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(54) **MODULAR STEERING WHEEL ASSEMBLY
FOR A VEHICLE**

(71) Applicant: **GM Global Technology Operations
LLC, Detroit, MI (US)**

(72) Inventor: **Dong Yeon Yoo, Lake Orion, MI (US)**

(73) Assignee: **GM GLOBAL TECHNOLOGY
OPERATIONS LLC, Detroit, MI (US)**

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1/10; Y10T 74/20834; Y10T 29/49488
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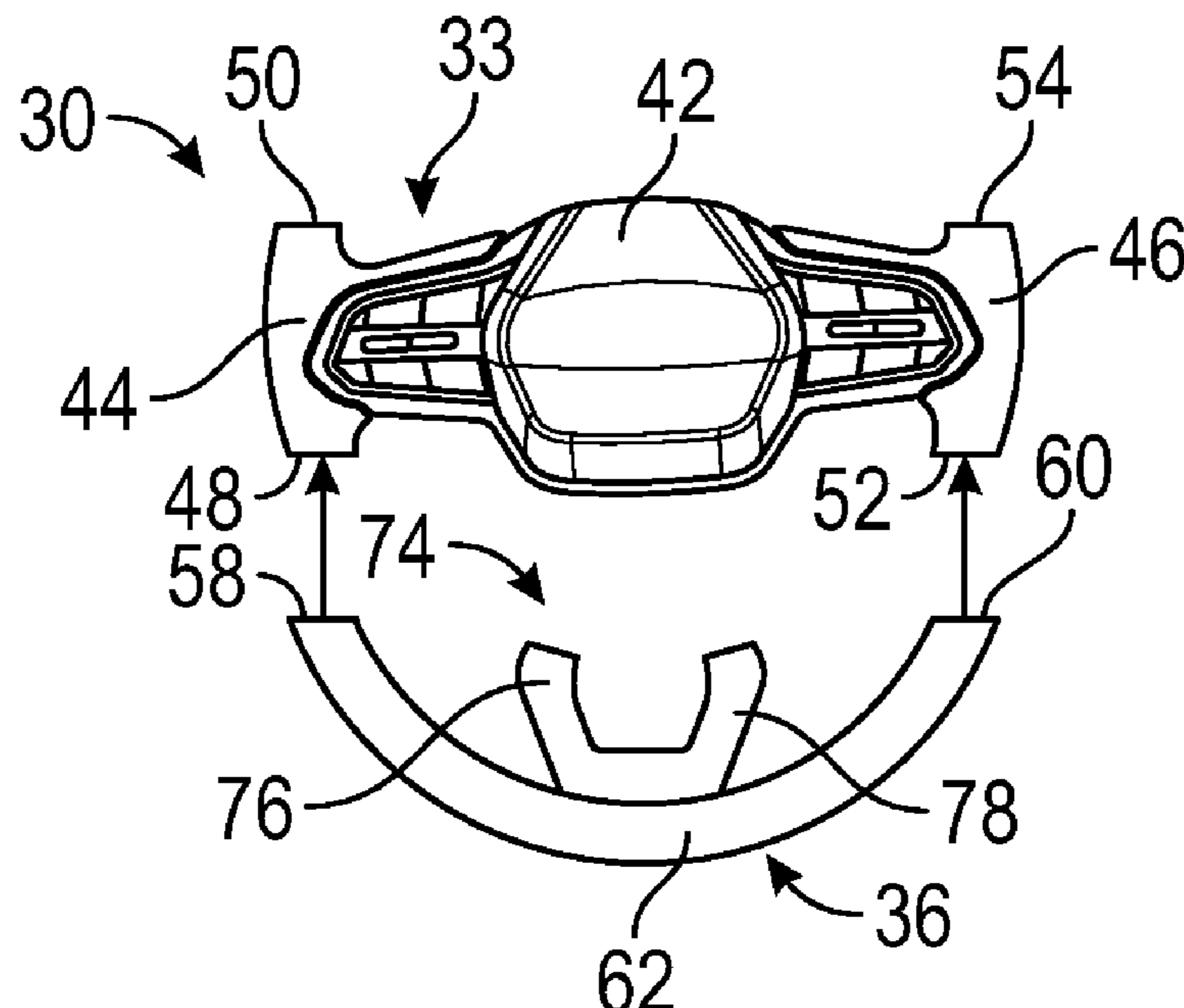
Primary Examiner — Daniel D Yabut

(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — CANTOR COLBURN
LLP

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A modular steering wheel assembly includes a central hub
having a center support, a first support element extending
outwardly from the center support in a first direction and a
second support element extending outwardly from the center
support in a second direction. The first support element
includes a first connector member and a second connector
member, and the second support element includes a first
connector element and a second connector element. A first
steering wheel member is detachably connected to at least
one of the first connector member and the second connector
member, and a second steering wheel member is detachably
connected to at least one of the first connector element and
the second connector element.

