Against the inevitability of cars: power, gender, and authoritarian mobility

Dr. Andrea Amri-Henkel

Head of the Transformative Mobility Research Group
IZES – Saarbrücken, Germany

«saar mila» | Gemeinsam für eine nachhaltige, saarländische Mobilitätskultur.

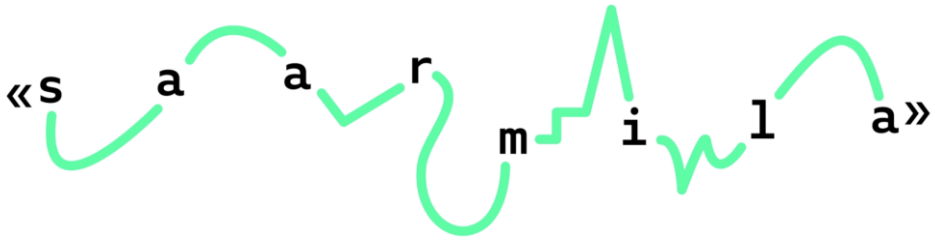
Gefördert durch:

Bundesministerium für Forschung, Technologie und Raumfahrt

Research project Saarmila

In short

- Transformative research on sustainable mobility
- Transdisciplinarity
- Partners: Institute for Future Energy and Material Flow Systems, Saarland Ministry of the Environment and Mobility, Saarbrücken Regional Association, Municipality of Saarlouis, Saar University of Fine Arts
- Duration: October 2024-September 2029



With funding from the:

Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space

FONA
Research for Sustainability

Cars do not simply move through cities. They structure them.

Material
Roads · parking · spatial separation

Institutional
Planning standards · investments · regulation

Cultural
Freedom · autonomy · status · masculinity

Political
Whose mobility counts? Who bears the costs?

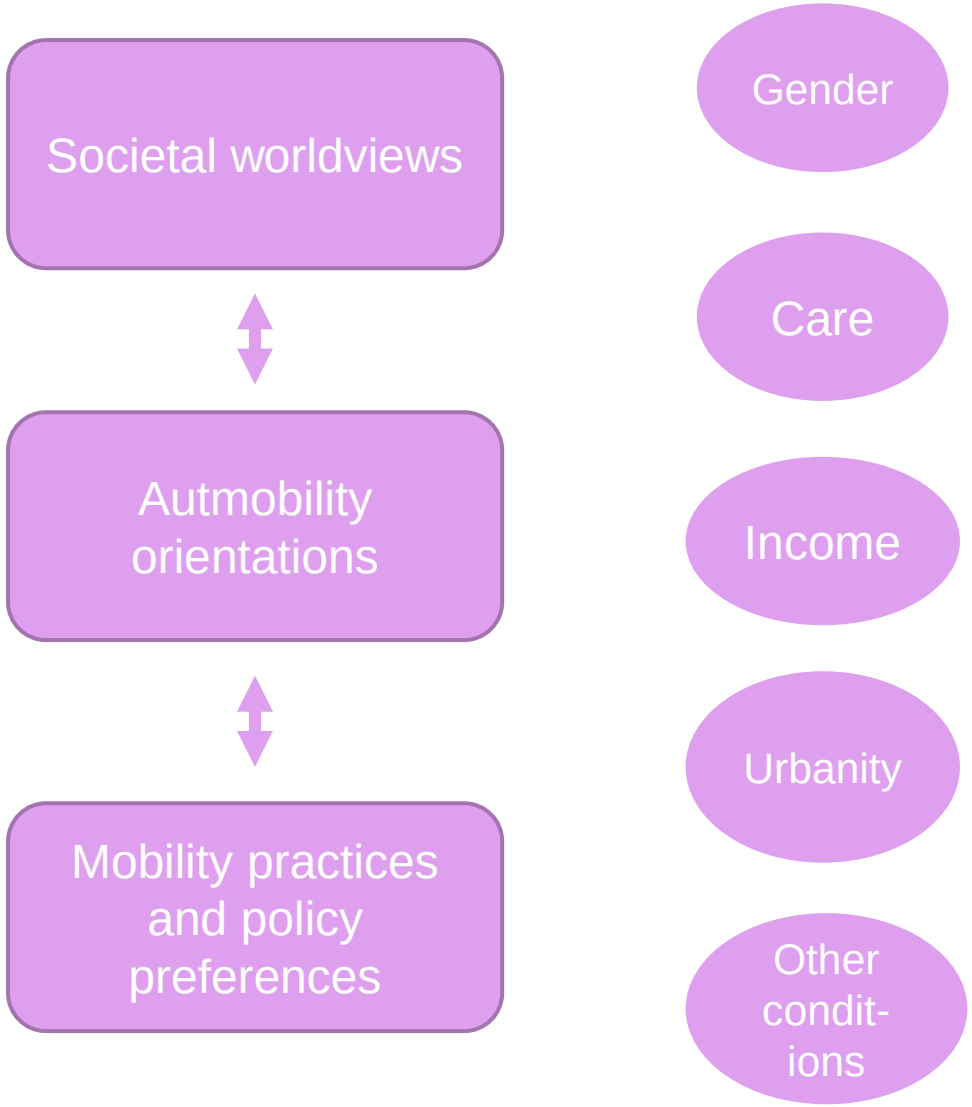
Car-centred mobility appears as “second nature” (Adorno 2003) : socially produced conditions become perceived as inevitable conditions (Urry 2006, 2004).

