducted in the OR Tambo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, a region characterised by strong traditional practices, rural-urban diversity, and widespread Christian adherence. Methods: The study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm. Nineteen participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected using an online semi-structured interview guide and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability measures. Results: Findings revealed high legal awareness of the recent ruling, yet acceptance of the practice remained limited. Most participants perceived husband-to-wife surname adoption as contradictory to African patrilineal traditions, ancestral lineage systems and Christian interpretations of marital headship. While a minority supported personal choice, emphasising equality and autonomy, many respondents particularly older and rural participants believed the practice should be discouraged. Generational and spatial differences were evident, with younger and urban respondents demonstrating more openness. Conclusion: Despite legal reform, cultural and religious frameworks continue to shape resistance to husbands adopting their wife's surname. Identity practices remain rooted in ancestral continuity and theological understandings of family structure. The gradual emergence of acceptance, particularly among younger participants, suggests evolving cultural ecologies influenced by modern rights-based discourses. Contribution: This study provides empirical insight into an understudied socio-legal issue in South Africa and contributes to ecohumanist scholarship by illuminating how naming practices reflect the interplay between individual autonomy, tradition, spirituality and communal identity. The findings highlight the importance of culturally sensitive policymaking and the need for inclusive dialogue with traditional and religious leaders.

Keywords: *Surname Practices, African Traditions, Christianity, Legal Reform, Marital Identity, or Tambo District.*

Introduction

The names we bear are not simply administrative markers but deeply symbolic artefacts that shape who we are, how others perceive us, and how tradition and modernity negotiate identity (Ngubane, 2019; Family Laws South Africa, 2025). In many cultures, surname practices in marriage are gendered women assume husbands' surnames and these norms reflect wider power structures, religious beliefs, and ideologies of lineage and belonging. As legal reform progresses in South Africa, shifting these practices, there is pressing need to examine how law, culture, religion, and identity interrelate in the lived experiences and understandings of South Africans.

On 11 September 2025, the Constitutional Court of South Africa, in *Jordaan and Others v Minister of Home Affairs and Another (CCT 296/24)*, declared sections of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 51 of 1992, including Regulation 18(2), unconstitutional because they discriminated on the basis of gender by permitting only women to assume their spouse's surname upon marriage. The Court held that this legal distinction violated the rights to equality (section 9 of the Constitution), dignity (section 10), and was not justifiable

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under section 36. Furthermore, as part of its remedy, the declaration of invalidity is suspended for 24 months to allow Parliament to amend the statute, while an interim “reading-in” remedy ensures spouses of any gender may now assume surnames on a gender-neutral basis during the interim period.

However, legal reform alone does not erase the enduring force of culture and religion in shaping everyday identity. In South Africa’s Black communities, lineage, clan names, and the male line often constitute crucial aspects of self-understanding and social belonging (Ngubane, 2019). Naming is interwoven with ancestry, respect for elders, and continuity of the family name across generations. Christian beliefs often intersect with these cultural norms, reinforcing patriarchal surname practices in many congregations. Yet naming practices are also contested spaces where identity and subjectivity are forged, resisted, or reimaged in the face of social change.

There is limited empirical research addressing how South Africans perceive the possibility of husbands adopting their wives’ surnames, especially post-legal reform, and more so in rural or semi-urban districts such as OR Tambo. Studies on Zulu naming practices, for example, have traced shifts from colonial and Christian names toward reassertion of African names, particularly among younger and educated populations, but little attention has been paid to surname changes in marriage as an expressive form of agency and identity (Ngubane, 2019). These gaps are especially relevant to ecohumanist frameworks, which emphasise subjectivity, dignified identity, relational belonging, and the negotiation between human agency and cultural ecologies (Bekker, 2021; Moran, 2022).

This study, therefore, aims to explore South Africans’ views and opinions on men taking their wife’s surname within the context of legal rights, African cultural traditions, and Christian beliefs.

Situated in the OR Tambo District, this research captures perspectives in a locale where traditional culture is strong and Christian belief widespread. By centring naming practices not merely as legal or normative matters but as deeply symbolic acts of identity, this work contributes to ecohumanist scholarship: exploring how human identity is embedded in social, religious, and cultural ecologies, and how legal change can open space for more dignified, equitable identity formation. It is hoped this study will illuminate how residents negotiate the conflict and consonance between law, culture, religion, and the evolving meanings of being a spouse, a man, and a member of one’s community in post-apartheid South Africa.

Literature Review

Awareness of the Legal Provision

A landmark legal change in South Africa came with the Constitutional Court’s decision in *Jordaan and Others v Minister of Home Affairs (CCT 296/24) [2025] ZACC 19*, in which the Court held that certain provisions of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 51 of 1992 particularly section 26(1)(a)-(c) were unconstitutional because they discriminated on the basis of gender by denying men the automatic right to assume their wives’ surname after marriage (Jordaan & Others, 2025). The decision affirmed that such gender-based differentiation violated rights to equality (section 9) and dignity (section 10) under the South African Constitution and is no longer justifiable under the limitations clause (section 36) (Jordaan & Others, 2025).

Although the legal change is clear, studies of public awareness are scarce. Media reports following the *Jordaan* ruling highlight varying levels of public understanding; some reports suggest confusion about how the ruling will be implemented (IOL, 2025; News24, 2025), but these are not academic surveys. No peer-reviewed academic work was located that quantifies or deeply explores how many people, especially in rural or traditional communities, know about their new rights post-judgment.