18 Claims, 4 Drawing Sheets



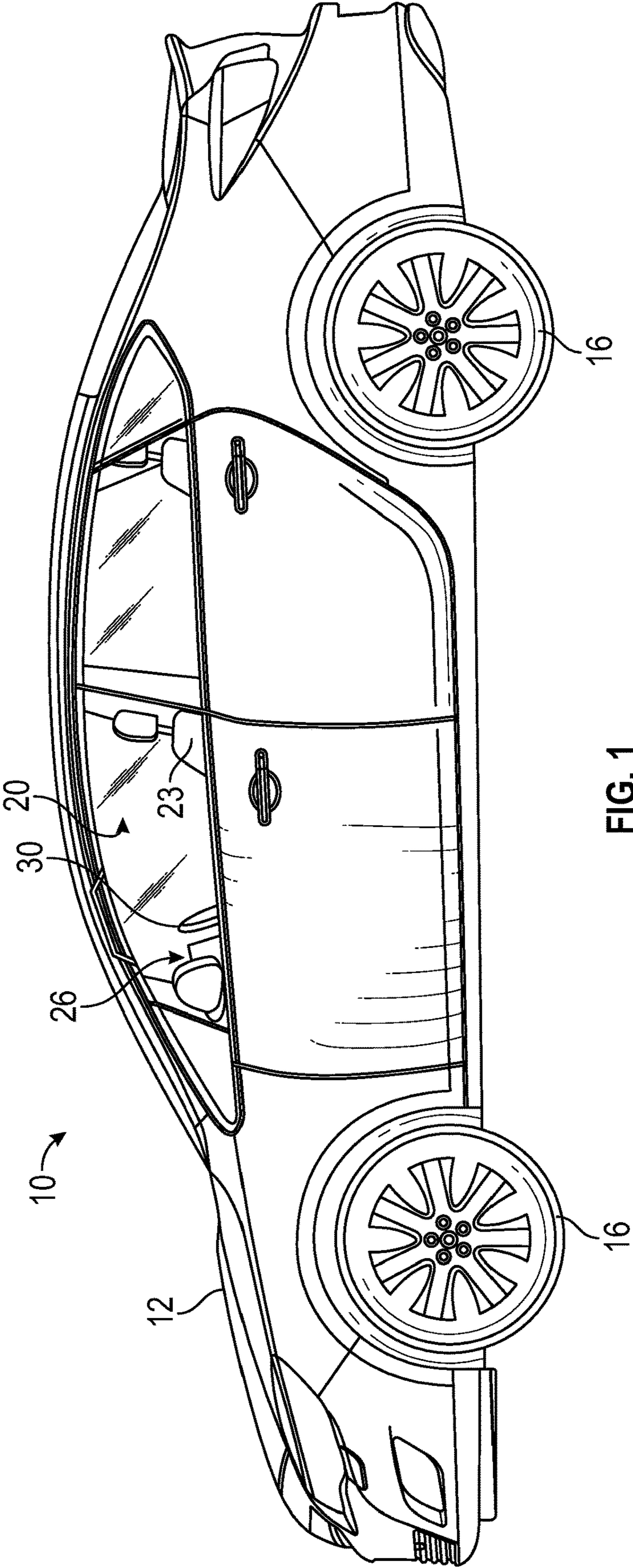
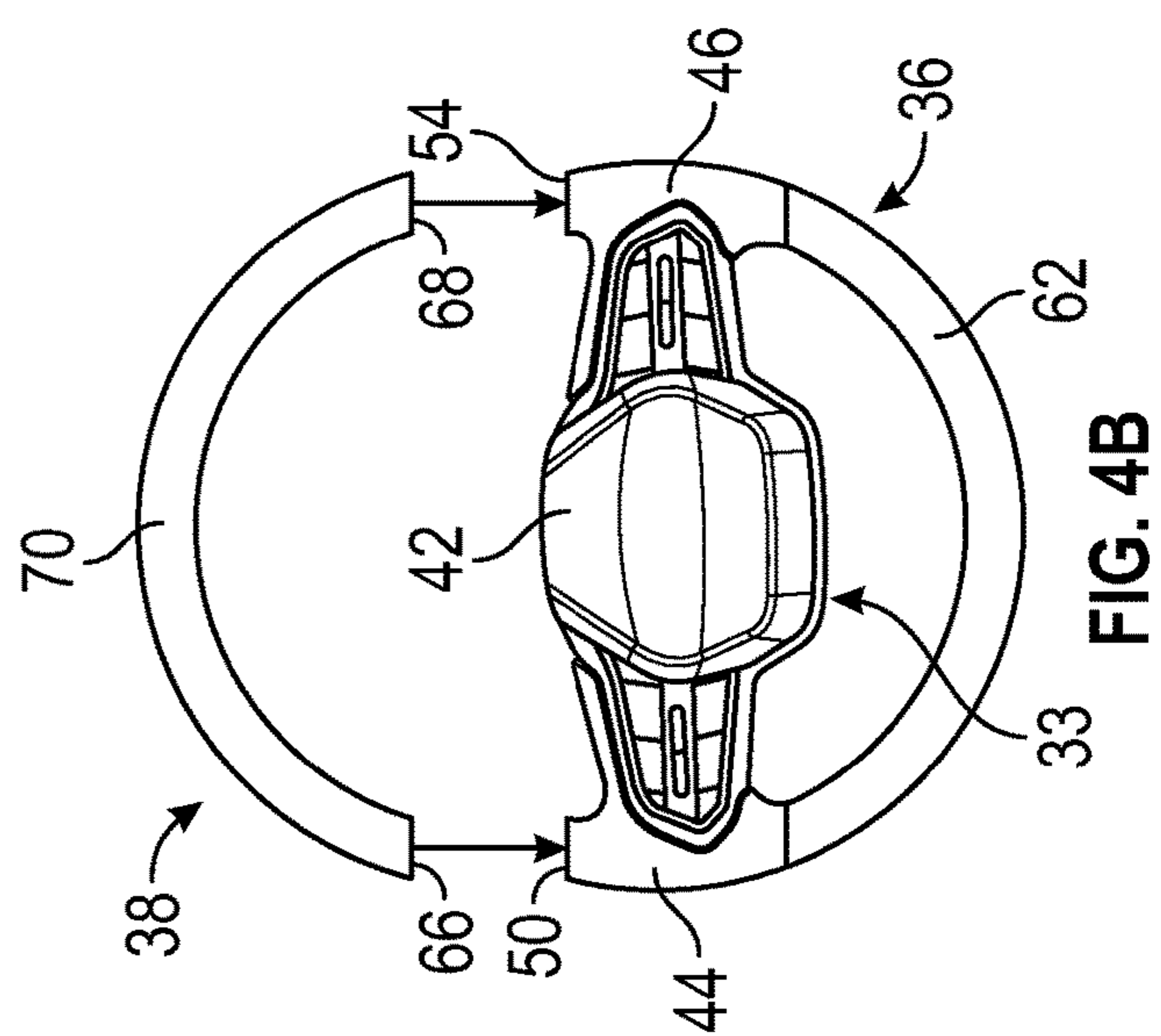