But mobility systems are not socially neutral

Mobility systems distribute

- time
- space
- accessibility
- care work
- environmental burdens
- autonomy

Automobility is ideological, not merely practical



Hypothesis

Orientations toward automobility are systematically associated with broader societal orientations toward hierarchy, gender and human-nature relations

A survey connecting mobility and societal orientations

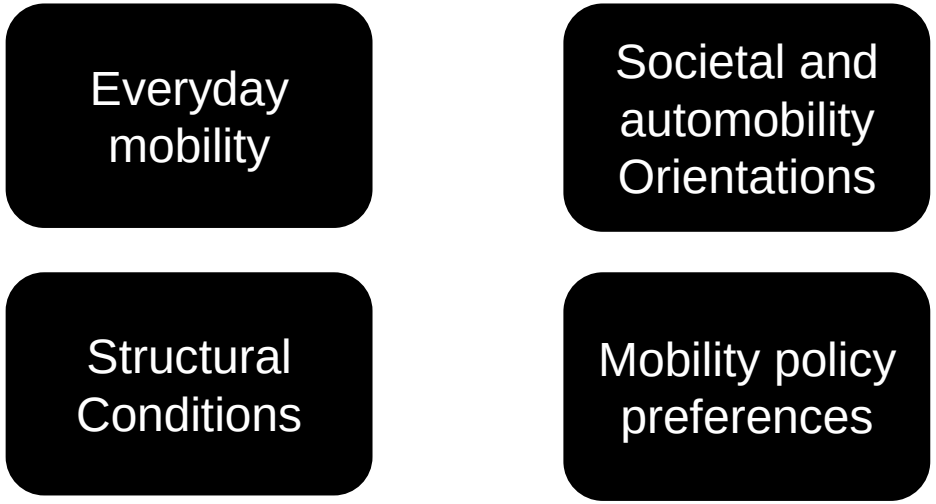
Germany, July 2026
n = 3,219 online respondents

Regional oversample: Saarland

Rest of Germany Online
n = 2,008

Saarland Online
n ≈ 1,211

Survey-weighted analyses



Survey implementation: conducted by UZ Bonn using the Bilendi Germany panel; certified according to ISO 20252:2019

Measuring what lies behind “car preference”

Automobility Engagement Scale
(25 items; Gauer et al. 2022)

Car dependence
Car ownership orientation
Car identity
Driving emotions
Residential preferences
Social norms
Perceived societal impacts

+ Gendered automobility stereotypes
(2 items)

Authoritarianism
(9 items; KSA-3; Beierlein et al. 2015)

Authoritarian aggression
Authoritarian submission
conventionalism

Antifeminism
(3 items; Decker et al. 2024)

