



# The theory of planned behavior, materialism, and aggressive driving



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Aggressive driving is a growing problem worldwide. Previous research has provided us with some insights into the characteristics of drivers prone to aggressiveness on the road and into the external conditions triggering such behavior. Little is known, however, about the personality traits of aggressive drivers. The present study proposes planned behavior and materialism as predictors of aggressive driving behavior.

**Design/methodology:** Data was gathered using a questionnaire-based survey of 220 individuals from twelve large industrial organizations in Israel. Our hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling.

**Findings:** Our results indicate that while planned behavior is a good predictor of the intention to behave aggressively, it has no impact on the tendency to behave aggressively. Materialism, however, was found to be a significant indicator of aggressive driving behavior.

**Research limitations:** Our study is based on a self-reported survey, therefore might suffer from several issues concerning the willingness to answer truthfully. Furthermore, the sampling group might be seen as somewhat biased due to the relatively high income/education levels of the respondents.

**Originality/value:** While both issues, aggressive driving and the theory of planned behavior, have been studied previously, the linkage between the two as well as the ability of materialism to predict aggressive behavior received little attention previously. The present study encompasses these constructs providing new insights into the linkage between them.

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## 1. Introduction

Aggressive behavior has long attracted research attention, part of which has focused on the antecedents and consequences of aggressive behavior in the marketplace (Richins, 1983; Rose and Neidermeyer, 1999; Slama and Celuch, 1995; Willenborg, 1999). Findings suggest that aggressive individuals tend to behave aggressively regardless of circumstances (Lajunen and Parker, 2001).

One kind of aggressive behavior which takes place on the road is often referred to as aggressive driving (Hauber, 1980). According to Mahlum (2010), “as many as 56 percent of deadly vehicle crashes [in the United States] involve one or more unsafe driving behaviors typically associated with aggressive driving” (2010, p. 1). This establishes aggressive driving as a growing problem in the United States as well as worldwide (Tasca, 2000).

Aggressive behavior in general is defined as “any form of behavior directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment” (Baron and Richardson, 2004, p. 7). Certain definitions of aggressive driving tend to conflate it, however, with a distinct form of aggressive on-the-road behavior, namely road rage (Dukes et al., 2001), creating a distorted image of the behavior in question. Whereas road rage is considered a distinct criminal behavior aimed at harming others through the use of a motor vehicle, the term aggressive driving is mostly used to refer to unsafe driving in violation of traffic regulations. Aggressive driving includes two categories of behavior. The first consists of forms of behavior that show disregard for the safety and well-being of other road users. It includes behaviors such as tailgating, weaving in and out of traffic, passing on the road shoulder, failure to yield the right of way to other road users, preventing other drivers from passing, running stop signs, and so on. The second category consists of behaviors which display annoyance or hostility and includes flashing headlights, yelling and gesturing, and sustained horn-honking (Tasca, 2000). While the two categories differ in intensity and in goal (the first involving deliberate interference with other drivers, the second expressing frustration with other drivers' behavior), both play an essential part

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in aggressive driving. Thus, for example, the American Automobile Association (AAA) Foundation for Traffic Safety defines aggressive driving as driving without regard for the safety of others (Blanchard et al., 2000).

Aggressive driving has also been defined in part by the environmental conditions facilitating it. Several studies have addressed the impact of traffic congestion on the tendency to behave aggressively on the road, concluding that frustrating situations tend to enhance aggressive driving (Shinar, 1998; Shinar and Compton, 2004). These findings point to the social aspect of aggressive driving, that is, to the interactions between individuals on the road. These interactions are inferred from the various behaviors labeled as aggressive. Aggressive driving behaviors such as tailgating, weaving in and out of traffic, improper lane changes, and preventing other drivers from passing all suggest interaction with other individuals (Tasca, 2000). Acknowledgment of this social dimension of aggressive driving has given rise to the claim that different drivers tend to behave differently under similar conditions (Shinar and Compton, 2004; Ulleberg and Rundmo, 2003; Yagil, 2001). Largely as a result of this understanding, public discourse has shifted in emphasis over the past few years from technical factors and faulty infrastructure to drivers' traits and characteristics as a major cause of motor vehicles accidents (Beck et al., 2006). Drivers' values, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (Parker et al., 1998), demographic characteristics (Krahé and Fenske, 2002; Miles and Johnson, 2003), and personality traits (Dahlen et al., 2005; Deffenbacher et al., 2005; Jonah, 1997) have all been shown to be predictors of aggressive driving.

Of demographic characteristics, age and gender have attracted significant attention (Tasca, 2000). While there seems to be a consensus regarding the impact of age on the tendency to behave aggressively on the road (with older people less likely to engage in such behavior), the results regarding gender are inconclusive. Some studies have found females to be far less likely to engage in aggressive driving (Shinar and Compton, 2004; Yagil, 2001) while others have produced no conclusive results (Tasca, 2000).