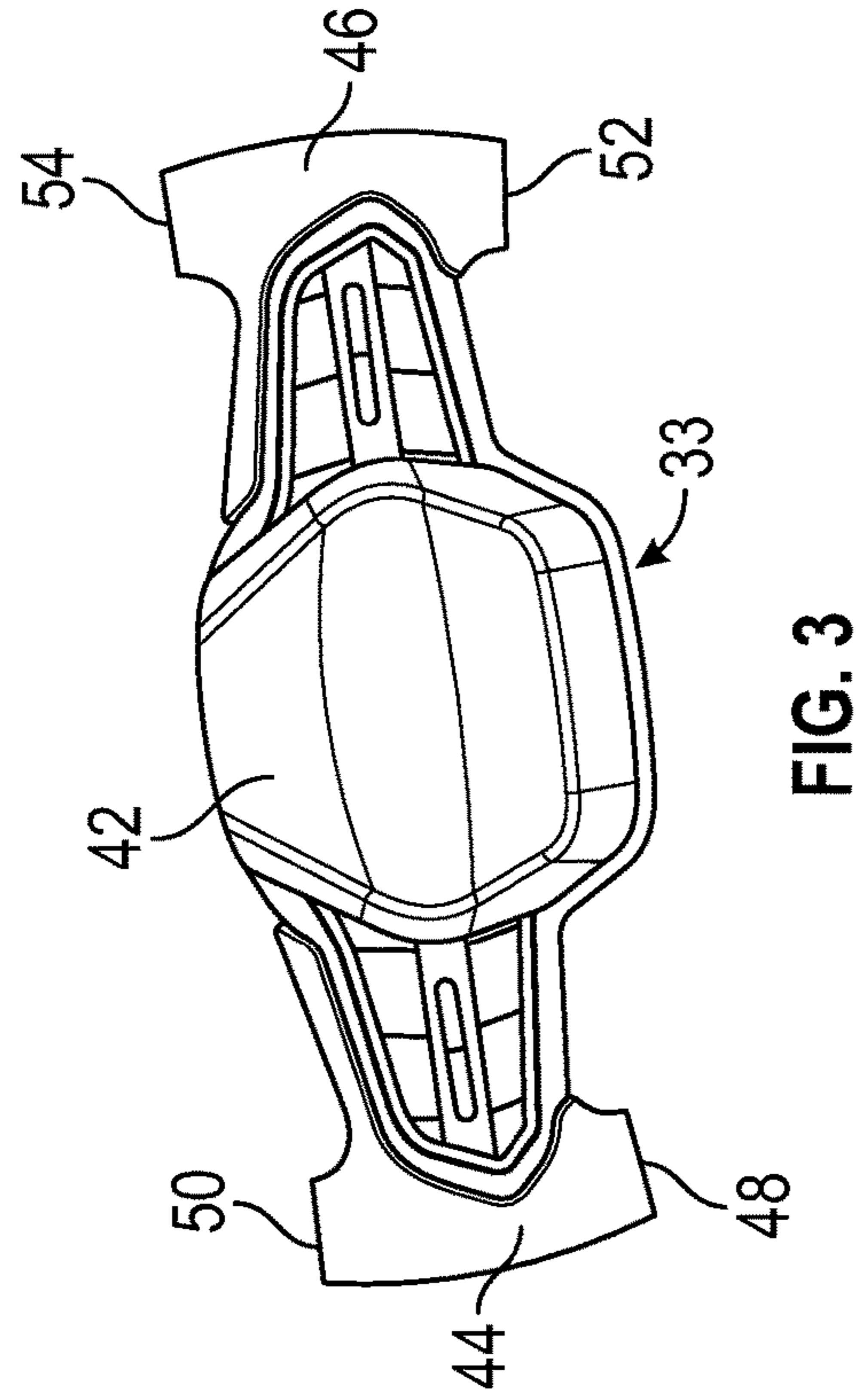
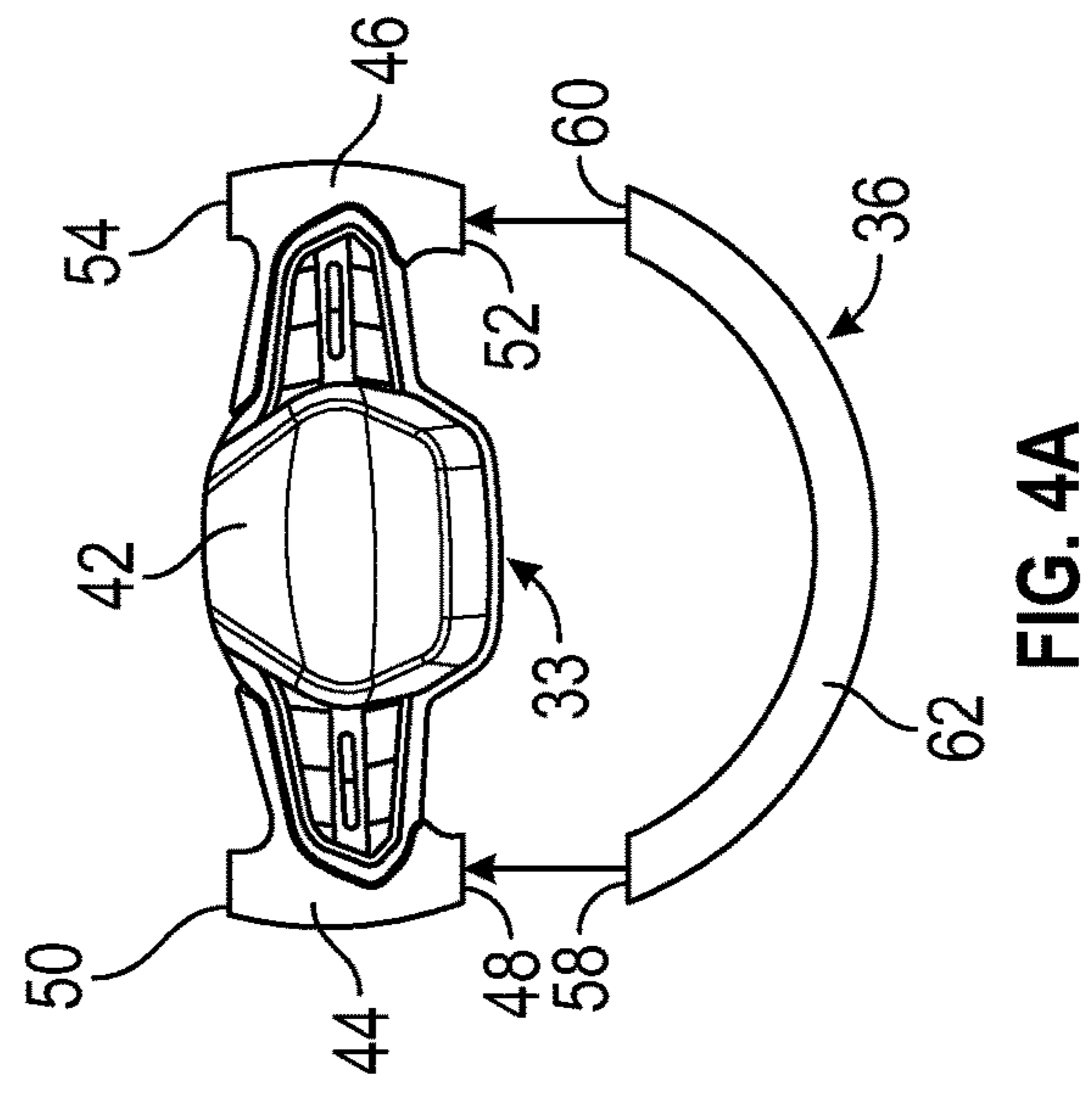
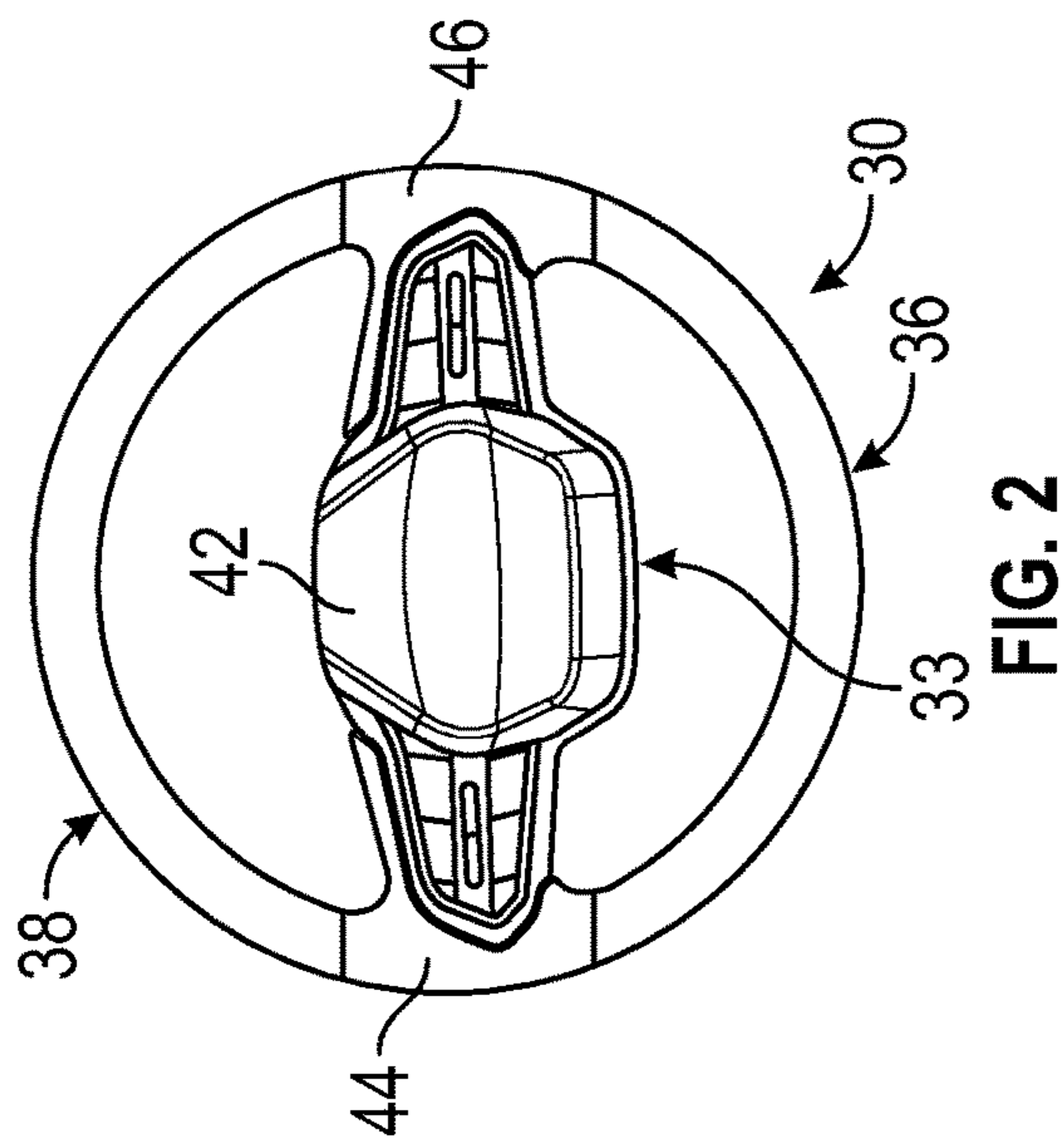