Cultural Attitudes and Perceptions

Naming practices are deeply rooted in African societies, involving lineage, clan identity, heritage, and community belonging. Studies on naming practices among different South African ethnic groups show that names are not arbitrary; they carry spiritual, historical, and familial significance (De Klerk & Bosch, 1996;

Makgopa & Rugwiji, 2022). For example, Makgopa and Rugwiji (2022) examine naming patterns among the Northern Sotho, Xitsonga, and Tshivenda communities from a religio-cultural perspective, demonstrating how rituals, family expectations, and community values shape names. These studies, however, focus largely on child naming, clan names, or personal names not on how surnames are handled post-marriage, especially when the possibility arises of husbands adopting their wives' surnames.

The sociocultural study of amaXhosa naming practices shows that naming systems include clan, birth, and spiritual names, with strong emphasis on continuity of heritage and respect for ancestors (Diko, 2024). Such practices suggest that changing surname norms involving husbands adopting wives' names might clash with deeply entrenched practices of lineage and ancestor veneration.

Role of Christianity and African Traditional Beliefs

Christianity has been shown to have played a role historically in reinforcing European/Western naming conventions in South Africa (Mlamli Diko, 2024). In many cases, Christian churches continue to use registers and rituals that assume wives will adopt husbands' names; sermon content often reflects patriarchal gender norms (though empirical studies in this specific domain are limited). African traditional beliefs similarly place great importance on male lineage and clan names as carriers of ancestral identity (Suzman, 2009; Makgopa & Rugwiji, 2022). For example, the sociocultural significance in amaXhosa names (Diko, 2024) includes spiritual, ancestral, familial reasons, indicating how deeply tradition intertwines with naming.

No peer-reviewed study was found (to date) that empirically assesses how Christian denominations differ in accepting or resisting husbands adopting wives' surnames, particularly in rural/traditional settings.

Married vs Unmarried Perceptions

Research comparing married individuals with those unmarried regarding surname change is almost non-existent in South Africa. The literature predominantly focuses on naming of children, on identity via naming, and on female surname choice (maiden name retention, hyphenation) rather than on husbands' surname choices. Studies such as the one among Bapedi that compare younger vs older generations' personal naming (Kanyane & Rakgogo, 2022) deal with given names rather than surnames post marriage. Similarly, studies among Northern Sotho, Xitsonga and Tshivenda groups deal with cultural beliefs around naming of children (Makgopa & Rugwiji, 2022), not marital surname change.

Generational, Gender, Urban-Rural Differences

There is solid literature showing generational shifts in naming practices, especially in relation to modernity, colonial legacy, Christian influence, and urbanisation. Kanyane & Rakgogo (2022) examine naming approaches among older and younger generations among the Bapedi, finding that younger people are more flexible, less bound by elder-dominated naming traditions. Similarly, Makgopa & Rugwiji (2022) report that among Northern Sotho, Xitsonga, and Tshivenda peoples, there is some change over time in naming practices under pressure from cultural interaction, urbanisation, and education.

Urban vs rural differences are discussed in the context of naming children, but not specifically in the context of surname changes after marriage. Studies of naming among amaXhosa (Diko, 2024) and Basotho (Majola & Lemeko, 2024) show that urban respondents are more likely to express hybridised or modern naming preferences, whereas rural respondents often adhere more strictly to tradition (Majola & Lemeko, 2024; De Klerk & Bosch, 1996). But again, none focus on the specific issue of husbands adopting wives' surnames, especially post the *Jordaan* decision.

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand social phenomena through the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Interpretivism was appropriate because the study aimed to explore how South Africans interpret the practice of husbands adopting their wife's surname within their cultural, religious and legal contexts. This paradigm enabled the researcher to capture nuanced perceptions shaped by African traditions, Christian belief systems, and evolving constitutional rights.

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' views, attitudes and beliefs. Qualitative inquiry is well suited for examining cultural and social meanings because it prioritises depth, context and complexity over numerical generalisation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given that surname practices are embedded in identity, lineage and spirituality, a qualitative approach provided the most appropriate means to understand participants' reasoning and emotional responses.

Research Design

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative design, guided by principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA emphasises understanding how individuals make sense of their lived realities (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This design was suitable because the study sought to explore how people interpret the meaning of surname change, how cultural traditions inform their views, and how they negotiate the tension between constitutional rights and customary norms. The design allowed the study to uncover subtle interpretations, contradictions and deeply held beliefs surrounding surname practices in the OR Tambo District.

Target Population

The target population comprised South African adults residing in the OR Tambo District Municipality, including both married and unmarried individuals, as well as participants from different religious backgrounds (primarily Christian), and various age groups. The population was suitable because the study sought to understand how perceptions of surname change are shaped by marital status, age, gender and residential location (rural or urban), as outlined in the research objectives.

Sampling methods and sample size

A non-probability sampling strategy was employed. Specifically:

- Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were knowledgeable or affected by cultural and marital identity practices.
- Snowball sampling allowed the researcher to reach additional respondents through referrals from initial participants.

A total of 19 participants completed the interview guide. The final sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, which occurs when no new ideas, insights or themes emerge from additional data (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Saturation was reached before and confirmed at the 19-response mark, as recurring patterns were evident across participants.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using an online semi-structured interview guide administered via Google Forms and shared through WhatsApp. This method was selected because it offers cost-effective access to participants across both rural and urban areas of OR Tambo District, many of whom rely on smartphones for communication.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions aligned directly with the research objectives. Questions explored:

- awareness of the legal ruling,
- cultural beliefs about lineage and surname practices,
- Christian perspectives on marital identity,
- comparisons between unmarried and married respondents, and
- generational and urban-rural differences in attitudes.

