

**To:** Transport & Health Policy Makers, & Practitioners  
**From:** Prof Adrian Davis, TRI, Edinburgh Napier University  
**Date:** 11<sup>th</sup> June 2019  
**Subject:** Essential Evidence 4 Scotland No. 10: Role model advocacy for sustainable transport

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Top line: Celebrity endorsement is a potential gateway for transforming public opinion on carbon intensive transport modes.

Wishing to identify or fit in with desirable individuals or reference groups is a primary motive for many consumption activities, especially those that are consumed publicly and may be considered a luxury. Aspirational reference groups, often consisting of idealized figures such as celebrities, athletes, successful politicians or business people, are particularly important in shaping the attitudes and behaviour of others who desire to associate with them. Individual aspirations of associating with role models are routinely harnessed by marketers, who for instance, use celebrity endorsement in selling brands and products. Researchers have noted that there has been no research to date, however, on the potential for celebrity activism, or role model advocacy beyond celebrities, such as from politicians, to form effective interventions for encouraging sustainable transport behaviour. This is despite studies suggesting that celebrity endorsement is a potential gateway for transforming public opinion on carbon intensive transport modes.

In a review it was shown that substantial effort has been invested in social marketing interventions that use aspirational role models, such as celebrities, to influence public opinion on social issues, but with little extension to the problem of sustainable transport.<sup>1</sup> When extended to the context of environment-associated products, stimulating pro-environmental behaviour has been shown to be more effective when consumers perceive status-enhancement from the conspicuous consumption of eco-friendly goods. Insights from celebrity endorsement and 'ethical' and 'green' consumption were used to assess how celebrities and politicians might exercise referent power to influence social norms surrounding sustainable transport. This was accomplished through the identification of eight key dimensions of role model endorsement in transport, with these applied to a series of examples that illustrate how celebrity and political role models have influenced transport cultures. It emerged that unsolicited associations, rather than solicited advertising will be more powerful, regardless of whether these are perceived as in/ authentic. These must be publicly visible appeals, which can apply to a range of trip purposes (luxury or necessity), suggesting that leisure, commuting, business and domestic travel behaviour may all be susceptible to role model endorsement influence, as long as the role model is aspirational in terms of self-comparison, with celebrities likely to be more influential than politicians in engendering sustainable transport behaviour.

Yet, as the researchers note, efforts aimed at engendering desirable transport futures will face at least two major challenges. The first will be the powerful solicited advertising of commercial marketing activities encouraging undesirable transport futures. Some have warned that social marketing campaigns are likely to be rendered ineffective when pitted against such efforts. The second challenge is that sustainable transport consumption, is still consumption, with celebrities who advocate a desirable transport future through the marketplace doing little more than hiding the contradictions of neo-liberal environmental policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna, P. et al 2018. Role model advocacy for sustainable transport, *Transportation Research Part D*, 61:373-382.