FIG. 1



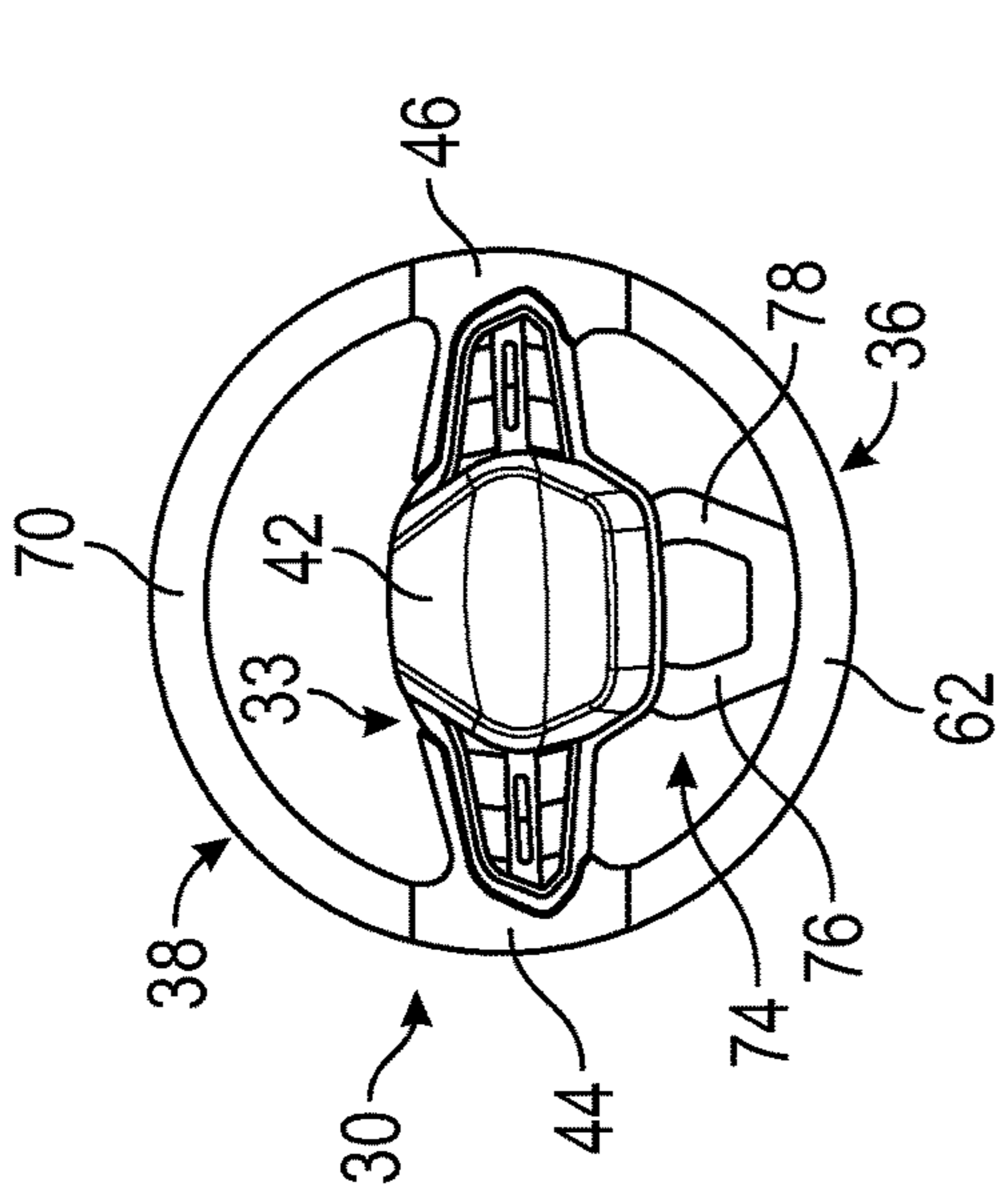


FIG. 5C

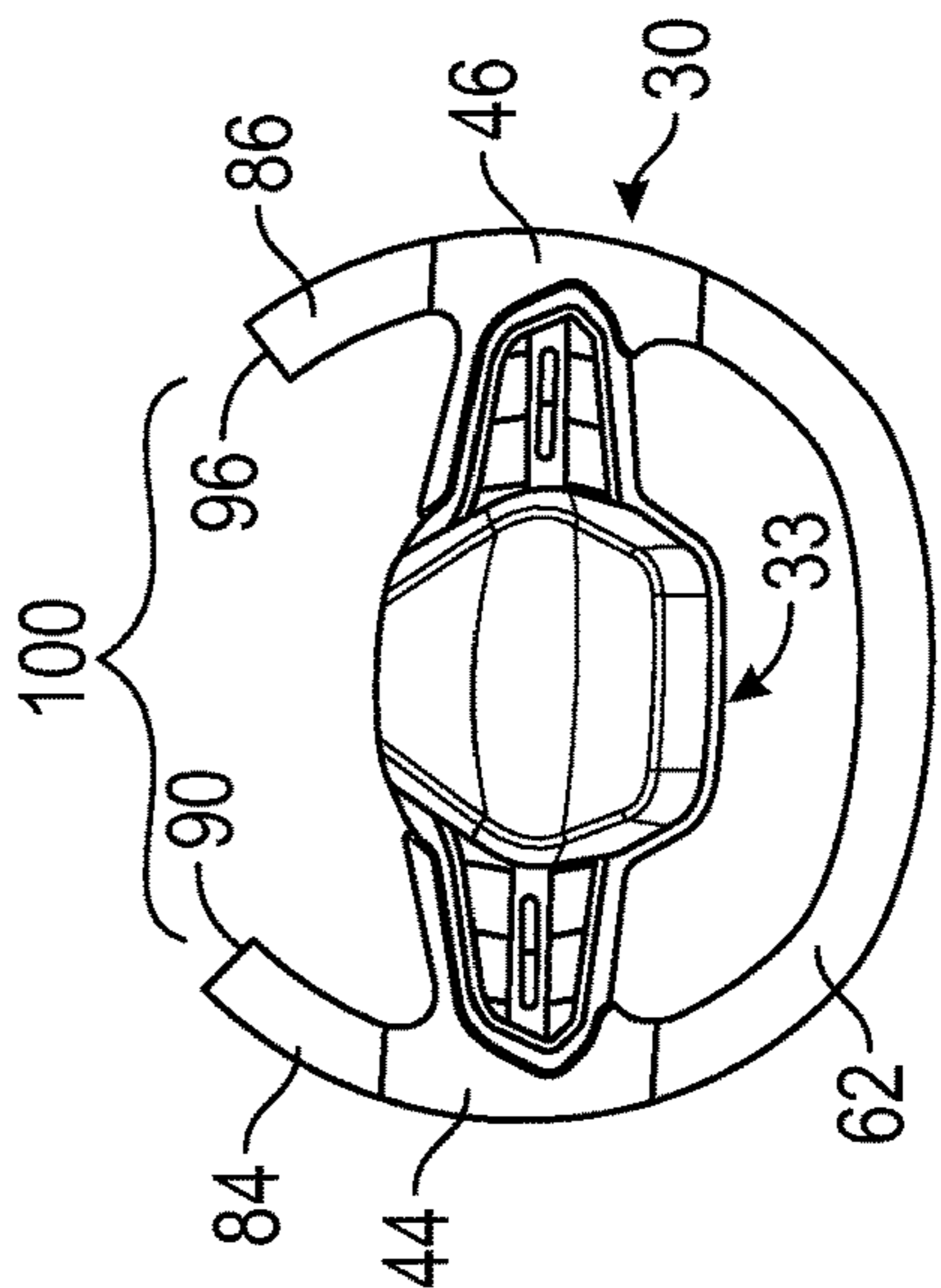


FIG. 6C

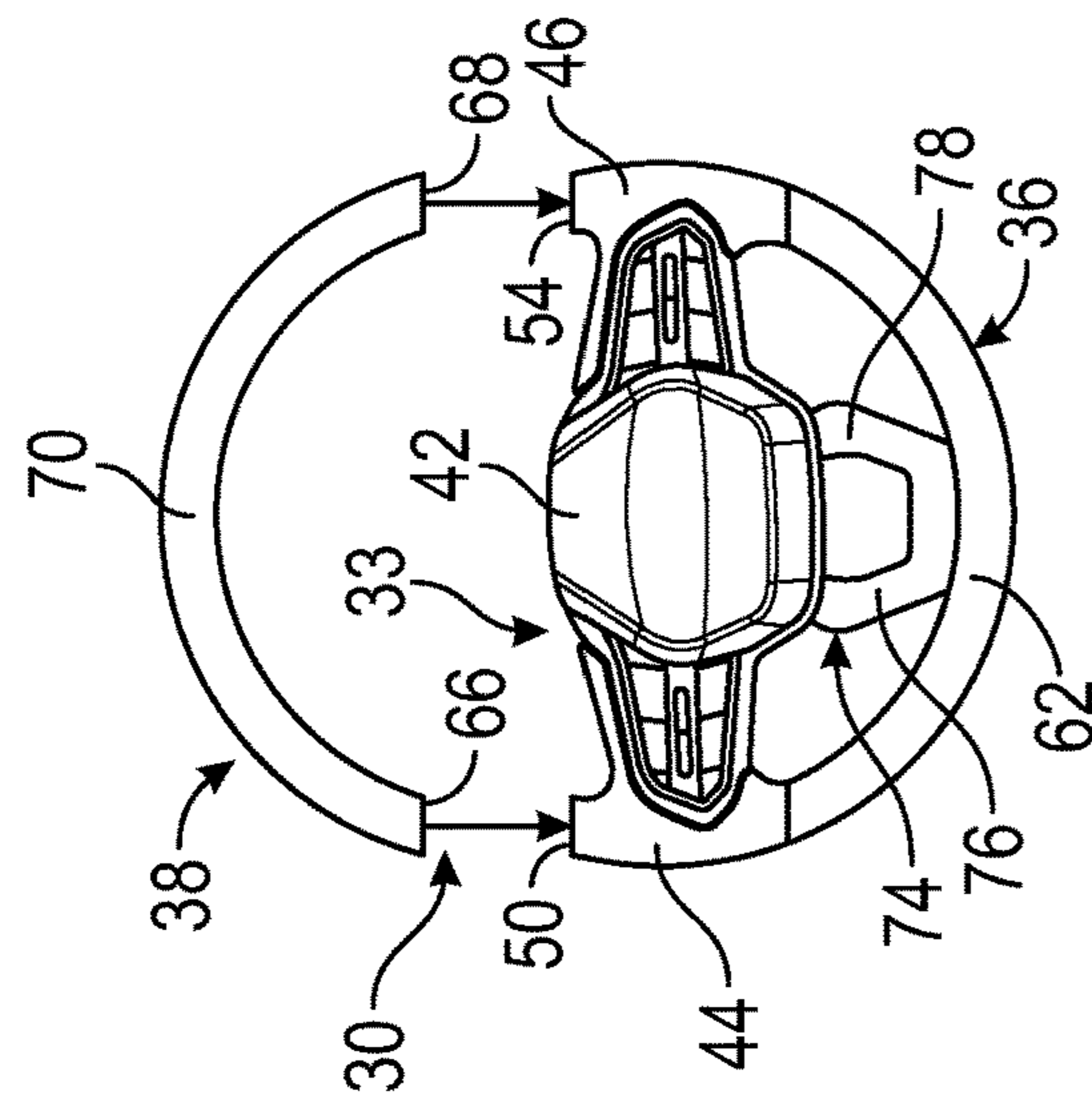


FIG. 5B

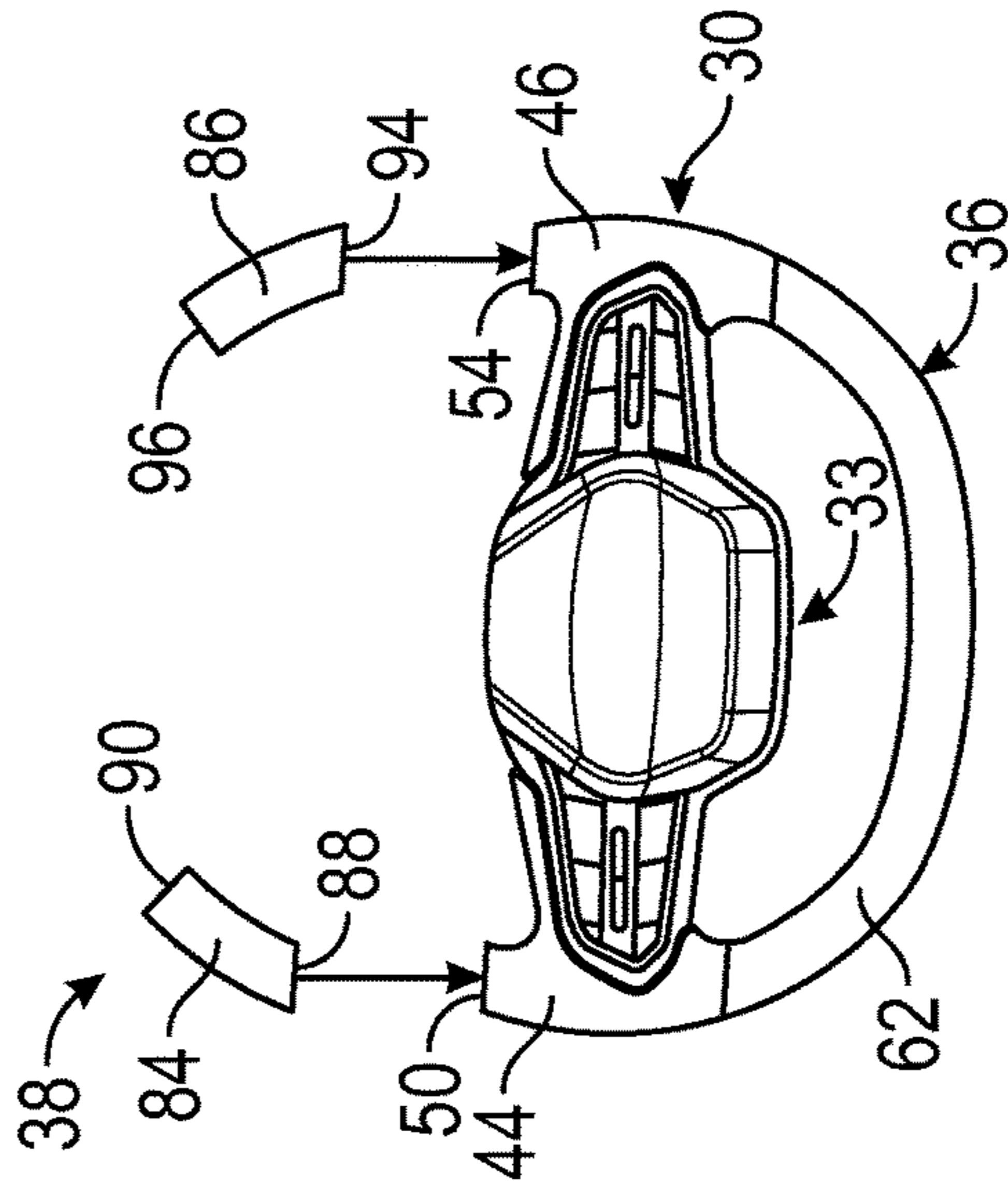


