The Impact of Environmental-themed Chinese Web Novel on Ecological Behavioral Intentions and the Mediating Role of Environmental Awareness Awakening

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Abstract

As an emerging environmental communication medium, the influence mechanism of environmental-themed web novels on readers' environmental behavior has not been fully studied. Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Theory of Narrative Persuasion, this study constructs a theoretical model of "environmental-themed cyberliterature-environmental awareness awakening-environmental behavioral intention", and explores the process of environmental-themed cyberliterature's influence on readers' environmental behavioral intention and its mechanism of action. The study adopts a quantitative research method, collecting data through questionnaires (N=350) and analyzing them with structural equation modeling. By measuring the reading volume, environmental awareness awakening (including cognitive level, sense of responsibility, and emotional resonance), and ecological behavioral intention of environmental-themed web novel, the results of this study will enrich the theoretical system of social impact research on web novel, and provide new ideas and inspirations for the practice of environmental communication.

Keywords: Chinese Web Novel, Reading Frequency, Cognitive Level, Sense of Responsibility, Emotional Resonance, Environmental Behavioral Intention

Introduction

Research Background

With the aggravation of global climate change, the sharp decline in biodiversity and increasing environmental pollution, human society is facing an unprecedented ecological crisis (Pörtner et al., 2023; Rinawati et al., 2013; Solórzano, 2023). The United Nations has emphasized that if no positive action is taken, the global temperature rise will exceed the 2°C warning line by the end of this century, leading to an irreversible ecological disaster (Elliott & Mark, 2010). Against this background, it has become particularly important to raise public awareness of environmental protection and ecological behavioral intentions (Pavlovic, 2022).

Chinese Web Novel, as a cultural form with wide social influence, has shown a booming development in recent years (Li, 2023; Ren, 2024). According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of 2024, the number of Web Novel users in China has exceeded 500 million, covering more than half of the Internet user population (Dingjia et al., 2024). Web Novel is not only a form of cultural entertainment, but also an important medium for shaping readers' values and behavioral tendencies (Kim, 2021; Li, 2024).

Among the many topics of Web Novel, environmental protection themed works show a trend of rapid growth (Christensen et al., 2018; Khasanah et al., 2024; Rizam & Ayuanita, 2024). Apocalyptic survival and survival works visualize the serious consequences of ecological destruction by depicting environmental disaster scenes and human survival crises (Hammer, 2010; Olgahan, 2024; Rajendran & Baghavandoss, 2024). Such works often transform abstract environmental problems into concrete plot experiences through figurative narratives, subconsciously influencing readers' environmental perceptions and attitudes (Christensen et al., 2018).

Based on this, this study focuses on the Reading Frequency (RF) of environmental-themed Web Novel (i.e., exposure level) as the independent variable and explores the mechanism of its influence on readers' Ecological Behavioral Intention (dependent variable, BI). Special attention is paid to the mediating role of environmental awareness awakening, a mediating variable that contains three key dimensions: cognitive level (CL), which refers to the degree of understanding and awareness of environmental issues (Altin et al., 2014; Baltodano-Nontol et al., 2024); Sense of Responsibility (SR), which refers to an individual's sense of responsibility and mission for environmental protection (Musova et al., 2021; Wu & Yi, 2014); and emotional resonance (ER), which refers to emotional reactions and empathy towards 9the destruction of ecological environment (Jaeger & Hine, 2024; Wang et al., 2018). By exploring the relationship between these variables, this study aims to reveal the intrinsic mechanism by which environmental-themed Web Novel influences readers' environmental behavior, and to provide new ideas for environmental education and ecological communication.

Research Issues
Existing studies have mainly focused on the influence of environmental education, environmental publicity and other traditional means on the public's awareness of environmental protection, while relatively little attention has been paid to the emerging medium of Internet literature(Çupi, 2023; Seelig, 2019). At the same time, most of the existing studies on environmental-themed literature have focused on textual analysis and thematic interpretation, but less on the actual impact on readers' psychology and behavior from an empirical point of view (Yap & Leow, 2024). Especially in the context of the rapid development of Chinese web novel market, there is an urgent need for an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms by which environmental-themed Web Novel affects readers' environmental cognition, emotions and behaviors. Based on this, this study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: Does reading frequency of environmental-themed web novel influence readers' ecological behavioral intention?
RQ2: Does reading frequency of environmental-themed web novel affect environmental awareness awakening?

RQ3: Does environmental awareness awakening affect readers' ecological behavioral intention?

RQ4: Does environmental awareness awakening play a mediating role in the process of environmental-themed web novels influencing readers' ecological behavioral intention?