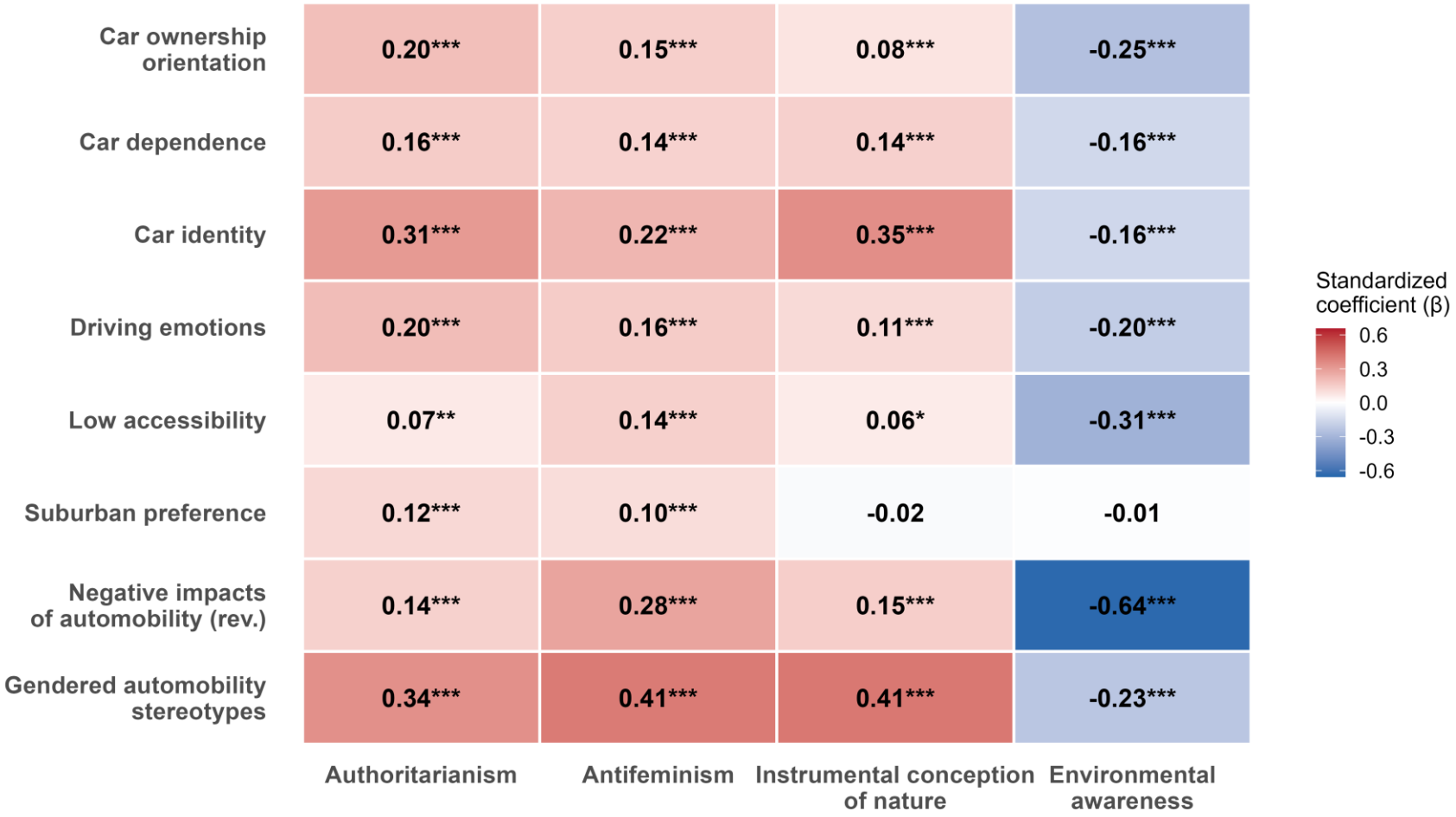
Instrumental conception of nature
(3 items; Decker et al. 2024)

Environmental awareness
(5 items; Grothmann et al. 2023)