FIG. 6B

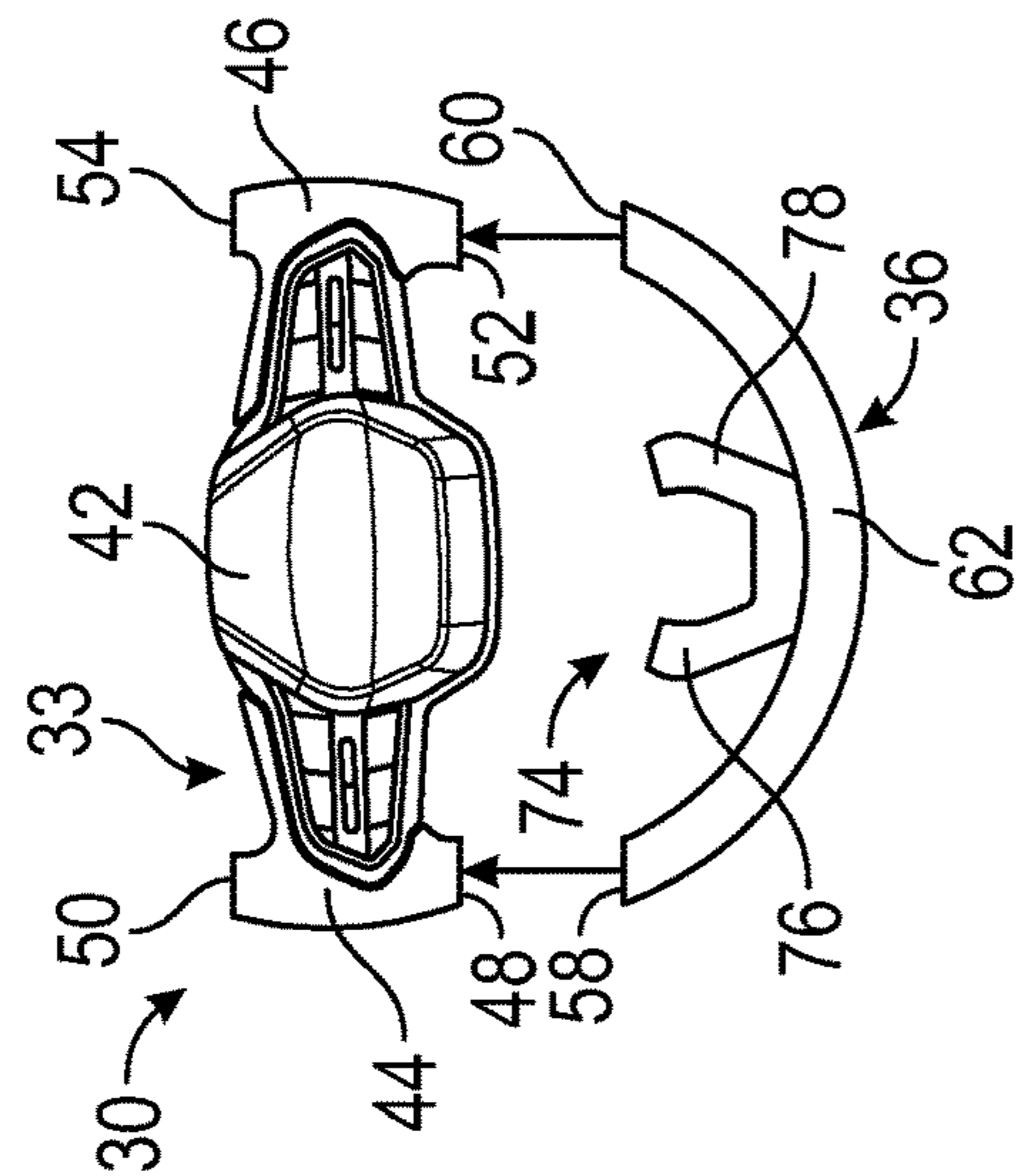


FIG. 5A

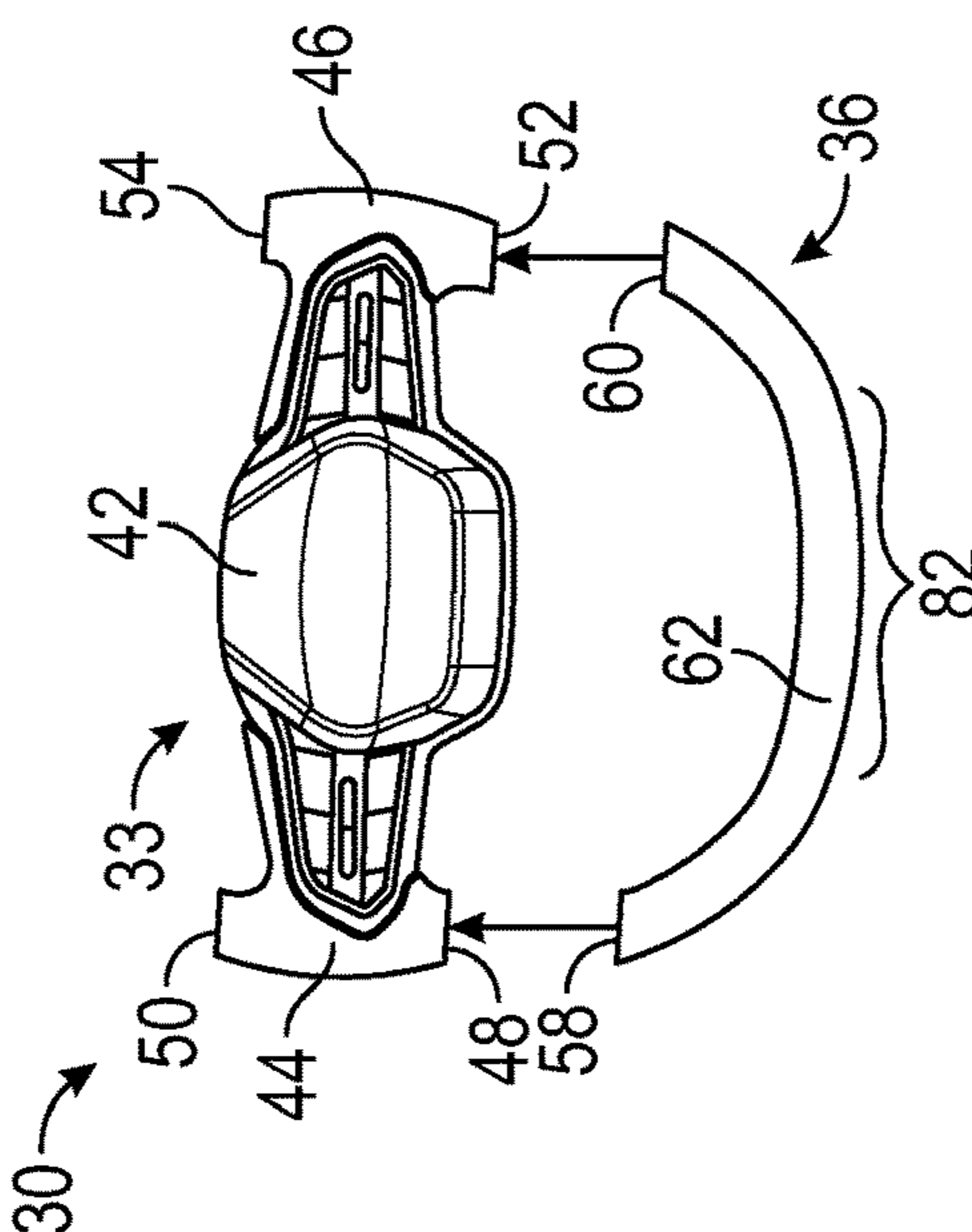


FIG. 6A

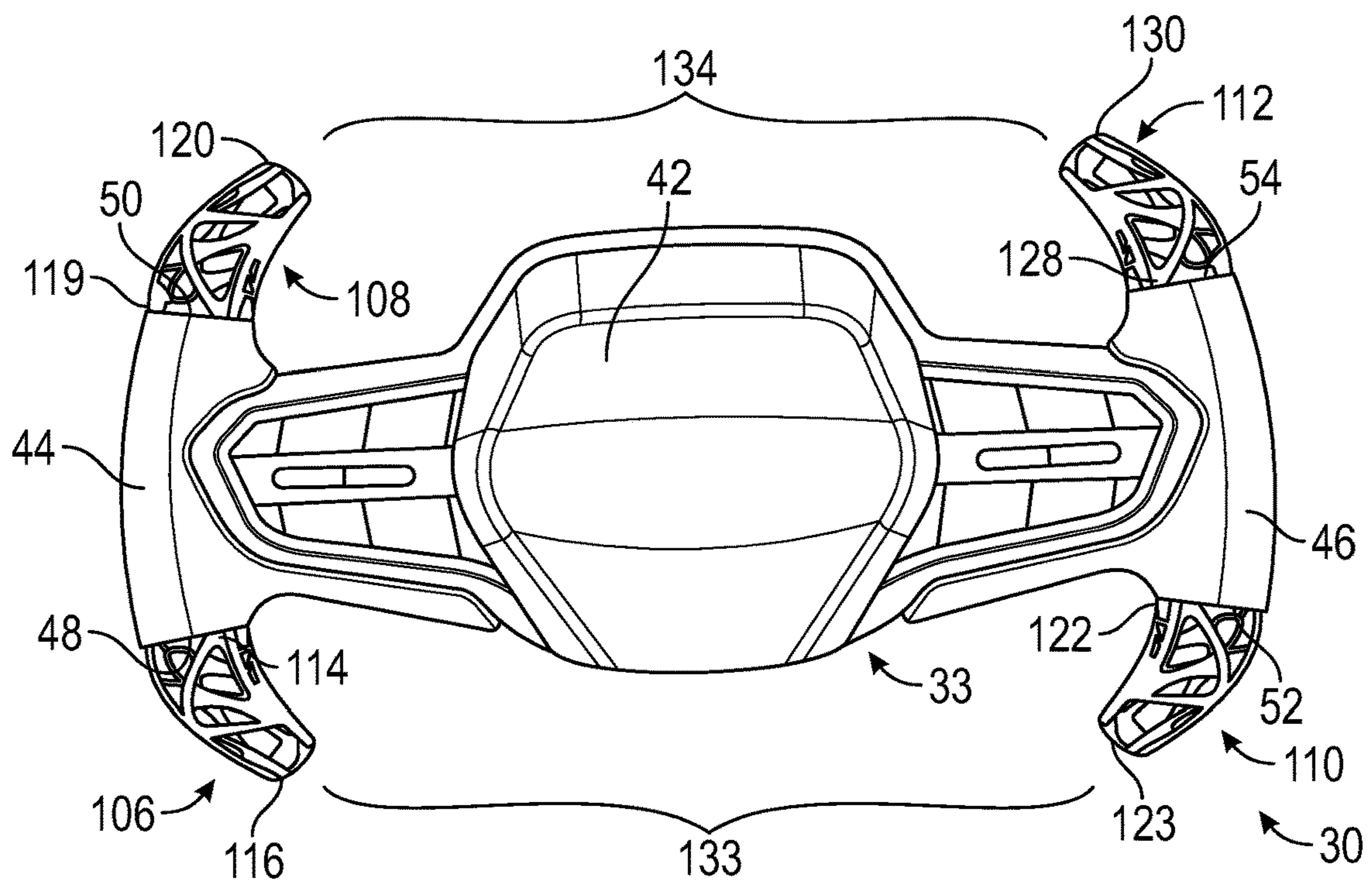


FIG. 7

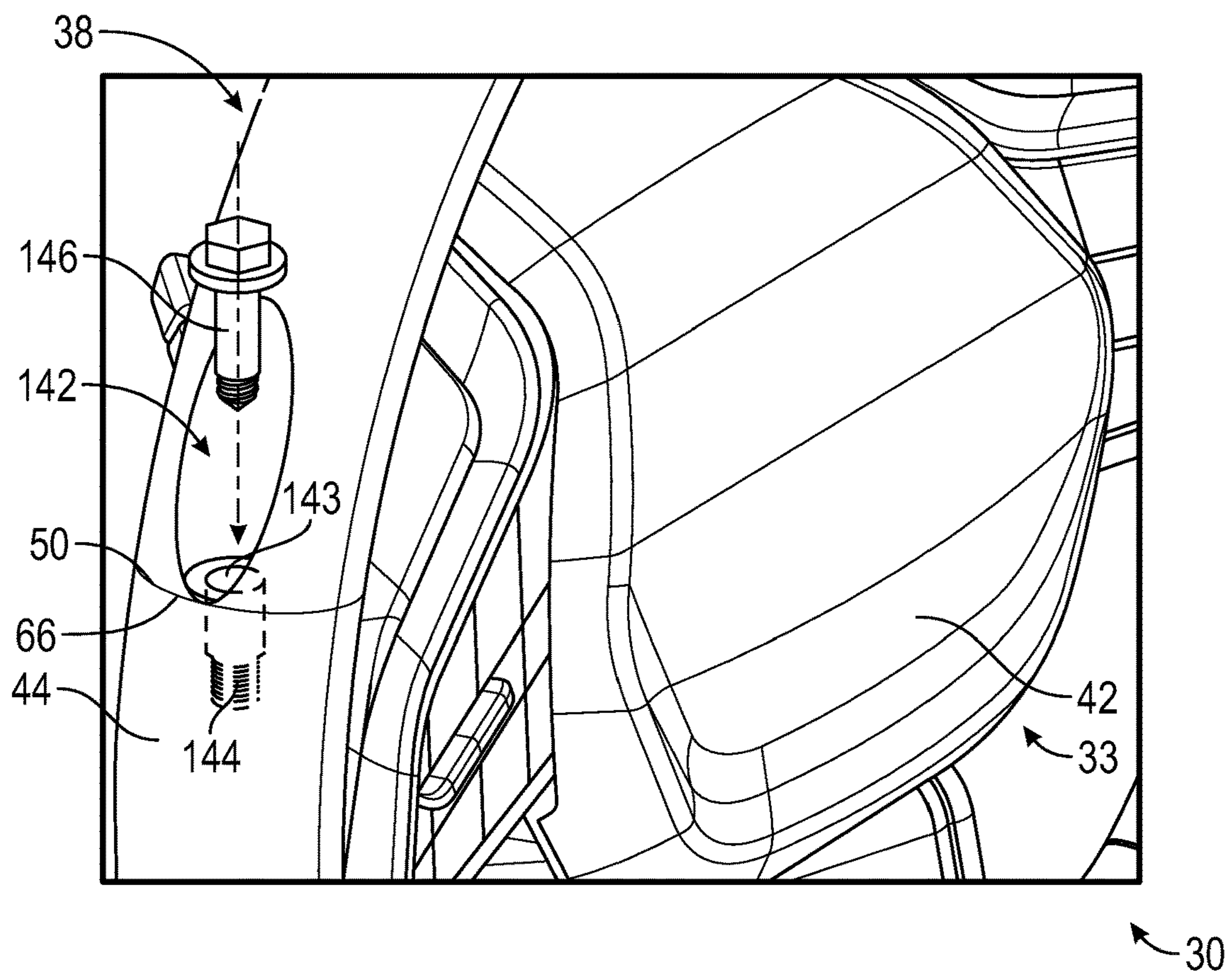


FIG. 8

1

MODULAR STEERING WHEEL ASSEMBLY FOR A VEHICLE

INTRODUCTION

The subject disclosure relates to the art of steering wheels and, more particularly, to a modular steering wheel assembly for a vehicle.