Significance of Study

This study expands the horizons of environmental communication research from the theoretical level and constructs a model of the role mechanism of environmental-themed web novel in influencing readers' environmental behavior. By introducing environmental awareness awakening as a mediating variable, it deepens the theoretical knowledge of the social impact of web novels and enriches the research content of environmental education and narrative persuasion theory. The findings will provide theoretical support for understanding the mechanism effect of environmental communication in the new media era. From a practical point of view, this study is of great revelation to environmental organizations, network writers and environmental educators. The findings of the study can provide content guidance for the creation of environmental themes, optimize environmental communication strategies, and enhance the effect of environmental publicity. At the same time, it provides new ideas for environmental organizations to carry out environmental education activities, helping to cultivate public environmental awareness and promote the construction of ecological civilization.

Literature Review

Environmental-themed Web Novel

Environmental-themed Web Novel, as an emerging literary genre, visualizes and dramatizes environmental issues through plot settings such as apocalyptic crises and ecological disasters, etc. According to Kubrak & Starostina (2023), when readers are immersed in the storyline, they will experience a psychological "transportation" process, temporarily detaching themselves from the real world and integrating into the story world. He (2023) emphasized that immersive journalism enhances audience engagement by enabling them to experience events as "eyewitnesses" or "participants". This deepens understanding and emotional resonance, potentially reducing resistance to persuasive messages and facilitating cognitive change during environmental crises; Bowman et al., (2024) discusses how immersive storytelling can be effective in reducing resistance to persuasive messages, thereby increasing acceptance. Experiencing an environmental crisis within a narrative promotes authentic emotional resonance and cognitive shifts, which enhances readers' ability to engage with and respond to the message conveyed; Breves (2023) notes that immersive media can elicit high levels of spatial presence, which may reduce resistance to persuasive messages and enhance acceptance, leading to authentic emotional resonance and cognitive shifts, especially in contexts such as environmental crises.

These mechanisms are of special significance in environmental-themed web novels. Hammer (2010) suggests that futuristic eco-disaster novels, such as the fictionalized works of Beltania, Mark, and Sedgwick, embed social and cultural issues that push readers to confront environmental crises and their consequences, thereby stimulating deeper reflection on contemporary ecological challenges through figurative disaster scenarios. At the same time, Raskin Bond's short stories emphasize the interdependence between nature and humans, immersing the reader in the ecological crisis. This engagement raises environmental

awareness and inspires behavioral change, emphasizing human accountability for the environment during ongoing ecological challenges (Karunya, 2024). It can be expected that the more environmental-themed web novels are read, the more opportunities readers must experience narrative transmission, and the higher the degree of their environmental awareness awakening (Denga et al., 2023). This provides a solid theoretical foundation for the hypotheses of this study.

Theoretical Framework
This study constructs a mediation model of environmental-themed Web Novel influencing ecological behavior based on social cognitive theory. The model takes the reading frequency of environmental-themed Web Novel as the independent variable and environmental awareness awakening as the mediating variable to explore the mechanism of its influence on ecological behavioral intention. Environmental awareness awakening contains three dimensions: cognitive level, sense of responsibility and emotional resonance, which reflect the depth of readers' understanding of environmental issues, the degree of recognition of environmental responsibility and the strength of emotional connection with the natural environment, respectively (Altin et al., 2014; Baltodano-Nontol et al., 2024; Jaeger & Hine, 2024; Musova et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2018; Wu & Yi, 2014).

According to social cognitive theory, the formation of individual behavior is jointly influenced by cognition, emotion and social environment (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Environmental-themed Web Novel may directly strengthen readers' ecological behavioral intentions through its unique narrative style (Khasanah et al., 2024; Rizam & Ayuanita, 2024). At the same time, this influence may also be realized by enhancing environmental awareness(Khan et al., 2024; Rizam & Ayuanita, 2024). Specifically, the dissemination of environmental knowledge in network literature helps to enhance readers' cognitive level (Kushakova & Bayzakova, 2024; Rizam & Ayuanita, 2024); the moral ethics embedded in it may strengthen readers' sense of responsibility (Kausar & Kalu, 2023; Walker, 2006); and the infectious environmental depictions may deepen readers' emotional resonance (Coker, 2022; Gumovskaya & Lukanicheva, 2024; Harshavarthini & Muthukumaravel, 2024). This multidimensional awakening of environmental awareness may in turn promote the formation of ecological behavioral intentions (de Deus et al., 2014; Laheri et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2021). Based on the above analysis, **Error! Reference source not found.** shows the framework of this research, and the following research hypotheses are proposed:

H1: The reading frequency of environmental-themed Web Novel has a significant effect on the three dimensions of environmental awareness awakening, cognitive level (H1a), sense of responsibility (H1b), and emotional resonance (H1c).