Automobility is ideological, not merely practical

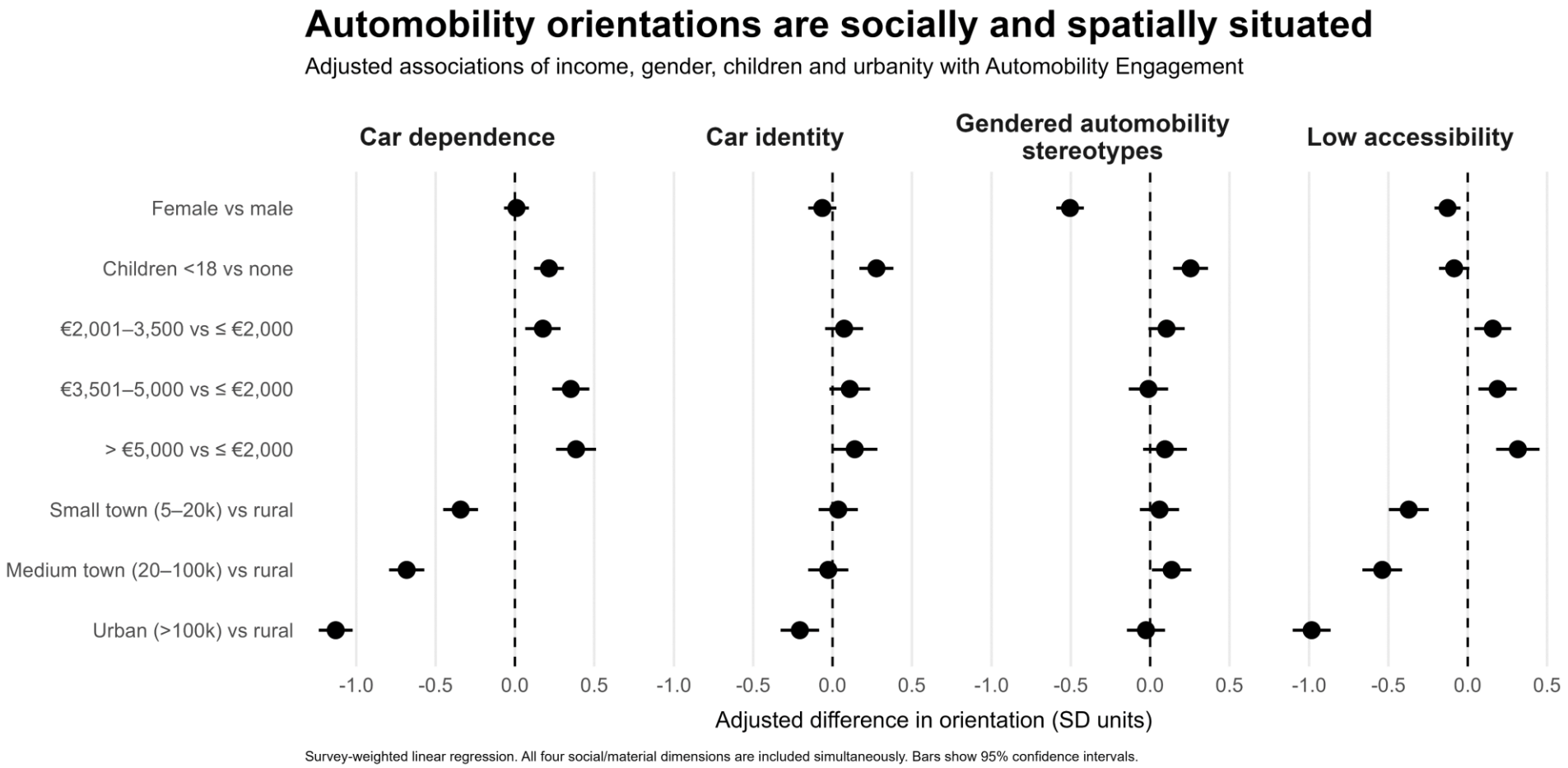
Automobility is embedded in broader societal orientations

Bivariate survey-weighted standardized associations



Each cell represents a separate survey-weighted standardized regression. Significance based on Holm-adjusted p-values within each societal c