Most vehicles include a steering mechanism of some form. A typical passenger vehicle includes a steering wheel assembly having a central hub. The central hub serves as an interface between the steering wheel and a steering column of a vehicle. In a typical passenger vehicle, the central hub supports a steering wheel rim. Steering wheel assemblies come in a variety of styles and may be formed from or covered by various materials. The steering wheel rim is typically round or generally round, sometimes polygonal, and may be covered by a non-slip material such as plastic, leather, or the like.

Overtime, constant contact with a driver's hands will cause the material on the steering rim to wear. The extent of the wear differs for every driver, but typically occurs in two locations on the member where the constant contact occurs most frequently. Regardless, replacing the material is often not an option. That is, instead of replacing the material, the entire steering wheel assembly is removed and replaced. Further, changing an appearance of a steering wheel also requires total replacement of the steering wheel assembly. A user that may want a sportier looking or a simply different steering wheel style has no choice but to completely replace the part that came with the vehicle at the time of purchase. Accordingly, it is desirable to provide, a steering wheel that includes portions that may be readily replaced in order to refresh the covering material or change an overall component shape and appearance based on driver preferences

SUMMARY

A modular steering wheel assembly, in accordance with a non-limiting example, includes a central hub having a center support, a first support element extending outwardly from the center support in a first direction and a second support element extending outwardly from the center support in a second direction. The first support element includes a first connector member and a second connector member, and the second support element includes a first connector element and a second connector element. A first steering wheel member is detachably connected to at least one of the first connector member and the second connector member, and a second steering wheel member is detachably connected to at least one of the first connector element and the second connector element.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the second steering wheel member is connected to each of the first connector element and the second connector element.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the first steering wheel member includes a first end connected to the first connector member and a second end connected to the second connector member and an intermediate portion extending between the first end and the second end.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the first steering wheel member includes a hub support coupled to the central hub.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the hub support includes a first hub support member and a

2

second hub support member spaced from the first hub support member, each of the first hub support member and the second hub support member extending outwardly from the first steering wheel member between the first end and the second end.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the intermediate portion includes a substantially straight section.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the second steering wheel member includes a first end portion connected to the first connector element, a second end portion connected to the second connector element, and an intermediate section extending un-interrupted between the first end portion and the second end portion.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the intermediate section including a substantially straight section.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the modular steering wheel assembly includes a third steering wheel member, wherein the second steering wheel member includes a first end portion detachably connected to the first connector element and a second end portion that is cantilevered from the central hub and the third steering wheel member includes a first end section detachably connected to the second connector element and a second end section that is cantilevered from the central hub.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the modular steering wheel assembly includes a fourth steering wheel member extending between and connecting the second end portion of the second steering wheel member and the second end section of the third steering wheel member.

A vehicle, in accordance with a non-limiting example, includes a body defining a passenger compartment and a modular steering wheel assembly arranged in the passenger compartment. The modular steering wheel assembly includes a central hub having a center support, a first support element extending outwardly from the center support in a first direction and a second support element extending outwardly from the center support in a second direction. The first support element includes a first connector member and a second connector member, and the second support element including a first connector element and a second connector element. A first steering wheel member is detachably connected to at least one of the first connector member and the second connector member and a second steering wheel member is detachably connected to at least one of the first connector element and the second connector element.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the second steering wheel member is connected to each of the second connector member and the second connector element.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the first steering wheel member includes a first end connected to the first connector member and a second end connected to the second connector member and an intermediate portion extending between the first end and the second end.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the first steering wheel member includes a hub support coupled to the central hub.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the hub support includes a first hub support member and a second hub support member spaced from the first hub support member, each of the first hub support member and

3

the second hub support member extending outwardly from the first steering wheel member between the first end and the second end.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the intermediate portion includes a substantially straight section.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the second steering wheel member includes a first end portion connected to the first connector element, a second end portion connected to the second connector element, and an intermediate section extending un-interrupted between the first end portion and the second end portion.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the intermediate section including a substantially straight section.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the steering wheel assembly includes a third steering wheel member, wherein the second steering wheel member includes a first end portion detachably connected to the first connector element and a second end portion that is cantilevered from the central hub and the third steering wheel member includes a first end section detachably connected to the second connector element and a second end section that is cantilevered from the central hub.

In addition to one or more of the features described herein the steering wheel assembly includes a fourth steering wheel member extending between and connecting the second end portion of the second steering wheel member and the second end section of the third steering wheel member.

The above features and advantages, and other features and advantages of the disclosure are readily apparent from the following detailed description when taken in connection with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Other features, advantages and details appear, by way of example only, in the following detailed description, the detailed description referring to the drawings in which:

FIG. 1 is a left side view of a vehicle including a modular steering wheel assembly, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

FIG. 2 is an is an elevational view of a modular steering wheel assembly, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

FIG. 3 is an elevational view of a central hub of the modular steering wheel assembly, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

FIG. 4A is an elevational view of a first steering wheel member being joined to the central hub of FIG. 2, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

FIG. 4B is an elevational view of the central hub of FIG. 3A receiving to receive a second steering wheel member, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

FIG. 5A is an elevational view of the central hub of FIG. 2 receiving a first steering wheel member including hub supports, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

FIG. 5B is an elevational view of the central hub of FIG. 4A receiving a second steering wheel member, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

FIG. 5C is an elevational view of the central hub of FIG. 4B including both the first and second steering wheel members, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

FIG. 6A is an elevational view of the central hub of FIG. 2 receiving a first steering wheel member, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

4

FIG. 6B is an elevational view of the central hub of FIG. 5A receiving a second steering wheel member and a third steering wheel member, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

FIG. 6C is an elevational view of the central hub of FIG. 5B including the first, second, and third steering wheel members, in accordance with a non-limiting example;

FIG. 7 is an elevational view of the central hub of FIG. 2 receiving a first steering wheel member, a second steering wheel member, a third steering wheel member, and a fourth steering wheel member, in accordance with a non-limiting example; and

FIG. 8 is a partial perspective view of a fastener for joining a first end portion of the second steering wheel member to a first connector on the central hub, in accordance with a non-limiting example.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The following description is merely exemplary in nature and is not intended to limit the present disclosure, its application or uses. It should be understood that throughout the drawings, corresponding reference numerals indicate like or corresponding parts and features.

A vehicle, in accordance with a non-limiting example, is indicated generally at **10** in FIG. 1. Vehicle **10** includes a body **12** supported on a plurality of wheels **16**. At least two of the plurality of wheels **16** are steerable. That is, changing a position of two of the plurality of wheels **16** relative to body **12** will cause vehicle **10** to change direction. Body **12** defines, in part, a passenger compartment **20** having seats, one of which is indicated at **23**, positioned behind a dashboard **26**. A modular steering wheel assembly **30** is arranged between seats **23** and dashboard **26**. Modular steering wheel assembly **30** is operated to control the orientation of the steerable wheels.

Referring to FIGS. 2 and 3, modular steering wheel assembly **30** include a central hub **33** to which are detachably mounted a first steering wheel member **36** and a second steering wheel member **38**. Central hub **33** includes a central hub **42** that houses, for example, an airbag, a horn switch and the like, a first support element **44** and a second support element **46**. First support element **44** extends outwardly from central hub **42** in a first direction and second support element **46** extends outwardly from central hub **42** in a second direction. In a non-limiting example, the second direction is about substantially opposite the first direction.

In a non-limiting example shown in FIG. 3, first support element **44** includes a first connector member **48** and a first connector element **50**. First connector element **50** is oriented about 180° or substantially directly opposite first connector member **48**. Similarly, second support element **46** includes a second connector member **52** and a second connector element **54**. In a non-limiting example, second connector element **54** is oriented about 180° or substantially opposite second connector member **52**.

Referring to FIG. 4A, first steering wheel member **36** includes a first end **58** and a second end **60**. An intermediate portion **62** extends between first end **58** and second end **60**. First end **58** is detachably connected to first connector member **48** and second end **60** is detachably mounted to second connector member **52**. At this point, it should be understood that the term “detachably mounted” defines a connection that can be disconnected without cutting or destroying any components and that the connection can be readily re-established.

5

Second steering wheel member **38**, in accordance with a non-limiting example shown in FIG. 4B, includes a first end portion **66** and a second end portion **68**. An intermediate section **70** extends between first end portion **66** and second end portion **68**. First end portion **66** is detachably connected to first connector element **50** and second end portion **68** is detachably connected to second connector element **54**. With this construction, first steering wheel member **36** and/or second steering wheel member **38** may be readily removed from central hub **33** and replaced as desired. The replacement may be to refresh worn surfaces, change materials, change colors or the like.