Any attempt to explain gender differences with regard to aggressive behavior must query what triggers or motivates such behavior. As noted earlier, aggressive driving is but one aspect of aggressive behavior. Since aggressive driving involves social interaction, as can be inferred from its definition, we suggest that gender differences derive from the core motivation of aggressive driving. Prior research has revealed gender differences with regard to aggression: while males are more likely to engage in direct aggression by attacking others directly, either verbally or physically, females tend to engage in indirect aggression, often by harming others' status among peers (Salmivalli and Kaukiainen, 2004). Since most behaviors included in the aggressive driving category (tailgating, running red lights, improper passing) are instances of direct aggression while only a few (unwillingness to cooperate with other motorists, failure to yield the right-of-way to other road users) are more indirect in nature, the tendency to engage in aggressive driving can be expected to exhibit gender differences.

Furthermore, previous studies have linked the behaviors associated with direct vs. indirect aggression with other types of aggression, namely initiatory vs. retaliatory aggression. Initiatory aggression occurs when an individual initiates action of an aggressive nature. Retaliatory aggression often comes as an aggressive response to what most people would consider as an aggressive act. Burbank (1987) found that females tend to use indirect aggression, usually following a provocation (e.g., a husband's adultery). Such provocations can often be regarded as acts of aggression as well. For this reason, indirect aggression can be viewed as retaliatory aggression (Björkqvist, 1994).

While previous studies have furthered our understanding of aggressive driving, the literature still lacks a broad view of the personality traits motivating such behavior. To expand our

understanding, the current study proposes the theory of planned behavior and materialism, based on its three constructs (envy, possessiveness, and non-generosity), as antecedents of aggressive driving.

### 1.1. The theory of planned behavior and aggressive driving

The origins of research on aggressive driving can be traced back to Tillmann and Hobbs (1949), who found a correlation between specific personality traits and accident liability, followed by Parry (1968), who stressed the driver's psychological characteristics over the mechanical features of the vehicle. This research stream laid the foundations for furthered inquiry into the human aspects of aggressive driving (Dukes et al., 2001; Galovski and Blanchard, 2002; Jonah, 1997; Lajunen et al., 1998; Lajunen and Parker, 2001; Parker et al., 1998; Ulleberg and Rundmo, 2003). Further research has supported the claim that aggressive driving results from a combination of circumstances and the individual driver's characteristics (Shinar and Compton, 2004). This suggests that aggressive driving must be understood as having both personal and interpersonal antecedents (Ellison-Potter et al., 2001; Shinar and Compton, 2004; Yagil, 2001).

Ajzen's (1988) theory of planned behavior (TPB) holds that people's actions are determined by their traits and attitudes, where traits are defined as "a characteristic of an individual that exerts pervasive influence on a broad range of trait-relevant responses" (Ajzen, 1988, p. 2). More specifically, Ajzen (1991) has argued that behavior is motivated by intentions, which in turn are formed by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

Previous studies employing the theory of planned behavior in the context of aggressive driving include Parker et al. (1998), which used the theory to predict aggressive driving behavior.

The present study's aim is twofold. First, following Parker et al.'s (1998) original study, we test the predictive power of TPB as measured against the Larson Driver's Stress Profile (2000), a measure of aggressive driving tendencies. By doing so we intend to reexamine (1) the validity of the TPB constructs as predictors of the intention to behave aggressively and (2) the mediating impact of those intentions on actual behavior. Second, we aim to measure the impact of the social trait of materialism, both as a mediator of the TPB-aggressive driving relationship and as a direct motivator of aggressive driving.

### 1.2. Materialism and aggressive driving

Previous studies have linked the theory of planned behavior with personality traits, showing that the latter have an impact on individuals' attitudes, intentions, and beliefs (Ajzen, 1988; Davies et al., 2008).

The current study aims to further our understanding of those personality traits which might motivate aggressive driving, focusing on materialism. Materialism is a trait based on a consumer orientation that attaches high importance to possessions. We have chosen to focus on materialism as a potential motivator of aggressive driving for two reasons. The first is based on previous work linking materialism with aggression, suggesting that materialism is the cause of many negative emotions produced by the individual's insatiable quest for happiness. Since achieving happiness via material goods is an impossible task, one's horizon recedes ever further with every new possession acquired, materialism causes frustration which ultimately triggers aggression (Kasser, 2003). Our second reason is based on preliminary discussions with drivers, many of whom used possessive language to refer not only to their cars but also to the space around them on the road. We therefore expected materialistic drivers to exhibit aggressive driving behavior to a greater degree.

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