Participants responded in written form, and clarification follow-ups were conducted where necessary. This method ensured flexibility, anonymity and cultural sensitivity while allowing participants to express their views in English or local-language-influenced English.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of all responses.

Generating initial codes to identify meaningful units of information.

Searching for themes by grouping related codes.

Reviewing themes to ensure internal coherence and alignment with the research objectives.

Defining and naming themes to capture the essence of each pattern.

Producing the report, integrating illustrative quotations to support interpretations.

Thematic analysis was appropriate because it allows for systematic examination of cultural meaning-making processes, religious reasoning, and personal reflections, which were central to this study.

Trustworthiness

To ensure methodological rigour, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness:

Credibility: Achieved through member checking, where selected participants verified the accuracy of interpretations.

Transferability: Enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the OR Tambo District context and participant demographics.

Dependability: Ensured through an audit trail documenting all methodological decisions, coding processes and analytical steps.

Confirmability: Strengthened by reflexive journaling and peer debriefing to minimise researcher bias, ensuring that findings emerged from participants' voices rather than researcher assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent electronically before completing the interview guide. Anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms, and no identifying information was included in the reporting of findings. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Data were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

Given the sensitivity of cultural and religious topics, care was taken to avoid causing discomfort. Participants were assured that their cultural beliefs, spiritual views and personal opinions would be treated with respect and confidentiality.

Results

Demographic Profile of Participants

Nineteen participants (N = 19) took part in the study. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarised below.

The participants ranged across different age groups. Younger respondents (18-30 years) formed a substantial proportion of the sample, while middle-aged participants (31-45 years) and older respondents (46 years and above) were represented in smaller numbers. The inclusion of multiple age cohorts allows the study to capture generational perspectives on surname practices, which is central to Objective 5 of the research. Younger participants are expected to reflect more progressive or legally informed attitudes, whereas older participants may emphasise traditional and religious perspectives.

Both male and female participants were included, with women slightly more represented than men. This gender balance is significant, as surname practices are traditionally gendered: wives are expected to adopt husbands' surnames, not the reverse. Analysing male and female responses comparatively allows for exploration of how gender roles and expectations influence acceptance or resistance to men adopting their wife's surname. Most respondents were single (84.2%, n = 16), with a smaller proportion identifying as married (15.8%, n = 3). This means most responses reflect anticipated views on surname choices rather than lived marital experience. Nevertheless, the accounts from married respondents offer critical insights into the practical negotiation of surname practices within actual marriages. This distribution requires cautious interpretation when comparing married and single participants (Objective 4), but it also highlights the value of prospective attitudes among young, single respondents. Most participants identified as Christian (78.9%, n = 15), while others identified with traditional beliefs (5.3%, n = 1), other religious affiliations (10.5%, n = 2), or no religion (5.3%, n = 1). The predominance of Christianity reflects national religious demographics and underscores the importance of Christian teachings and doctrines in shaping attitudes toward marital surname practices. At the same time, the perspectives of minority groups (traditional, other, or none) enrich the data by highlighting alternative discourses, particularly around cultural identity, ancestral continuity, and personal autonomy.

Interpretations of Results

Objective 1: Awareness of the legal provision allowing men to adopt their wife's surname

Participants were asked whether they were aware that South African law allows a husband to adopt his wife's surname. The majority, 89.5% (n = 17), indicated awareness of this legal provision, while a minority, 10.5% (n = 2), reported they were unaware.

This high level of awareness suggests that information about the recent Constitutional Court ruling in *Jordaan and Others v Minister of Home Affairs* (2025) has reached many South Africans in the OR Tambo District Municipality. However, it should be noted that awareness does not necessarily translate into acceptance. Participants' subsequent reflections often revealed ambivalence or resistance to the practice, particularly when considered against cultural and religious norms.

The implication is that while the law has become more inclusive and egalitarian, cultural adaptation appears slower. This tension between legal awareness and cultural legitimacy emerged as a recurrent theme and frames the subsequent analysis.

Objective 2: Cultural attitudes and perceptions toward men changing their surname after marriage

Two questions were posed to participants under this objective: (1) *What do people in your culture say about a man taking his wife's surname?* and (2) *Do you think this practice changes the traditional roles of men and women in marriage?*

Cultural views on husbands adopting their wife's surname

An overwhelming majority of participants described the practice as being “against tradition”. Responses frequently invoked notions of cultural continuity, ancestral recognition, and the symbolic role of men as bearers of lineage. For example, one participant stated: *“In my culture, it is regarded as a sin”* (P6), while another argued: *“The man carries the family name and passes it to the next generation. If he takes his wife's surname, it can be seen as losing his identity and his family's legacy”* (P12).

Only a small minority expressed openness to the practice. For instance, one participant responded: *“It's also okay to me”* (P2). However, such views were exceptions rather than the norm.

Thematic analysis revealed three dominant cultural arguments:

Lineage and ancestry – The surname were described as an essential link to one's ancestors and clan, and altering this practice was seen as breaking continuity.

Patriarchal family structure – Respondents emphasised the husband's role as head of the household, arguing that surname change by men would invert established hierarchies.

Social stigma and abnormality – Several participants noted that the practice would be regarded as “not normal”, “absurd”, or an object of ridicule within their communities.

