

Is your car a happy car?

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To most of us, the features of a car are no more than a sum of utilitarian parts: Headlights, grilles and air intake slots all serve a function. It's a required bonus, of course, when those parts are assembled in a manner that evokes style and speed, even elegance, grace, power.

Many of us anthropomorphize our vehicles, giving them names and imbuing them with human quirks to excuse all manner of mechanical hiccups. But some people take it a step further and perceive actual facial characteristics in their vehicles. Have you ever looked at your car and thought it was happy, sad or angry?



CREDIT: Joel Saget/Getty Images

The Mazda Kiyora fits into the "happy car" category

In a 2008 study, *Face to Face: The Perception of Automotive Designs* (Windhager S, Slice DE, Schaefer K, Oberzaucher E, Thorstensen T, Grammer K.) published in *Human Nature*, participants were asked to name the characteristics, emotions, personality traits, and attitudes they attribute to car fronts. 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, the subjects agreed which type of car possessed certain traits.

The feedback gathered from this study could potentially provide valuable insight for car-designers. 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.

Our ability and propensity to project biological characteristics on cars may not be a surprise. But, do we think that the facial characteristics of our vehicles reflect back on us, as drivers? Perhaps our presence on the road will be more dominant in an angry looking car, like the 2010 Chevrolet Camaro. But in today's gloomy world, who would fail to be endeared by the sight of the toothy grin of 2010 Mazda3 the caught in their rearview mirror?

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