But orientations meet material conditions

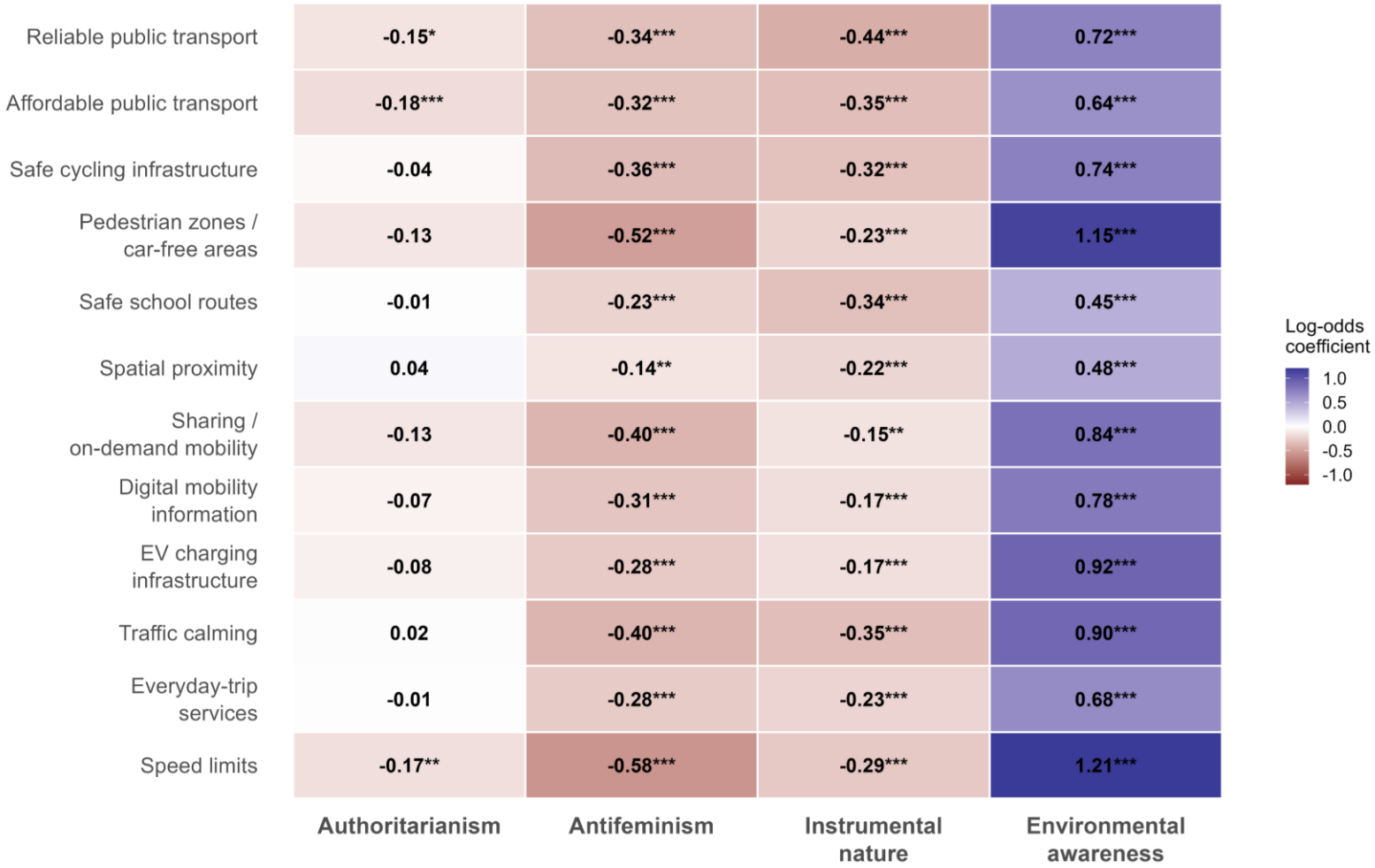


People (also) act within mobility environments they did not individually choose.

Mobility is neither simply chosen nor structurally determined.

The politics of mobility transition

Support for mobility measures is systematically associated with broader societal orientations



Survey-weighted bivariate ordinal regressions. * Holm-adjusted p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Against the inevitability of cars

Automobiliy is socially embedded

Car-related orientations correlate with broader views on hierarchy, gender and nature.

Automobiliy is materially embedded

Preferences translate into practices within unequal spatial and infrastructural conditions.

Mobility transition is poltical

Support for transformation reflects broader societal conflicts over hierarchy, autonomy and social change.

Thank you for your attention!

Amri-Henkel@izes.de

«saar mila» | Gemeinsam für eine nachhaltige, saarländische Mobilitätskultur.

Gefördert durch:

Bundesministerium für Forschung, Technologie und Raumfahrt

References

Adorno, Theodor W. 2003. Soziologische Schriften 1. 1. Aufl. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 1708. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Beierlein, C., F. Asbrock, M. Kauff, and P. Schmidt. 2015. “Kurzskala Autoritarismus (KSA-3).”.

Biesecker, Adelheid, and Sabine Hofmeister. 2010. “Focus: (Re)Productivity.” Ecological Economics 69 (8): 1703–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2010.03.025.

Daggett, Cara. 2018. “Petro-Masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire.” Millennium: Journal of International Studies 47 (1): 25–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818775817.

Decker, Oliver, Johannes Kiess, Ayline Heller, and Elmar Brähler, eds. 2024. Vereint Im Ressentiment Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Rechtsextreme Einstellungen: Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2024. Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag.

Grothmann, T., V. Frick, R. Harnisch, M. Münsch, S. Kettner, and C. Thorun. 2023. “Umweltbewusstsein in Deutschland 2022 – Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Bevölkerungsumfrage [Environmental Awareness in Germany 2022 – Results of a Representative Population Survey].” Dessau-Roßlau: Federal Environment Agency. https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/sites/default/files/medien/3521/publikationen/umweltbewusstsein_2022_bf-2023_09_04.pdf(open in a new window).