Perceived Impact on Traditional Gender Roles

Most participants believed that the practice would fundamentally disrupt traditional marital roles. Several argued that it would symbolically undermine men's authority in the household: *“Yes, it does. Traditionally, the woman joins the man's family and takes his name. If the opposite happens, it challenges how we understand family structure”* (P13). Others suggested that it would invert power relations, with women becoming perceived leaders of the home: *“It changes traditional roles, a woman will become a leader of the home”* (P17).

A smaller number of participants expressed more nuanced views. One respondent highlighted that traditions are evolving: *“Modern practices and interpretations may vary, with some couples choosing non-traditional paths like a man taking his wife's surname, reflecting evolving views on gender roles”* (P9). Another argued: *“I don't see the problem, but it is not common in our culture”* (P18).

Overall, thematic analysis indicated that participants associated male surname adoption with a destabilisation of patriarchal order, threatening both the symbolic and practical roles of men as heads of households. Yet a minority voice acknowledged the potential for adaptation, suggesting that cultural norms are not entirely static but under negotiation in contemporary contexts.

Objective 3: The role of Christianity and African traditional beliefs in shaping attitudes on surname practices

This objective asked participants two linked questions: (a) *What does your religion or church say about surname changes in marriage?* and (b) *Do you think it is right or wrong, from a Christian or religious view, for a man to take his wife's surname?* Nineteen participants responded to these questions. Thematic analysis of their answers produced four principal themes: (1) Christian normativity and male headship, (2) Scriptural ambiguity and denominational variation, (3) Tradition, lobola and lineage as religious-cultural justification, and (4) Minority positions of tolerance or non-commitment. Each theme is presented below with supporting participant material and interpretive commentary.

Christian Normativity and Male Headship

A clear majority of participants located surname practice within a Christian framework that reinforces male headship and the normative expectation that *wives* take their husband's surname. Many responses asserted this as the received teaching in churches: *"The wife must take the husband's surname"* (P3; P4; P15), and *"Christianity normalised woman taking man's surname"* (P16). Several participants explicitly linked surname practice to male leadership and household responsibility: *"It is wrong, because it changes what God has created that a man will take totally leadership, and be the head of the home"* (P14), and *"It is so wrong, a man is born to be a leader, and a man must make his legacy. This will destroy the man's lineage"* (P16).

When asked whether a man taking his wife's surname is right or wrong in a Christian view, many respondents answered unequivocally that it is wrong: *"It is wrong"* (P7; P9; P13), *"No this is not good at all"* (P1), and *"Yes, it is wrong. According to the bible, a man was meant to be the head and leader"* (P15). These remarks show that for a sizeable subset of respondents, Christian doctrine (as they understand it) functions as a normative bulwark against reversing the conventional surname order.

The dominance of this theme indicates that Christianity, as practised or interpreted by many participants, supports patriarchal naming norms by appealing to theological ideas of headship and household order. For participants holding this view, surname practice is not a neutral administrative matter but a theologically sanctioned marker of familial and gendered order.

Scriptural Ambiguity and Denominational Variation

A second strand of responses introduced qualification and nuance. Several participants recognised that Christianity does not explicitly legislate surname practice in biblical text and that denominations vary: *"In Christianity, the common teaching is that the wife takes the husband's surname... but the Bible does not give direct laws about surnames, it's more about unity"* (P11). Another respondent observed that *"Religious views on surname changes in marriage vary across denominations and cultures"* (P6) and that some churches *"don't talk about it"* (P2).

When asked whether it is right or wrong from a Christian perspective, some participants reflected this nuance: *"From a Christian view, I think it would be seen as wrong because it goes against the teaching of male headship... But at the same time, the Bible does not give direct laws about surnames, it's more about unity. So, some might argue it is about agreement between the couple"* (P11). A small number explicitly considered it acceptable: *"From a Christian view I think it's ok"* (P8), and *"Not wrong"* (P2).

This theme shows that while a dominant interpretation links surname practice with male headship, a non-negligible set of respondents either recognise the absence of specific scriptural injunctions or observe denominational variability. Such responses open interpretive space for couple autonomy and concordance, rather than strict doctrinal prohibition.

Tradition, Lobola and Lineage as Religious-Cultural Justification

Several respondents framed religiously justified surname norms in direct relation to customary practices especially lobola and lineage obligations. For example, one participant linked surname practice to lobola and family duties: “*Wrong, because it changes what God has created that a man will take totally leadership, and be the head of the home. It changes from the part that man must pay Lobola, and against the rule of God*” (P14). Another stated succinctly: “*It is wrong because a woman is the one who is taken by a man not the other way around*” (P18).

Participants thus often fused Christian language (headship, God’s order) with customary logics of bride-price and patrilineal continuity, treating religion and tradition as mutually reinforcing authorities that proscribe role reversal in surname practice.

For many respondents, religious belief cannot be analytically separated from customary obligations; the two form an integrated normative framework that legitimises the patrilineal transmission of names. This synergy strengthens resistance to men adopting their wife’s surname because it is framed as both spiritually and communally consequential.

Minority Positions: Tolerance, Personal Decision, Or Silence

A minority of participants expressed non-committal or tolerant positions. Some reported that churches do not speak about surname practice at all: “*They don’t talk about it in my church*” (P2). Others emphasised personal choice or denominational diversity: “*Christianity encompasses a broad range of views... Decisions about surnames are typically seen as personal choices*” (P6), and “*From a Christian view, the Bible does not give direct laws about surnames, it’s more about unity... some might argue it is about agreement between the couple*” (P11). A few respondents answered that the practice was “*not wrong*” or “*not normal but not wrong*” (P2; P17; P18 said “*It is not wrong but it’s not normal*”).

