

# The Digital Overload: Why Cars Should Return to the Classic Era of Buttons



As car interiors become increasingly digital, drivers may be paying a hidden price for the high-risk convenience associated with it. Tech is great, yes. However, when it comes to driving, screens are lacking compared to the user feedback knobs, switches and buttons provide.

The automotive industry has invested heavily in the digitisation of car functions, prioritising large screens on a car's dashboard, and it's starting to feel like a step in the wrong direction. Let's journey into the evolution of car technology and examine the drawbacks of transitioning to all-digital systems and why reviving buttons is the way to go.

## The Evolution—A shift from knobs to Swipes



Initially, cars were mechanical machines demanding hands-on interaction. Drivers needed to turn a key for ignition, twist a knob to turn on the radio, or to flick a switch to activate headlights. Everything was straightforward. Consequently, drivers had to be familiar with the controls and mechanisms of their vehicles, ensuring more control over certain features.

However, the 80s and 90s graced the car market with digital displays, such as the Chevy Corvette C4 interior, which projected comfort as a major marketing point. These extras were excellent, but physical controls didn't lose their touch because they were reliable. Subsequently, in the 2000s, automakers invested more in infotainment systems—a ripple effect of the smartphone evolution.

Screens started appearing on dashboards, assisting with navigation, climate control, and more. In this regard, Tesla set a new standard in 2012 with the launch of the [Tesla Model S](#), featuring a massive 17-inch touchscreen. This development, amongst many others, steered the car industry towards deprioritising buttons and embracing sleek screens.

Currently, high-end car brands such as BMW, Ford, and Mercedes-Benz, as well as affordable car brands like Kia, have adopted the digital screen trend, replacing traditional buttons with displays that control various functions, including navigation, music, and climate control. The primary objective of car digitisation was to enhance the driving experience; however, recent developments suggest otherwise.

## Why Touchscreens are Not as Reliable as Claimed



It's okay to enjoy the perks of a digital screen on your phone, tablet, TV, or any other everyday appliance. However, when driving on the highway or navigating streets, the primary focus should be on the road. Any distraction can lead to a disastrous outcome, possibly affecting lives and properties. These are possible issues digital screens can create in modern-day driving.

### Distraction

In old cars, the usual staple for operations like changing a radio station was simple; twisting a knob or pressing a button gets you a desired outcome. Screens, on the other hand, are supported by systems that incorporate multiple features underneath different layers, requiring cumbersome navigation. Consequently, drivers may spend more time and attention on these screens, potentially causing them to take their eyes off the road for an extended period.

In some situations, drivers must make split-second decisions to prevent collisions or accidents, and screens are not the most optimal option. They sometimes worsen the outcome of such events. *A 2017 Study by the Foundation for Traffic Safety (AAA)* shows that engaging with display systems can distract drivers for up to 40 seconds, long enough to cause a crash. AAA noted that navigation and turning on radios were the most common reasons drivers take their eyes off the road.

## **Glare and Smudge Issues**

It's pretty common to experience excruciating eye pain when staring at a phone screen under direct sunlight. Regrettably, this situation is also associated with digital screens in vehicles. Glares can make automobile screens difficult to read during the day. For example, the 2021 Mercedes-Benz S-Class, which featured a large screen display, had issues with sunlight reflections, forcing drivers to squint or adjust their position during operation.

Apart from reflection problems, layers of fingerprints often smudge screen displays, giving them a messy look that can affect screen visibility. Buttons, in contrast, require minimal maintenance. You can operate them at any time and keep them clean with a simple wipe.

## **Software Malfunction — Lags and Bugs**

Similar to most digital hardware, car screens have underlying software, which is prone to glitches and costly malfunctions. Issues such as frozen screens, blank screens, unresponsive interfaces, and irregular reboots can be overwhelming and frustrating, especially when using navigation for directions.

In 2022, JD Power reported that a common complaint among new car owners was related to infotainment systems, specifically screens. Malfunctioning touch screens may prevent access to essential functions, which is crucial to keep your vehicle in optimal working condition.

## **Not Compatible With Older Drivers**

Tech operating skills? Not everyone's cup of tea. Older drivers, in particular, have found screens extremely overwhelming to operate—a development worsened by the fact that automakers displays operate differently.

[An article published by AARO](#) highlights the struggle seniors face in juggling between menu interfaces and how they prefer the straightforwardness of buttons. Even younger drivers sometimes get frustrated when these displays don't work as smoothly as their digital smart devices.

## **Reliability Issues**

Screens are fragile. A crack or glitchy software can render your display useless. In contrast, buttons are designed to last a long time and can withstand years of use, even without proper maintenance.



## Why Buttons Are the Real Deal



Touchscreens are sophisticated, customisable, packed with numerous features, and are often unreliable. By contrast, buttons are dependable and require intuitive usage. Here's why they should be reconsidered.

### They are Safe

Buttons need less physical attention than displays, which helps drivers stay focused. You could turn on your radio by just feeling the knobs while your eyes are still fixed on the road. The Mazda 3, for example, has been praised for still using buttons for controls such as audio and climate control, while utilising a portable screen for navigation.

### Accessible to All and Simple to Use

Not everyone is tech-savvy. Older drivers or individuals interested in using technology without extensive training might find touchscreens frustrating. However, buttons are universal and don't require any special training to use. Additionally, they're always in an easily accessible position, which comes in handy for functions that require frequent interactions. Those with visual or motor impairment may also find physical buttons more satisfying to use than touchscreens.

### Tactile Feedback and Reliability

Buttons allow drivers to confirm that they have made a specific input, even without looking at the screen. Buttons can last a long time as they withstand more wear and tear. The 1999 Toyota Corolla, for instance, remains praised for its interior durability to this day.

In contrast, a cracked or broken display screen can cut you off from many controls. Apart from the possible problems this can cause, a damaged display is a more costly replacement than a simple button or switch change.

### **Finding a Middle Ground: Is it Possible to Have Both?**

Considering the perks that come with touch screens—such as navigation, backup cameras, smartphone integration, music, and more—I wouldn't say they should be discarded entirely. However, it becomes a concern when manufacturers shove everything into a single screen. Instead of total replacement, automakers should consider the hybrid approach taken by Audi and Mazda.

It's simple—let buttons and knobs be used for everyday essential controls while using touchscreens for complex tasks like navigation. [The European New Car Assessment Program \(Euro NCAP\)](#) is proposing to automakers the use of button dials to carry out certain operations in order to achieve a five-star rating, effective from January 2026.

The extreme digitisation of vehicles is turning them into cold, lifeless machines. Car enthusiasts aren't just looking for ways to move; they want interaction and control. Requesting physical control is not about refusing evolution; it's about preserving the joy and uniqueness of driving.

Although not flawless, buttons win in safety, reliability, and tactile feedback compared to screens. Regardless, touchscreens and physical controls can coexist, each serving its purpose effectively.