

# Car fronts at face value

September 22 2008

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Do people attribute certain personality traits or emotions to car fronts? If so, could this have implications for driving and pedestrian behavior? Truls Thorstensen (EFS Consulting Vienna), Karl Grammer (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Urban Ethology) and other researchers at the University of Vienna joined economic interest with evolutionary psychology to answer these questions. The research project will be published this week in the Springer journal *Human Nature*. The study investigates our perception of automotive designs, and whether and how these findings correspond to the perception of human faces.

Throughout evolution, humans have developed an ability to collect information on people's sex, age, emotions, and intentions by looking at their faces. The authors suggest that this ability is probably widely used on other living beings and maybe even on inanimate objects, such as cars. Although this theory has been proposed by other authors, it has not yet been investigated systematically. The researchers therefore asked people to report the characteristics, emotions, personality traits, and attitudes that they ascribed to car fronts and then used geometric morphometrics to calculate the corresponding shape information.

One-third of the subjects associated a human or animal face with at least 90 percent of the cars. All subjects marked eyes (headlights), a mouth (air intake/grille), and a nose in more than 50 percent of the cars. Overall, people agreed which type of car possesses certain traits. The authors found that people liked cars most which had a wide stance, a narrow windshield, and/or widely spaced, narrow headlights. The better the subjects liked a car, the more it bore shape characteristics

corresponding to high values of what the authors termed "power", indicating that both men and women like mature, dominant, masculine, arrogant, angry-looking cars.

If these are the traits that people like, does that necessarily mean that this is the type of car they would buy? The authors surmise that this might not always be the case. Do we judge a car by our (perhaps stereotyped) impression of its owner, or do we choose a car based on its communication of desired characteristics? Do we feel that driving a car that looks arrogant and dominant might be of benefit in the daily "battles" on the road? These are interesting questions for car manufacturers and researchers alike, and will be pursued further in the collaboration between EFS Consulting and Karl Grammer's group.

The collaborators conclude, "we show that distinct features in the car fronts correspond to different trait attributions. Thus, humans possibly interpret even inanimate structures in biological terms, which could have implications for driving and pedestrian behavior. With respect to practical applications, a tool for automobile designers to style cars according to a desired image could be derived."

Article: Windhager S, Slice DE, Schaefer K, Oberzaucher E, Thorstensen T, Grammer K (2008). Face to face: The Perception of Automotive Designs. Human Nature. DOI 10.1007/s12110-008-9047-z

Source: Springer

Citation: Car fronts at face value (2008, September 22) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-09-car-fronts.html>

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