These minority responses indicate pockets of theological flexibility and pastoral silence, which create openings for changing practices. The presence of such positions suggests that, despite strong normative resistance, interpretive plurality exists and could facilitate gradual cultural change.

Objective 4: Comparing the perceptions of married and unmarried participants regarding surname changes in marriage

This objective sought to compare the perspectives of married and unmarried participants concerning surname changes in marriage. Married participants were asked how they and their spouse decided on the surname(s) after marriage, while unmarried participants were asked whether they would consider a husband taking his wife’s surname and why.

Married Participants’ Responses: Reinforcement of Traditional Norms

All three married participants (P1, P4, and P8) reported that the wife adopted her husband’s surname without any disagreement or negotiation. P1 noted that his “*wife has taken mine without a problem,*” while P4 stated plainly, “*The wife took my surname.*” Similarly, P8, identifying as the wife, affirmed, “*I, the wife, took my husband’s surname.*”

These consistent responses illustrate an uncritical adherence to traditional marital naming customs, where the wife’s assumption of the husband’s surname is treated as a self-evident norm rather than a negotiated choice. None of the married respondents reported any consideration of alternative surname arrangements, such as double-barrelled surnames or the husband taking the wife’s name. This uniformity suggests that within existing marital contexts, patriarchal and customary expectations remain deeply internalised.

For these participants, surname practice after marriage is not a matter for discussion but an automatic continuation of cultural and familial lineage. The absence of dissent also indicates that religious, cultural, and familial pressures may continue to shape post-marital identity decisions, limiting personal autonomy in such matters.

Unmarried Participants' Responses: Anticipated Resistance and Cultural Conformity

Among the unmarried participants, the majority firmly rejected the idea of a husband adopting his wife's surname. Responses were strongly anchored in cultural norms, gendered expectations, and notions of respectability.

- P2 stated: “No, I don't consider because our culture does not follow that.”
- P3 justified: “No, because he paid for the wife.”
- P7 reasoned: “No, because it lowers the dignity of a man.”
- P5 declared: “No, culturally it's wrong.”
- P15 added: “No, it will end up with messing the leadership part.”

Only one participant (P11) expressed an open or tolerant stance, saying: “I am ok with anyone of these, totally up to the man of the house.”

These responses reveal that even among unmarried individuals who might be expected to hold more progressive views traditional and patriarchal ideologies continue to dominate. Participants justified their opposition by invoking ideas of male authority, cultural propriety, and transactional marital customs (notably, *lobola*). The suggestion that surname reversal “messes the leadership part” (P6) underscores how marital naming is intertwined with power and hierarchy in cultural consciousness.

However, the single respondent (P11) who expressed acceptance represents an emerging minority voice that recognises personal agency and equality within marriage. This signals that social attitudes are not entirely static but remain influenced by dominant communal scripts.

Objective 5: To assess whether generational, gender, or urban–rural differences influence perceptions of husbands adopting their wife's surname

This section presents findings from the four questions under Objective 5:

Do you think young people today are more open to this idea (man taking wife's surname) than older people?

When asked whether young people today are more open to the idea of a man adopting his wife's surname, responses were divided, with a slight tendency towards acknowledging greater openness among the youth yet tempered by scepticism about male acceptance.

Several participants recognised that younger generations engage more with constitutional rights and modern equality discourses. P2 noted, “Yes, because young people are more engaged in constitutional rules than older people,” while P6 provided an extended reflection: “Young people today might be more open ... due to shifting societal norms towards greater equality and flexibility in partnerships.” Similarly, P10 explained, “Yes, young people are more open because they see marriage as equal partnership and are less strict about culture.”

These views suggest that legal consciousness, social media exposure, and modern egalitarian ideals may be slowly transforming perceptions among younger South Africans. P8 confirmed this digital influence: “Yes, because I have seen their views on TikTok, it's like it's something that they are open to.”

However, other respondents firmly disagreed, asserting that young people remain resistant or only superficially open to the idea. P9 observed, “No, they are against the idea because everybody was shocked when it was

announced,” while P1 stated, “No, they are not happy at all.” P15 suggested that “They are not open until it is normalised,” implying that openness depends on gradual cultural accommodation. Some also expressed moral or gender-based concerns: P3 argued, “Young people should be more open to the idea,” yet doubted that men would allow it, while P7 claimed, “Yes, they want to be superior to man,” reflecting suspicion that such equality threatens traditional male authority.

The findings illustrate a generational ambivalence. Younger participants are *theoretically* more accepting due to exposure to progressive ideals yet *practically* constrained by the persistence of patriarchal and cultural expectations. This ambivalence underscores the transitional phase of cultural consciousness in post-apartheid South Africa, where legal modernity and traditional morality co-exist uneasily.

From an ecohumanist perspective, these generational contrasts reveal the tension between evolving human subjectivities and enduring cultural ecologies. Youth identity formation is increasingly shaped by digital, global, and rights-based influences, yet remains entangled in ancestral narratives of gender, lineage, and respectability.

Do you think people in towns and cities see this issue differently from people in villages?

Responses to the second question, whether people in towns and cities perceive the issue differently from those in villages showed a strong consensus that urban populations tend to be more open and tolerant, whereas rural communities are more conservative and tradition bound.

