

Does a vicious cat make you a stud?

- July 12th, 2009
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Commentary

Do you drive a large, intimidating, manly-man car because you are a tough macho dude or because you want to make people think you are?

Do you drive a tiny little car with a sleek, artistic design because you are a gentle, stylish and sophisticated individual or because you want us to believe you are that sort of person?

Do you drive a pickup truck because you have a lot of heavy goods to transport or because that truck runs on testosterone and matches your boots, your gun rack, your drugstore cowboy hat and the way you like to strut and pose for all the ladies you are dying to attract?

In other words, is your vehicle transportation or is it a costume with wheels?

Do we choose our cars and trucks to match what we already are or as an indication of what we hope to become in the eyes of others?

Some researchers seem to be leaning toward car selection as a marker for what we actually are as opposed to what we would like to pretend we are. For instance, Dennis Slice, an associate professor of scientific computing at Florida State University, seems to tilt toward the belief that we are what we drive. He points to the Volkswagen Beetle, which he calls "the classic cute car - not dominant, not aggressive. I don't think anyone could be mean to someone else in a Volkswagen Beetle," he said.

That last comment is ambiguous of course. I presume he means a person in a Beetle is too nice to be mean to others. But he could be saying that a person in a Beetle is so nice and cute that nobody could be mean to that person.

He's probably suggesting the first part, that cute people aren't mean. (Apparently he has never encountered Madonna or a couple of governors I could mention.)

Actually, as the former owner of a VW Bug (my cuteness expired with my hair), I can tell you that Bug ownership is more an indication of being downright cheap than it is a marker for niceness. What I liked best about that tiny little car was the tiny little gas bills.

At the other end of the scale are macho cars like the Ford Redneck, the Toyota Sumo and the Mercedes Banker, known for the self-important and manly men who drive them. But I'm not so sure they signal aggressiveness as much as they signal a sad wish to appear strong and dominant. After all, it is often people who are most worried about their defenses who flaunt their armor.

Choosing cars that fit our personalities is similar to the common belief that we choose our pets because they resemble us in appearance and/or in temperament. Are people who buy large, slobbering and occasionally mean dogs choosing a companion they believe is just like them? Or are they secretly twitchy people so worried about living in a crime-ridden world that they are frantic to scare off the bad guys?

For that matter, do I keep a couple of large, snarling cats on the premises because I like the company of insane animals or because I see them as what they are - pit cats, vicious jungle creatures who don't take kindly to strangers moving around our property?

You can read a lot more into a pet choice than a vehicle choice. A small yippy-yappy dog fools nobody and tends to indicate a simple bond between the person and the pooch. The dog was chosen for fun and not for protection.

The same is true of small cats. But huge, slaving cats like ours can really hurt you if you try to do us harm.

Oh, what's the point? That's a bluff, of course - much like what's going on when a drug store cowboy rides around in his large, empty pickup with a large empty dog.

In truth, hardly anyone chooses a cat for protection or least of all as a signal to the world of what a rough and tough hombre he is. A cat is just a cat, more likely to make a person laugh than run for his life.

In most cases, you don't choose a cat for its personality because that isn't always apparent when they're kittens. In fact, you don't even know the true personality of the cat until you have already taken it into your home where its pleasant or psychopathic tendencies eventually emerge.

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