

Owners of high-status cars are on a collision course with traffic

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Why do BMW and Audi owners often seem to drive like idiots? Is it the car that makes them behave aggressively behind the wheel, or are specific types of people drawn to such cars as well being more likely to

break traffic regulations? New research at the University of Helsinki provides some answers.

Jan-Erik Lönnqvist, professor of social psychology, had made the same observation in traffic as many others: Audi and BMW drivers seemed much more likely to ignore traffic regulations and drive recklessly.

"I had noticed that the ones most likely to run a red light, not give way to pedestrians and generally drive recklessly and too fast were often the ones driving fast German cars," says Lönnqvist of the University of Helsinki's Swedish School of Social Science.

Previous research has also confirmed that the drivers of expensive cars are more likely to break traffic regulations. This phenomenon has been explained with the common assumption that wealth has a corrupting effect on people, resulting, for example, in high-status consumption and unethical behaviour in various situations.

Lönnqvist approached the question from a different angle by asking whether specific types of people are drawn to high-status cars regardless of their financial assets and also have a tendency to break traffic laws.

To gain answers, researchers carried out a study of Finnish consumers. A total of 1,892 car owners answered not only questions about their car, consumption habits and wealth, but also questions exploring personality traits. The answers were analysed using the Five-Factor Model, the most widely used framework for assessing personality traits in five key domains (openness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness).

The answers were unambiguous: self-centred men who are argumentative, stubborn, disagreeable and unempathetic are much more likely to own a high-status car such as an Audi, BMW or Mercedes.

"These personality traits explain the desire to own high-status products, and the same traits also explain why such people break traffic regulations more frequently than others," says Lönnqvist.

He points out that money is, of course, necessary to buy high-status products, which is why rich people are more likely to drive high-status cars.

"But we also found that those whose personality was deemed more disagreeable were more drawn to high-status cars. These are people who often see themselves as superior and are keen to display this to others."

Conscientious people also drawn to high-status cars

One of the more unexpected results was that another personality type is also drawn to high-status cars: the conscientious. People with this type of personality are, as a rule, respectable, ambitious, reliable and well-organised. They take care of themselves and their health and often perform well at work.

"The link is presumably explained by the importance they attach to high quality. All makes of car have a specific image, and by driving a reliable car they are sending out the message that they themselves are reliable," Lönnqvist explains.

The link between conscientious [personality](#) traits and interest in high-status cars was found among both men and women. In contrast, the connection between self-centred [personality traits](#) and high-status cars was only found among men, not women. Lönnqvist has no clear answer as to why this is the case. One possibility is that cars simply do not have the same significance as status symbols for women.

Few researchers have explored the consumption of luxury products using

the Five-Factor Model, but Lönnqvist believes that more research could lead to an increased understanding of the reasons behind this kind of consumption.

"It would be great if consumers had other, sustainable ways of showing their status rather than the superficial consumption of luxury goods that often has negative consequences. We are already seeing that driving an electric car is becoming something of a status symbol, whereas SUVs with their high emissions are no longer considered as cool."

More information: Jan Erik Lönnqvist et al, Not only assholes drive Mercedes. Besides disagreeable men, also conscientious people drive high-status cars, *International Journal of Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/ijop.12642](https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12642)

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