

Commercial determinants of active travel: a crucial but overlooked barrier to health and sustainability



Active travel (walking, cycling, and other non-motorised transport) is an important component of active lifestyles and plays a crucial role in improving physical and mental health, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, and offering social and economic benefits.¹ However, despite its well-documented benefits, active travel remains considerably underutilised in many countries. To effectively promote active travel, understanding its determinants across all levels of the social-ecological framework,² such as individual attitudes and beliefs, social norms, policies, and infrastructure and topography, is important.^{3,4}

A growing body of evidence suggests that activities of commercial actors strongly influence health behaviours; however, these influences are often overlooked by researchers, practitioners, and decision makers.⁵ These influences are part of a broader set of dynamics, referred to as the commercial determinants of health, which can be defined as “the systems, practices, and pathways through which commercial actors drive health and equity outcomes, either positively or negatively”.⁵ These commercial determinants include business practices such as lobbying, marketing, supply chain management, and shaping of social norms. Although the commercial determinants of some health behaviours, including smoking, alcohol consumption, and diet, are well researched, the commercial determinants of physical activity in general and, more specifically, active travel are poorly understood. This Comment aims to stimulate scientific discourse on the commercial determinants of active travel.

The concept of commercial determinants of active travel describes the influence of economic interests on sustainable and active mobility choices, primarily by prioritising pedestrian and cycling infrastructure or public transport instead of private motorised (passive) transport. Commercial determinants of active travel operate through systemic influences on urban and community planning, transportation planning, corporate interests, public discourse, and policy making.

Through this lens, transport systems and infrastructure are outcomes of concerted commercial strategies that shape what is built, funded, and normalised. For instance, car manufacturers and automobile-associated industries

have long used aggressive marketing, lobbying, and image construction campaigns that associate car ownership with success, freedom, and modernity, while portraying walking and cycling as inferior or unsafe modes of transport. In addition, the fossil fuel industry supports petrol-dependent travel in many countries. This tactic is similar to the influence of the tobacco industry as a commercial determinant of health.⁶ Consequently, health and equity outcomes are negatively influenced by existing systems, practices, and pathways of dominating commercial actors. To advance the discussion of neglected structural barriers, this Comment highlights the negative commercial influences on active travel. However, we should also acknowledge commercial strategies and approaches that support active transport, such as investments by bicycle manufacturers, urban mobility start-ups, and health-oriented retailers (table).

The commercial suppression of active travel contributes to negative health and environmental outcomes. Physical inactivity, air pollution, noise, traffic injuries, and urban sprawl are exacerbated by dependency on motorised transport.⁷ Moreover, the global vehicular transport sector accounts for approximately a quarter of all carbon dioxide emissions globally.⁸ Replacing the modal shift from motorised to active forms of travelling could considerably cut down carbon dioxide emissions.⁷ Thus, counteracting active travel modes by commercial interests not only undermines public health efforts but also directly conflicts with climate mitigation strategies.

To counteract commercial determinants of active travel and contribute to the mission of physically active populations,⁹ public, global, and planetary health researchers, policy makers, and urban planners should explicitly acknowledge the role of commercial interests and lobbying in shaping mobility systems; develop accountability frameworks for corporate influences in transport and infrastructure policy; prioritise public investment in active travel over car-centric urban expansion based on existing policy frameworks; promote public narratives that reframe walking and cycling as aspirational, healthy, and equitable while highlighting the societal costs of car use versus the benefits of active travel; and critically assess the environmental, health, and societal impact of the

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	Description	Negative examples (barrier to active travel)	Positive examples (enabler of active travel)
Political lobbying	Influence on policy making to shape regulations, funding, and infrastructure	Automotive industry lobbying for road expansion, reduced fuel taxes, and parking costs Electric vehicle-focused lobbying by car manufacturers that shifts attention away from reducing car dependency	Bicycle or walking coalitions lobbying for national cycling and walking plans and infrastructure investment
Marketing and advertising	Framing mobility modes to shape public preferences and social norms	Car or petrol, or both, advertisements promoting status, speed, and convenience Marketing strategies downplaying real financial and environmental costs of car ownership	Social marketing campaigns framing walking, cycling, and public transport as modern, healthy, efficient, and eco-friendly
Corporate philanthropy	Sponsorship of public goods to boost brand image and shape public discourse	Sponsoring events (eg, sport events and political party conferences) while greenwashing or downplaying environmental harms	Funding active travel infrastructure such as bike-sharing systems, pedestrian plazas, or integrated cycle-public transport schemes
Market segmentation	Tailoring products or services to profitable groups, reinforcing specific behaviours	Sport utility vehicle advertisements targeting urban families despite space or environmental concerns	Bicycle manufacturers offering adaptive bikes or e-bikes for older people or people with disabilities
Strategic partnerships	Alliances with governments, NGOs, or academia to promote shared agendas	Industry-government alliances that favour (electric) cars over active transport Alliances of political actors, industry, trade unions, and local governments positively promoting the car industry as an essential industry Electric vehicle campaigns that reinforce car dependency under a green image	NGO-private partnerships developing apps that reward walking and cycling with local incentives Alliances of environmental and health advocates, health insurance, and employers supporting active travel
Suppression of alternatives	Active undermining or neglect of active travel through lobbying or misinformation	Blocking low-emission zones; undermining pedestrianisation efforts; presenting cycling as dangerous and leading to many road trip fatalities; discrediting health research about the impacts of traffic noise and pollution	Legal and policy support and advocacy for prioritising active travel in city centres (eg, pan-European master plans for walking and cycling)
Asymmetry in influences	Unequal political and financial power among commercial actors	Dominance of the automotive and fossil fuel industries in shaping mobility policies, limiting the influence of bike manufacturers and NGOs	Collaborative platforms amplifying the voice of active travel advocates through coalitions and alliances

NGOs=non-governmental organisations.

Table: Commercial strategies and approaches influencing active travel.

automotive industry and their responsibility in enabling a sustainable future. Moreover, public and global health and climate initiatives should recognise active travel as a crucial intervention for not only preventing non-communicable disease and reducing emission but also challenging harmful commercial determinants. Tools and frameworks that expose underlying business interests in mobility policy—akin to those used in tobacco and alcohol control—should be adapted for the transport sector. A transformation of urban mobility systems will require more than technical fixes or behavioural nudges. The transformation demands a deep interrogation of commercial forces that shape our streets, cities, and ultimately, our choices. Addressing the commercial determinants of active travel is essential to enable healthier populations and a healthier planet and targets a crucial but overlooked barrier to health and sustainability of the WHO's global action plan on physical activity for more active people for a healthier world.¹⁰

We declare no competing interests.

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