

To: Transport & Health Policy Makers, & Practitioners
From: Prof Adrian Davis, TRI, Edinburgh Napier University
Date: 20th November 2023
Subject: Essential Evidence 4 Scotland No.75: Car brands and risky driving

Top line: Research indicates a car brand-gradient exists for collisions caused by injudicious driving. Messaging that implicitly reinforces, augments and normalises the idea of driving-as-performance may increase collision risk. The link between car branding and aggressive driving has received little attention.

Social marketers concern themselves with behaviours that may damage society or individuals. One domain of concern is that of road safety: the WHO report 1.3 million road deaths worldwide, with no major country escaping the trauma burden. Deaths from road collisions are the number one cause of death among those aged 15–29, with the particular tragedy of unexpected death among young people adding to the misery, with the additional distress and social burden of at least 20 million people seriously injured worldwide.¹ Applying critical marketing to this issue, the impact commercial marketing has upon society, has centred on a simple insight: that while social scientists spent decades trying to ascertain, for example, why people take up smoking, focusing on age, gender, parental behaviour and many other variables, there was a much more obvious answer. People start (and continue) smoking because the tobacco industry uses the full panoply of marketing techniques and ideas to encourage them so to do. Notable successes in critical marketers exposing commercial marketing damage in tobacco, alcohol and food marketing have followed.²

The amount of effort, resources and skill deployed by firms into building automotive sector brand associations and brand positions is vast: advertising spend was estimated at \$35bn in 2019. Concerns about the content of some of these adverts have been raised. A content analysis by Shin et al. found that almost half of US car adverts featured an unsafe driving sequence, with aggressive driving accounting for 85% of these driving sequences.³ Consequently., researchers hypothesised that there may be “good” and “bad” automotive brands, that is, that the advertising and promotion of some makes may influence risky driving, while other makes may be innocent in this regard.⁴ To test this hypothesis, researchers examined whether the incidence of road collisions caused by risky driving behaviours varies by car brand. They used UK collision data, Stats19. The database contains all UK road traffic incidents that resulted in personal injury and were reported to the police within 30 days.

Researchers created a “risky collision score” for each brand that measured the proportion of each brand’s total collisions made up by collisions attributed to risky driving. They compared each brand’s risky collision ratios with other brands: examining the ratio (for each brand) of collisions attributed to aggressive driving vs collisions of all types (for each brand), with each brand therefore having its own unique “aggressive driving” ratio. The selection of these “risky driving” contributory factors (CFs) was chosen to reflect the driving behaviour related factors that are in the driver’s control, represent their choice to disobey the rules and legislation and may, in theory, be influenced by their mindset and therefore by brand messaging. CFs chosen for analysis were therefore: *Injudicious actions: *Disobeyed automatic traffic signal; *Disobeyed Give Way or Stop sign or markings; *Disobeyed double white lines *Disobeyed pedestrian crossing facility; *Exceeding speed limit; *Travelling too fast for conditions; and *Following too close. If there was no brand effect then it would not be expected to find any differences in the levels of risky-driving-incidents split by car make – but there are statistically significant differences – and this finding sets up the possibility that branding activities may contribute to risky driving.

¹ [Road traffic injuries \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/road-traffic-injuries)

² Hastings, G. and Sheron, N. (2013), “Alcohol marketing: grooming the next generation”, *British Medical Journal*, 346 No. feb28 1, p. f1227.

³ Shin, P., Hallett, D., Chipman, M., et al, 2005 “Unsafe driving in North American automobile commercials”, *Journal of Public Health*, 27 No. 4, pp. 318-325.

⁴ Tapp, A., Ursachi, G., Campsall, D. 2023 Exploring the relationship between car brands and risky driving, *Journal of Social Marketing*, DOI 10.1108/JSOCM-04-2023-0074