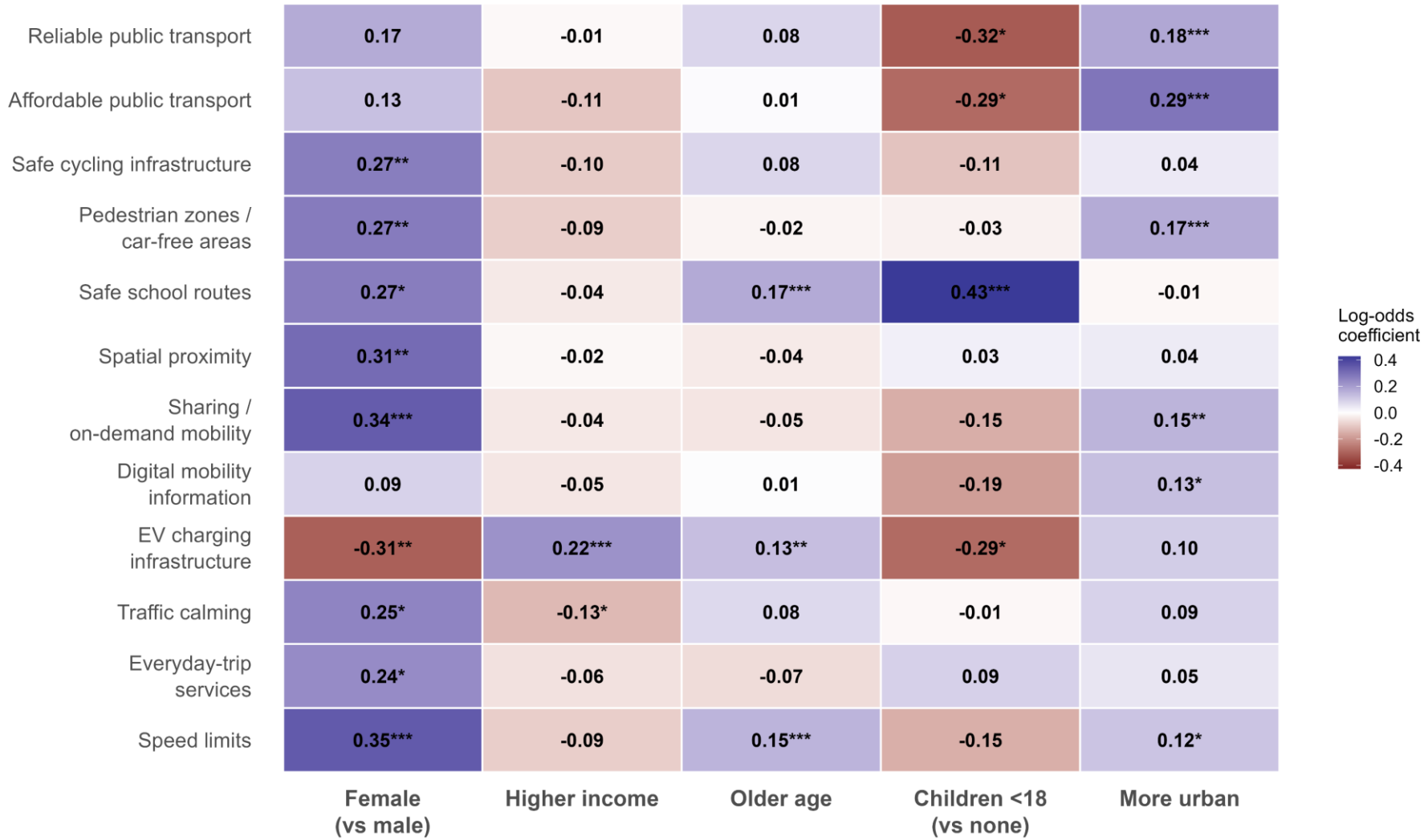
Urry, John. 2004. “The ‘System’ of Automobility.” Theory, Culture & Society 21 (4-5): 25–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276404046059.

Urry, John. 2006. “Inhabiting the Car.” The Sociological Review 54 (1_suppl): 17–31. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00635.x

Viviane H. Gauer, Jonn Axsen, Elisabeth Dütschke, Zoe Long, Exploring “automobility engagement”: A predictor of shared, automated, and electric mobility interest?, Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment, Volume 109, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trd.2022.103353.

Who supports which mobility transition?

Policy support is also socially and spatially patterned



Survey-weighted bivariate ordinal regressions. Age, income and urbanity are standardized ordered trends. * Holm-adjusted p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.