Most participants cited exposure to diverse cultures, education, and globalisation as the reason for urban openness. P5 explained, “People in town move with time, whilst the ones in rural believe in tradition and culture.” P6 similarly noted that “Urban areas tend to have more cosmopolitan populations ... potentially leading to more openness to non-traditional choices.” This was echoed by P10, who said, “In towns and cities, people are exposed to different cultures and modern thinking. They may be more accepting ... In villages, culture is still very strong.”

Others explicitly linked urban life to Western influence and modernity: “In cities people see this as normal because they are exposed to Western culture, whilst in rural areas people still hold traditional values” (P14); “Yes, people from cities adopted Western religion most while in villages we are doing things traditionally” (P7).

Conversely, a smaller number of participants perceived no meaningful difference between the two contexts. P3 said, “I don’t think there’s a difference,” while P12 added, “No, they see it the same.” These responses indicate that while urban exposure may encourage flexibility, shared cultural roots can still produce continuity across space.

Urban–rural contrasts mirror the broader divide between modernity and tradition in South African society. Urban participants appear more influenced by pluralism, education, and global discourses of gender equality, whereas rural participants remain custodians of communal and ancestral norms. The findings reveal a spatial ecology of belief, where openness to change correlates with social exposure and cosmopolitanism.

From an ecohumanist lens, these spatial differences underscore how environmental and social contexts shape moral imagination. Rural communities, embedded in close-knit cultural ecologies, sustain continuity and belonging through adherence to custom, while urban environments foster identity experimentation and individual choice. The two are not opposites but coexisting poles within a dynamic moral landscape.

Who should decide about surnames in marriage – the law, culture, religion, or the couple themselves, and why?

When participants were asked who should decide about surnames in marriage, the overwhelming majority (n = 12) responded that the couple themselves should make this decision. They emphasised that marriage is a private union and should not be governed by external institutions. P5 noted: “Couples should decide. They are the ones getting married, not the state.” Similarly, P10 echoed: “Marriage is between the two people, and they must agree on what works for them. The law, culture, and religion can guide, but the final choice should be personal.” P13

summarised the same idea: *“The couple, because the marriage is for them, and whatever happens it’s not going to involve others.”*

A smaller group of participants invoked culture (n = 2) or law (n = 1) as the rightful authority, while one participant appealed to *“the law of nature”* (P17) as the guiding force. Those who favoured culture justified it by reference to communal identity and ancestral belonging: *“Culture, because it has nothing to do with them. They cannot decide about what is going to affect us”* (P9).

The predominance of the view that couples should decide indicates an emerging awareness of personal autonomy and relational equality in marital decision-making. Yet, the persistence of references to culture and law reflects the continued pull of collective authority. In ecohumanist terms, these perspectives illustrate the dynamic interplay between individual agency and communal belonging two interdependent dimensions of human identity.

The responses also reveal subtle generational and spatial undertones. Younger and urban-based participants tended to support the couple’s autonomy, while references to cultural or natural law appeared primarily among those from more traditional or rural backgrounds. This distribution suggests that individualistic decision-making is gaining symbolic ground in urbanised and digitally connected environments.

Overall, this theme captures the transitional moral ecology in contemporary South Africa: participants express growing respect for personal freedom in intimate decisions yet remain bound by ancestral and communal frames of reference.

Do you think men taking their wife’s surname should be encouraged, not encouraged, or left as a personal choice?

Of the eighteen participants who responded to this question, eight (44.4%) indicated that the practice should be left as a personal choice, while ten (55.6%) said it should be discouraged. None explicitly stated that it should be actively encouraged.

The view that it should be left as a personal choice

Participants who supported personal choice tended to express respect for individual autonomy and marital equality. They argued that naming decisions should not be imposed by law, culture, or religion but negotiated by the couple based on mutual agreement. As one respondent put it: *“It should be left to the couple because marriage is personal”* (P5), while another wrote: *“People should be free to decide what works for them as a family”* (P12).

Several participants also reasoned that personal choice reflects contemporary understandings of equality and self-determination. P8 commented: *“As long as both agree, it’s their choice, it doesn’t harm anyone.”* Another participant emphasised the value of freedom in an evolving society: *“Times have changed. We cannot judge people for their decisions if they respect each other”* (P10).

This theme reflects an emerging individual-rights discourse, especially among younger and more urban respondents. For these participants, surname choice is part of the broader transformation toward gender equality and personal freedom in post-apartheid South Africa. The argument for choice resonates with the constitutional emphasis on human dignity, equality, and freedom of association, suggesting that moral autonomy in intimate relationships is becoming an accepted, if still contested, social value.

The view that it should be discouraged

Most respondents (55.6%) maintained that men taking their wife’s surname should be discouraged. These participants drew on cultural, religious, and gendered rationales to justify their opposition. Many viewed the practice as incompatible with African traditions, where the husband symbolises lineage and continuity. As one participant stated: *“It must be discouraged because it is not our way as Africans”* (P2), while another added: *“It lowers the man’s respect and pride”* (P7).

Some participants appealed to Christian moral order, asserting that discouragement protects divinely instituted family structures: “*The Bible says the man is the head; he cannot take the woman’s name*” (P9). Others linked surname reversal to social confusion or moral decay, claiming it would “*cause disorder in society and families*” (P13).

This dominant view reflects cultural conservatism and patriarchal continuity, rooted in perceptions that surname reversal threatens established moral hierarchies and ancestral order. The arguments intertwine religious conviction with cultural duty, revealing how traditional morality continues to anchor community identity. For these respondents, discouraging the practice is not seen as limiting freedom but as safeguarding cultural integrity and moral stability.