Referring to FIG. 5A, first steering wheel member **36** is shown to include a hub support **74** in accordance with a non-limiting example. Hub support **74** in addition to increasing support for first steering wheel member **36**, also provides additional contact area for a driver as well as may provide structure for additional vehicle controls (not shown). Hub support **74** includes a first hub support member **76** and a second hub support member **78** that project outwardly from intermediate portion **62** and connect with central hub **33** as shown in FIG. 5C. First and second hub support members **76** and **78** are mechanically connected to central hub **33** and, in a non-limiting example, may also establish an electrical pathway. Second steering wheel member **38** is connected to central hub **33** to form modular steering wheel assembly **30** as shown in FIG. 5C.

Referring to FIG. 6A, intermediate portion **62** of first steering wheel member **36** includes a substantially straight section **82**. First steering wheel member **36** is connected to central hub **33** by detachably connecting first end **58** with first connector member **48** and second end **60** with second connector member **52** as shown in FIG. 6A. Shown in FIG. 6B, modular steering wheel assembly **30** includes a second steering wheel member **84** and a third steering wheel member **86**.

In a non-limiting example, second steering wheel member **84** includes a first end portion **88** connected to first connector element **50** and a second end portion **90** that is cantilevered from central hub **33**. Similarly, third steering wheel member **86** includes a first end section **94** connected to second connector element **54** and second end section **96** that is cantilevered from central hub **33**. Second end portion **90** of second steering wheel member **84** and second end section **96** of third steering wheel member **86** are spaced from one another by a gap **100**. By adding second steering wheel member **84** and third steering wheel member **86** to central hub **33**, modular steering wheel assembly has a sportier appearance with a yoke geometry. Further, if desired to change the appearance, second and third steering wheel members **84** and **86** may be readily replaced with another option.

FIG. 7 depicts modular steering wheel assembly **30** in accordance with another non-limiting example. First support element **44** supports a first steering wheel member **106** and a second steering wheel member **108**, and second support element **46** supports a third steering wheel member **110** and a fourth steering wheel member **112**. First, second, third, and fourth steering wheel members **106**, **108**, **110**, and **112** may be formed by additive manufacturing and include an open framework design. The use of additive manufacturing for components of steering wheel assembly **30** provides an enhanced level of customization to the user in terms of appearance through shapes and geometries that are not otherwise possible and/or practical using traditional manufacturing methods.

6

In a non-limiting example, first steering wheel member **106** includes a first end **114** connected to first connector member **48** and a second end **116** that is cantilevered from central hub **33**. Second steering wheel member **108** includes a first end portion **119** connected to first connector element **50** and a second end portion **120** that is cantilevered from central hub **33**. Third steering wheel member **110** includes a first end section **122** connected to second connector member **52** and a second end section **123** cantilevered from central hub **33**. Fourth steering wheel member **112** includes a first end segment **128** connected to second connector element **54** and a second end segment **130** that is cantilevered from central hub **33**. Second end **116** is spaced from second end section **123** by a first gap **133** and second end portion **120** is spaced from second end segment **130** by a second gap **134**.

Reference will now follow to FIG. 8 in describing a detachable connection between first connector element **50** and first end portion **66** of second steering wheel member **38**. It should be understood that connections to first connector member **48**, second connector member **52**, and second connector element **54** include similar structure. In a non-limiting example, first end portion **66** of second steering wheel member **38** include a recess **142** including a first opening **144**. First connector element **50** includes a first threaded passage **144** that may be brought into alignment with the first opening **143**. A fastener **146** passes through the opening in first end portion **66** and engages threads (not shown) in second opening **144**, and tightened. Once tightened, a cover (not shown) is placed in recess **142** to hide fastener **146** and to provide a smooth rim appearance with reduced visibility of recess **142**.

At this point, it should be appreciated that the disclosed modular steering wheel assembly includes readily replaceable components that may be exchanged to replace worn surfaces or simply change an aesthetic of the vehicle. Steering wheel members may take on a variety of shapes and forms and could be formed from a wide array of materials. Steering wheel members may be formed from plastics, metals, carbon fiber and the like. The steering wheel members may be covered by a wide array of materials including leather, cloth, and the like. The number of options for creating a steering wheel are limited only by the imagination of the user.

The terms “a” and “an” do not denote a limitation of quantity, but rather denote the presence of at least one of the referenced item. The term “or” means “and/or” unless clearly indicated otherwise by context. Reference throughout the specification to “an aspect”, means that a particular element (e.g., feature, structure, step, or characteristic) described in connection with the aspect is included in at least one aspect described herein, and may or may not be present in other aspects. In addition, it is to be understood that the described elements may be combined in any suitable manner in the various aspects.

When an element such as a layer, film, region, or substrate is referred to as being “on” another element, it can be directly on the other element or intervening elements may also be present. In contrast, when an element is referred to as being “directly on” another element, there are no intervening elements present.

Unless specified to the contrary herein, all test standards are the most recent standard in effect as of the filing date of this application, or, if priority is claimed, the filing date of the earliest priority application in which the test standard appears.

Unless defined otherwise, technical, and scientific terms used herein have the same meaning as is commonly understood by one of skill in the art to which this disclosure belongs.

While the above disclosure has been described with reference to exemplary embodiments, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that various changes may be made and equivalents may be substituted for elements thereof without departing from its scope. In addition, many modifications may be made to adapt a particular situation or material to the teachings of the disclosure without departing from the essential scope thereof. Therefore, it is intended that the present disclosure not be limited to the particular embodiments disclosed, but will include all embodiments falling within the scope thereof

What is claimed is:

1. A modular steering wheel assembly comprising:

a central hub having a center support, a first support element extending outwardly from the center support in a first direction and a second support element extending outwardly from the center support in a second direction, the first support element including a first connector member and a first connector element, and the second support element including a second connector member and a second connector element;

a supplemental restraint system including an airbag mounted in the central hub;

a first steering wheel member non-foldably detachably connected to at least one of the first connector member and the second connector member;

a second steering wheel member non-foldably detachably connected to at least one of the first connector element and the second connector element, and

the first steering wheel member includes a hub support coupled to the central hub.

2. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 1, wherein the hub support includes a first hub support member and a second hub support member spaced from the first hub support member, each of the first hub support member and the second hub support member extending outwardly from the first steering wheel member between the first end and the second end.

3. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 1, wherein the second steering wheel member is connected to each of the first connector element and the second connector element.

4. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 3, wherein the first steering wheel member includes a first end connected to the first connector member and a second end connected to the second connector member and an intermediate portion extending between the first end and the second end.

5. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 4, wherein the intermediate portion includes a substantially straight section.

6. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 3, wherein the second steering wheel member includes a first end portion connected to the first connector element, a second end portion connected to the second connector element, and an intermediate section extending uninterrupted between the first end portion and the second end portion.

7. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 6, wherein the intermediate section including a substantially straight section.

8. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 1, further comprising a third steering wheel member,

wherein the second steering wheel member includes a first end portion detachably connected to the first connector element and a second end portion that is cantilevered from the central hub and the third steering wheel member includes a first end section detachably connected to the second connector element and a second end section that is cantilevered from the central hub.

9. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 8, further comprising a fourth steering wheel member extending between and connecting the second end portion of the second steering wheel member and the second end section of the third steering wheel member.

10. A vehicle comprising:

a body defining a passenger compartment; and

a modular steering wheel assembly arranged in the passenger compartment, the modular steering wheel assembly comprising:

a central hub having a center support, a first support element extending outwardly from the center support in a first direction and a second support element extending outwardly from the center support in a second direction, the first support element including a first connector member and a first connector element, and the second support element including a second connector member and a second connector element;

a supplemental restraint system including an airbag mounted in the central hub;

a first steering wheel member non-foldably detachably connected to at least one of the first connector member and the second connector member;

a second steering wheel member non-foldably detachably connected to at least one of the first connector element and the second connector element, and

the first steering wheel member includes a hub support coupled to the central hub.

11. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 10, wherein the hub support includes a first hub support member and a second hub support member spaced from the first hub support member, each of the first hub support member and the second hub support member extending outwardly from the first steering wheel member between the first end and the second end.

12. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 10, wherein the second steering wheel member is connected to each of the second connector member and the second connector element.

13. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 12, wherein the first steering wheel member includes a first end connected to the first connector member and a second end connected to the second connector member and an intermediate portion extending between the first end and the second end.

14. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 13, wherein the intermediate portion includes a substantially straight section.

15. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 12, wherein the second steering wheel member includes a first end portion connected to the first connector element, a second end portion connected to the second connector element, and an intermediate section extending uninterrupted between the first end portion and the second end portion.

16. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 15, wherein the intermediate section including a substantially straight section.

17. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim 10, further comprising a third steering wheel member,

wherein the second steering wheel member includes a first end portion detachably connected to the first connector element and a second end portion that is cantilevered from the central hub and the third steering wheel member includes a first end section detachably connected to the second 5 connector element and a second end section that is cantilevered from the central hub.

18. The modular steering wheel assembly according to claim **17**, further comprising a fourth steering wheel member extending between and connecting the second end 10 portion of the second steering wheel member and the second end section of the third steering wheel member.

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