H2: The frequency of reading environmental-themed Web Novel has a significant effect on ecological behavioral intention (H2).

H3: The three dimensions of environmental awareness awakening- cognitive level (H3a), responsibility (H3b), and emotional resonance (H3c) have a significant effect on ecological behavioral intention (H3a-c).

H4: The three dimensions of environmental awareness awakening cognitive level (H4a), sense of responsibility (H4b), and emotional resonance (H4c) mediate the relationship between the frequency of reading environmental-themed webnovel and ecological behavioral intention.
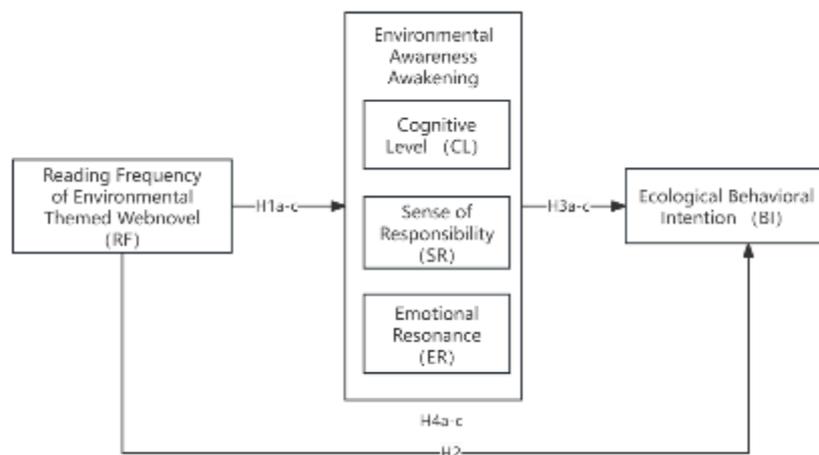
Fig. 1 Framework of Research

Methodology
This study adopts a quantitative research method to collect data through a questionnaire survey to verify the relationship between the reading of environmental-themed web novel, the awakening of environmental awareness and the intention of eco-behavior. Based on the previous literature review and theoretical framework, structural equation modeling was constructed to test the research hypotheses. This study targeted web novel readers aged 18-45 in mainland China, with a particular focus on those who have read environmental-themed web novel within the past year. A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants through reader forums and social media of major web novel platforms. The planned effective sample size is 300 people, and 350 questionnaires are planned to be distributed considering the questionnaire recovery rate and validity.

The scales related to cognitive level refer to a questionnaire on environmental cognitive level of secondary school students from Altin et al. (2014); The scale on sense of responsibility was taken from a survey conducted by Musova et al.(2021)in Slovakia. The scale on emotional resonance was altered from a template provided by ResearchWorks on artistic expression; the scale related to ecological behavioral intention was taken from study of mobile libraries by Wang et al.(2018). The questionnaire was distributed online, created and published through the Questionnaire Star platform. Before formal administration, a small sample pretest (N=30) will be conducted to test the reliability of the scale and make necessary revisions.

After the pretest, the survey was conducted in an online format, distributed through the Questionnaire Star platform, with a total of 350 questionnaires distributed, excluding those whose answers to the questionnaires were all consistent and those who hadn't read environmental-themed online novels, and recovering 318 valid questionnaires, with an effective rate of questionnaire recovery of 90.86%. The number of surveys collected is sufficient to reflect the ecological behavioral intention and its influence.

Results of Analysis
Sample Characteristics and Data Distribution
A total of 318 valid questionnaires were collected in this study, and the validity rate of the questionnaires was 90.86%. As showed in

Table **1**, the gender distribution of the sample group is relatively balanced (male 47.17%, female 52.83%), mainly young people between 18-40 years old (56.92%), with a certain reading frequency and willingness to pay.

Table 1
Profile of factors characterizing the demographics of the sample

	OPTIONS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
GENDER	Male	150	47.170
	Female	168	52.830
AGE	Below 18 years	47	14.780
	18-30 years	99	31.132
	31-40 years	82	25.786
	41-50 years	54	16.981
	Above 50 years	36	11.321
EDUCATION	High school and below	81	25.472
	University college/undergraduate	159	50.000
	Master's Degree	56	17.610
	Doctoral degree	22	6.918

Among them, data show that 71.9% of the respondents read environmental-themed web novels no less than once a week, and more than 70% of them read for more than 60 minutes, showing a high degree of stickiness and acceptance of the content.The results of the data after skewness and kurtosis tests show that the skewness coefficients of all the observed variables are between ±3, and the kurtosis coefficients are between ±10, which meets the requirements of approximate normal distribution and is suitable for PLS-SEM modeling analysis.