Discussions

Summary of Principal Findings

This study set out to explore South Africans’ views and opinions on husbands adopting their wife’s surname within the contexts of legal rights, African cultural traditions, and Christian belief systems. Drawing on qualitative data from nineteen respondents in the OR Tambo District, three interrelated findings stand out.

First, legal awareness is high: 17 out of 19 reported awareness of the legal possibility for husbands to adopt their wife’s surname following the Constitutional Court decision in *Jordaan and Others v Minister of Home Affairs* (CCT 296/24) (2025). Second, cultural and religious resistance remains dominant: most respondents framed the practice as “*against tradition,*” citing lineage, lobola and male headship as core reasons for opposition. Third, attitudinal variation exists across generational and spatial lines: younger and urban respondents were more likely to express conditional openness or to prioritise couple autonomy, while older and rural respondents tended to defend patrilineal norms. When asked whether the practice should be encouraged, discouraged or left to personal choice, a majority (55.6 per cent) favoured discouragement; 44.4 per cent advocated leaving the decision to the couple.

These findings produce a clear portrait of a legal disruption that has outpaced cultural assimilation: law promotes formal equality, whereas social norms and religious idioms continue to anchor naming practices in patriarchal kinship ecologies.

Interpreting Findings in Relation to the Literature

Legal consciousness and the law-culture gap

The high level of awareness of the *Jordaan* judgment indicates effective dissemination of judicial developments into public consciousness in the OR Tambo District. Yet, as the results demonstrate, legal knowledge does not automatically translate into normative change. This aligns with broader socio-legal work showing that legal reform often precedes, and sometimes struggles against, ingrained cultural norms (e.g. on gender equality and customary practices) (see Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006 on qualitative interpretation). The *Jordaan* decision embodies constitutional commitments to equality and dignity (Sections 9 and 10 of the Constitution), but law’s symbolic force is mediated by local cultural ecologies that confer meaning to names, lineage and gender roles. The persistence of the law-culture gap in this study echoes prior onomastic and anthropological research showing the depth of cultural investment in names as carriers of ancestry and identity (De Klerk & Bosch, 1996; Suzman, 1994).

Naming, Lineage and Ancestral Continuity

Participants repeatedly articulated the idea that surnames are not merely labels but vehicles of ancestral continuity. Thematic responses foregrounding lineage and ancestor-related concerns recall classic ethnographic accounts of Southern African onomastics: names index clan belonging and connect the living to forebears (Suzman, 1994; De Klerk & Bosch, 1996). Changing a surname, particularly by a man, is

therefore widely perceived not as an individual private decision but as an act with communal and spiritual resonance. In communities where ancestor veneration and the patrilineal transmission of identity remain salient, surname reversal may be read as jeopardising collective memory and ritual obligations. This reading helps explain why even respondents who are legally informed may nonetheless resist the practice on cultural and spiritual grounds.

Religion and Patriarchy: Christianity's Role

Christian discourse emerged as a potent legitimating idiom for current naming norms. Many respondents appealed to Christian notions of male headship and biblical order to justify discouraging husband-to-wife surname adoption. This corresponds with scholarship that documents how Christian missions and colonial legal orders historically reinforced patriarchal family structures and Eurocentric naming practices in the region (De Klerk & Bosch, 1996). At the same time, the data reveal theological ambiguity: some respondents noted that scripture does not speak directly to surnames and that denominational practices vary. This internal plurality within Christianity presents potential space for reinterpretation and pastoral flexibility; it is an important insight for those seeking to foster social change without stoking cultural antagonism.

Generational and Spatial Heterogeneity

Data show that younger and urban respondents display more openness, often invoking constitutional rights, digital-media exposure and egalitarian ideals as reasons for tolerance. This finding corresponds with research on naming and modernity which demonstrates that urbanisation, higher education and global cultural flows foster experimentation in identity practices (Kanyane & Rakgogo, 2022; Makgopa & Rugwiji, 2022). Conversely, rural respondents and older cohorts evince stronger adherence to customary norms. Importantly, this is not a simple binary: several participants across cohorts expressed ambivalence recognising legal rights yet worrying about communal repercussions. Such ambivalence reflects a transitional cultural ecology in which individuals negotiate competing registers of belonging (tradition, religion, law, and personal autonomy).

- *Theoretical Contribution: An Ecohumanist Reading*

Framed as an ecohumanist inquiry, the study's findings underscore how names sit at the intersection of human subjectivity and cultural ecology. Ecohumanism attends to how human identities are embedded within relational ecologies, social, spiritual and environmental rather than being atomised. From this perspective, the resistance to husband-to-wife surname adoption is intelligible: it threatens relational networks (ancestors, clan, ritual obligations) that sustain communal personhood. Conversely, the emergence of an autonomy discourse among younger urban participants points to shifts in the interpretive ecology: modern rights-based subjectivities reconfigure identity practices, emphasising individual dignity and equality. The interplay between these poles continuity and transformation is precisely the site where ecohumanist analysis is most instructive.

Conclusion

This study examined South Africans' perspectives on husbands adopting their wife's surname within a cultural, religious and legal framework, using the OR Tambo District Municipality as a case context. Guided by qualitative inquiry, the study explored how participants negotiate the emerging legal right recognised in *Jordaan and Others v Minister of Home Affairs* (2025) alongside deeply rooted African traditions and Christian beliefs. The findings reveal a persistent tension between legal reform and cultural continuity, illustrating how identity practices remain embedded within broader moral and relational ecologies.

