

Publication: Channel News Asia Online

Date: 27 December 2022

Headline: Commentary: Why do people love to hate BMW and Mercedes drivers?

Commentary: Why do people love to hate BMW and Mercedes drivers?

Yes, some drivers of fancy cars can be selfish and entitled, but our stereotypes and behaviour towards them don't help the issue, says SMU's Assoc Prof Ivy Lau.



Ivy Lau

From time to time, we hear about outrageous driver behaviours. Some have caught our attention more than others.

Early this year, there was the driver of a Bentley who inched his car forward against a school security guard for more than 20 seconds. The driver was sentenced to eight weeks' jail in October.

Then there was the case of the Mercedes-Benz driver who hurled insults at a bus driver from his car, then got out of his car to go onto the bus, grabbed the driver's phone and threw it onto the road.

And then there are dangerous behaviours, like a BMW caught driving in the opposite direction of traffic. In all three of these incidents, expensive, high-status cars were involved.

These incidents have prompted some to ask: Why are drivers of high-status cars so selfish? Why do they feel they are entitled to driving in whatever ways they please even if it means disregarding regulations and other road users?

From time to time, we hear about outrageous driver behaviours. Some have caught our attention more than others.

Early this year, there was the driver of a Bentley who inched his car forward against a school security guard for more than 20 seconds. The driver was sentenced to eight weeks' jail in October.

Publication: Channel News Asia Online

Date: 27 December 2022

Headline: Commentary: Why do people love to hate BMW and Mercedes drivers?

Then there was the case of the Mercedes-Benz driver who hurled insults at a bus driver from his car, then got out of his car to go onto the bus, grabbed the driver's phone and threw it onto the road.

And then there are dangerous behaviours, like a BMW caught driving in the opposite direction of traffic. In all three of these incidents, expensive, high-status cars were involved.

These incidents have prompted some to ask: Why are drivers of high-status cars so selfish? Why do they feel they are entitled to driving in whatever ways they please even if it means disregarding regulations and other road users?



ARE ALL OF THEM REALLY BAD DRIVERS?

To address these two questions objectively, we will have to look up some numbers. For example, what is the rate of high-status car drivers being sanctioned for bad driver behaviours relative to the rate of non-high-status car drivers being sanctioned for the same reasons? How many of the road accidents are caused by unsafe behaviours of fancy car drivers?

A Finnish study in 2020 found that people with more disagreeable character traits are drawn to driving high-status cars. But before we exclaim "Aha!", the same study also found that people who have conscientiousness personality traits are also drawn to driving fancy cars.

Maybe there is some objective basis for our negative perception of drivers of high-status cars. However, even if this is the case, I am willing to venture a speculation that not all drivers of luxury cars behave in selfish, irresponsible way.

Our negative perception of people driving high-status cars may have been partly the result of distinctive events happening together. On the road, there are fewer fancy than normal cars. Therefore, the Maserati or Bentley stands out when we see one.

Publication: Channel News Asia Online

Date: 27 December 2022

Headline: Commentary: Why do people love to hate BMW and Mercedes drivers?

There are (luckily) fewer outrageous than safe drivers on the road. Therefore, they too stand out when we come across one.

MENTAL SHORTCUT

Our memory works in such a way that we remember distinctive events better than mundane ones.

When we see or hear of outrageous drivers of luxury cars, we have two distinctive occurrences happening together. We are going to remember such events better and for longer.

When we try to recall negative road events, those that involve outrageous drivers of high-status cars will come to us faster because they are better remembered. This ease of recall could affect our judgment.

When judging how often something happens, we often use a mental shortcut to help us to make a judgment quickly - if I can come up with examples of something easily, then that something must happen all the time. This mental shortcut is termed as "availability heuristic" and researchers found that people use it almost automatically.

The use of this heuristic is usually helpful in making frequency judgment, but it leads us astray when we try to guess the frequency of relatively unlikely events.

Driving a high-status car is relatively uncommon. An outrageous driver is another uncommon event. An outrageous driver driving a luxury car has a joint probability that is lower than each of the two events by itself.

However, because outrageous drivers of high-status cars are distinctive, we remember the occurrences better. As a result, examples come to our mind easily and so we judge it to be a frequent occurrence when we use availability heuristic.

Yes, so we may misjudge the frequency of outrageous drivers of high-status cars, but what is the problem if I overestimate the likelihood that the driver of the BMW behind me is going to do something crazy?

ANTICIPATION CAN BE A BAD THING

We behave with reference to our expectations. In anticipation of the crazy driving of the fancy car behind, I may drive differently and send a wrong message to the driver, who in response may start to drive more offensively, and events may develop into an unpleasant direction.

By expecting someone to behave in a particular way, we may inadvertently help to materialise our expectations – a case of the self-fulfilling prophecy. The possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy can also apply to interpersonal interaction.

If I expect the driver who just got off the Mercedes-Benz in front of me to be arrogant and entitled, I may avoid eye contact, and when the person eventually walks past me coldly, this affirms my expectation. Not that I will miss the chance of making a new best friend had I been more friendly, but my day may have been a bit more pleasant.

Publication: Channel News Asia Online

Date: 27 December 2022

Headline: Commentary: Why do people love to hate BMW and Mercedes drivers?

The above scenarios are a little dramatic, but they serve to illustrate the problem with stereotypes.

Stereotypes are simplified beliefs or expectations that we apply to a group. Not that all content in stereotypes is always false. But the content of a stereotype does not apply to everyone in a group.

There are outrageous drivers of high-status cars, but there are also decent drivers of fancy cars. The point is, no driver should drive in an outrageous manner, regardless of the kind of car being driven.

Ivy Lau is an Associate Professor of Psychology (Education) and Associate Dean (Student Matters & Alumni Affairs) at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University.

Source: CNA/aj