

What the 'Faces' of Cars Reveal

Is a vehicle 'friendly' or is it 'powerful'? What is it about a car that produces either impression? Test subjects had a close look at car fronts to find an answer.

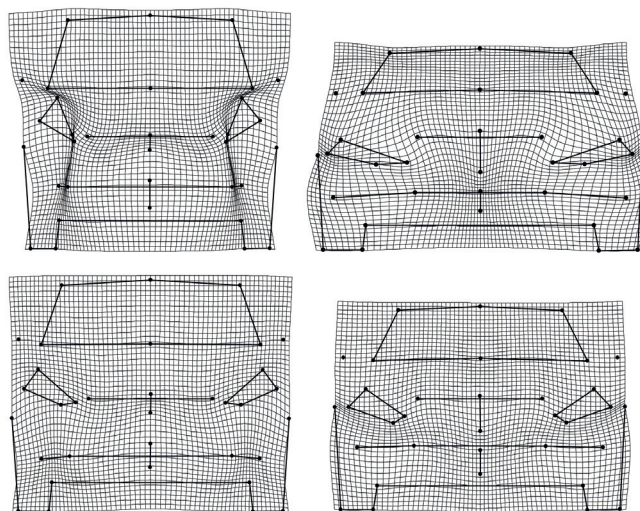
Human beings have a fixation about faces. We are highly social beings and, as such, evolution has equipped us with the ability to infer with a glance the age, sex, predominant emotions as well as the personality of another human being in a matter of seconds.

In fact we seem to be so attuned to faces that we see them in clouds, in stones, in plants. Now anthropologists from the University of Vienna are scientifically exploring whether this face-fixation also extends to man-made objects—to cars.

Twenty men and women, each between 19 and 33 years, were asked to look at the front view of 38 different car models on monitors. A clear majority associated faces with at least 70 per cent of the cars. One third of the test subjects saw faces in 90 per cent or more of the vehicles. The models shown had to be appraised according

to characteristics associated with people: were they more masculine or feminine, adult or childish, hostile or friendly?

The scale values found for each car were averaged per characteristic, and these averages were ranged in two categories, namely 'power' and 'sociability' (see diagram below). A research team led by Sonja Windhager and Karl Grammer used methods of geometric morphometry to correlate the rating for each car model with the anatomy of the car front. Pictures of the car fronts were provided with landmarks and these were digitalised as two-dimensional coordinates according to the same formula. Then individual landmark sets were superimposed on each other according to a certain statistical method. A medium car was created, correlating the values for power and sociability. A specific shape, represented



'Powerful' (top) and 'sociable' (bottom) car faces. Represented as gridlines, the features can be changed from weak (left) to strong (right).

with grid lines (see diagram), emerged according to how the landmark sets were positioned. All in all, a precise numerical value and the gridline model were used to derive the most desirable structural details for 'powerful' and 'sociable' cars.

According to Truls Thorstensen of project partner EFS Management Consultancy, such information can benefit car designers as well as explain success stories. "If the Toyota Prius is perceived as the most agreeable model among the

'friendly' cars, the designers have obviously done a good job. The eco-friendly image of the low-emission hybrid technology is also perfectly conveyed by the design."

The study is being repeated in Ethiopia to find out whether the findings are universally and cross-culturally applicable, or whether a pre-existing brand image might have influenced results. The regions around Addis Ababa have hardly been exposed to any VW or Mercedes advertising so far. ■



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|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| 1 Alfa 147 | 11 Fiat Stilo | 20 Merc. E Class | 29 Renault Modus |
| 2 Audi A6 | 12 Ford Focus | 21 Merc. SLK | 30 Saab 9-5 |
| 3 BMW 3 | 13 Honda Civic | 22 Mini Cooper | 31 Seat Toledo |
| 4 BMW 5 | 14 Kia Picanto | 23 Mitsubishi Colt | 32 Smart Passion |
| 5 BMW 645ci | 15 Lexus GS | 24 Nissan New Micra | 33 Suzuki Swift |
| 6 Chrysler 300c | 16 Maybach | 25 Opel Astra | 34 Toyota Prius |
| 7 Chrys. Crossfire | 17 Mazda 6 | 26 Opel Signum | 35 Toyota Yaris |
| 8 Citroen C2 | 18 Mercedes A Class | 27 Peugeot 307 | 36 VW Golf |
| 9 Citroen C4 | 19 Merc. C Class | 28 Peug. 1007 Rc | 37 VW New Beetle |
| 10 Daihatsu Cuore | | | 38 VW Passat |