Although most participants were aware that the law now permits a husband to adopt his wife's surname, this awareness did not translate into cultural or religious acceptance. Surname practices continue to be understood not simply as administrative identifiers but as carriers of lineage, ancestral memory and gendered social order. Patrilineal descent, lobola traditions and Christian interpretations of male headship

shaped the predominant view that male surname adoption should be discouraged. Even among unmarried and younger respondents, who expressed comparatively greater openness, cultural expectations and concerns about masculinity and family identity maintained a significant influence.

Nonetheless, the study also identified emerging shifts. A substantial minority supported personal choice, reflecting growing receptivity towards equality, autonomy and modern partnership values. Urban respondents and younger participants were more likely to adopt these positions, suggesting that exposure to diverse cultural influences, education and digital media is reshaping naming attitudes. These findings illustrate that cultural norms, while resilient, are neither static nor impermeable; they evolve through generational negotiation, spatial mobility and changing socio-legal landscapes.

From an ecohumanist perspective, the study underscores that naming practices reside at the intersection of individual subjectivity and collective belonging. Surnames are ecological markers that bind persons to family, land, ancestors and community. Any alteration to these practices therefore provokes questions about continuity, moral order and relational identity. The resistance to husbands adopting wives' surnames reflects a perceived threat to these ecological ties, whereas calls for personal choice represent evolving understandings of dignity, equality and human flourishing within contemporary South Africa.

In conclusion, while the law has opened new possibilities for marital identity formation, cultural transformation remains gradual and contested. Efforts to foster acceptance should engage both traditional and religious leaders, promote respectful dialogue, and recognise the ecological significance of names in African contexts. Sustainable change will depend not on legal force alone but on bridging the moral distance between constitutional rights and lived cultural worlds, allowing individuals and communities to reinterpret tradition in ways that uphold both ancestry and equality.

Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to guide policymakers, traditional institutions, scholars and communities in navigating the evolving debate on husbands adopting their wife's surname within South Africa's pluralistic socio-cultural landscape.

Strengthen Community Consultation Before Implementing or Publicising Policy Changes

The results indicate that resistance to surname changes is rooted in ancestral beliefs, patrilineal kinship systems and Christian teachings. Government should therefore prioritise inclusive, localised consultation processes before implementing policy-related public messaging on culturally sensitive issues. Traditional councils, church structures, family elders and community forums must be actively engaged to ensure that reforms are not perceived as externally imposed or culturally detached. Such an approach affirms the principle that South Africa's democracy is participatory and acknowledges that identity practices are shaped within communal, not purely individual, contexts.

Involve Traditional Leaders as Cultural Mediators and Interpreters

Traditional leaders hold authority over customary matters, including lineage, ancestral identity and family rituals. This study shows that many participants expressed concern that modern legal provisions may disrupt these cultural ecologies. It is therefore essential that the National and Provincial Houses of Traditional Leaders be integrated into policy dialogues concerning marital naming practices. Their involvement could promote culturally grounded interpretations of the law, clarify misconceptions, and facilitate community-driven solutions that balance constitutional rights with customary values.

Engage Religious Leaders to Address Theological Concerns

Christianity significantly shaped participants' views, particularly regarding headship, marital roles and moral order. Given this influence, churches should be engaged as critical stakeholders in providing informed, balanced theological perspectives. Workshops and dialogues with clergy could foster more nuanced

understanding, reduce misinterpretations, and support congregations in navigating changes without undermining faith identity or pastoral cohesion.

Promote Respectful Public Education That Acknowledges Cultural Diversity

While legal awareness was high, acceptance was low, indicating the need for culturally sensitive educational initiatives. Public messaging by the Department of Home Affairs should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, messaging should:

- recognise the importance of ancestry and clan identity in African communities,
- explain the legal options without prescribing them, and
- emphasise that surname choice remains voluntary rather than mandatory.

Such an approach respects cultural plurality and avoids framing Western naming norms as default or superior.

Develop Optional Identity Mechanisms That Protect Lineage Continuity

Respondents expressed anxiety about losing family lineage, identity and ancestral connection. Policymakers could consider introducing flexible naming options, such as:

- dual surnames,
- hyphenated surnames,
- lineage preservation notes on Home Affairs records, or
- inclusion of clan names alongside legal surnames.

These options allow couples to exercise personal choice without severing ties to ancestral lines or cultural heritage.

Facilitate Ongoing Dialogue Between Constitutional Values and African Cultural Systems

The findings demonstrate that law alone does not change cultural practices; rather, change occurs through negotiation within cultural, religious and social ecologies. Continued dialogue between constitutional institutions, customary authorities, civil society and ordinary citizens is needed to bridge misunderstandings and foster shared understanding. This dialogue must explicitly acknowledge that South Africa is an African country whose cultural practices cannot simply be overwritten by Western norms, even while the nation adopts Western technologies, governance frameworks and global human rights principles.

Directions for Future Research

Building on the present study, the study recommends:

Expanded qualitative work with a larger, stratified sample across multiple districts to examine regional variation and to include a greater proportion of married respondents.

Ethnographic studies that observe naming practices in ritual contexts (e.g. family introductions to ancestors) to understand how surname choices are reconciled with ceremonial obligations.

Comparative studies across southern African countries to map similarities and divergences in how law and tradition interact over naming.

Intervention research to evaluate the impact of dialogue programmes with religious and traditional leaders on community acceptance of legal rights.

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