Measurement Model Evaluation
Reliability and Convergent Validity
Cronbach's α and combined reliability (CR) tests were conducted on each potential variable of the questionnaire, and the results are shown in

Table **4**, which indicate that the internal consistency of each variable is good (α value and CR are both greater than 0.78), and the convergent validity also meets the standard (AVE > 0.50), and the questionnaire measurement tool has a high degree of reliability and validity.

Validity Analysis
In this study, SmartPLS 4.0 was used to analyze the data for convergent validity, and the results of the data analysis are shown in Table 2, the t-value of all the question items is greater than 1.96, and the p-value is less than 0.001, which means that all the question items are significant and possess good explanatory power. The combined reliability of all the constructs is greater than 0.70, which means that the question days under the same construction have internal consistency and the measurement model reliability is good. The mean extraction

variance for all constructs was greater than 0.50. Overall, the questionnaire in this study had good convergent validity.

Table 2
Convergent Validity Table (Math.)

Constructs	Item	O	STDEV	O/STDEV	P Value	CR	AVE
Reading Frequency (RF)	RF1	0.853	0.022	38.464	0.000	0.784	0.697
	RF2	0.853	0.020	42.782	0.000		
	RF3	0.797	0.028	28.099	0.000		
Cognitive Level (CL)	CL1	0.822	0.021	38.998	0.000	0.954	0.653
	CL10	0.859	0.016	53.821	0.000		
	CL11	0.714	0.034	21.077	0.000		
	CL2	0.833	0.018	46.044	0.000		
	CL3	0.820	0.021	39.227	0.000		
	CL4	0.703	0.035	19.886	0.000		
	CL5	0.710	0.034	20.878	0.000		
	CL6	0.851	0.016	53.548	0.000		
	CL7	0.860	0.017	50.916	0.000		
	CL8	0.837	0.017	48.279	0.000		
	CL9	0.851	0.016	52.940	0.000		
Sense of Responsibility (SR)	SR1	0.859	0.016	55.349	0.000	0.962	0.633
	SR10	0.753	0.030	24.991	0.000		
	SR11	0.719	0.031	23.030	0.000		
	SR12	0.850	0.017	49.308	0.000		
	SR13	0.850	0.014	61.480	0.000		
	SR2	0.851	0.014	60.320	0.000		
	SR3	0.848	0.015	58.482	0.000		
	SR4	0.847	0.015	56.960	0.000		
	SR5	0.706	0.035	20.113	0.000		
	SR6	0.826	0.017	47.239	0.000		
	SR7	0.724	0.029	25.236	0.000		
	SR8	0.770	0.026	29.289	0.000		
	SR9	0.703	0.034	20.811	0.000		
Emotional Resonance (ER)	ER1	0.865	0.026	32.907	0.000	0.817	0.636
	ER2	0.782	0.040	19.402	0.000		
	ER3	0.741	0.047	15.895	0.000		
	ER4	0.797	0.034	23.662	0.000		
Ecological Behavioral Intention (BI)	BI1	0.907	0.010	93.576	0.000	0.895	0.823
	BI2	0.899	0.016	54.966	0.000		
	BI3	0.916	0.011	86.866	0.000		

Meanwhile,

	RF	CL	SR	ER	BI
RF	0.835				
CL	0.238	0.808			
SR	0.253	0.191	0.795		
ER	0.186	0.133	0.049	0.797	

BI	0.297	0.282	0.335	0.248	0.907

shows the results of the analysis of the Vernell I. Lark criterion, the bold diagonal line is the result of the open root of the average extracted variance (AVE), and the lower triangular area is the correlation coefficient between the variables, and as can be seen in the table, the square root of the average extracted variance of the cognitive level, ecological behavioral intention, emotional resonance, frequency of reading, and sense of responsibility are respectively 0.808, 0.907, 0.797 , 0.835, and 0.795, which are greater than the correlation coefficients between the variables. To summarize the above belongings, the questionnaire is considered to have good differential validity.

Table 3
Distinguishing Validity - Vernell I. Lark Criteria Scale

	RF	CL	SR	ER	BI
RF	0.835				
CL	0.238	0.808			
SR	0.253	0.191	0.795		
ER	0.186	0.133	0.049	0.797	
BI	0.297	0.282	0.335	0.248	0.907

The Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loading method were used to verify the discriminant validity, and the results showed that the square root values of each construct were higher than their correlation coefficients with other variables, and the cross-loading also showed that each question item had the largest loadings on the dimension to which it belonged, which indicated that there was good discriminant validity among the latent variables.

Table 4
Indicators of Reliability and Convergent Validity of Measurement Variables Structural Model Evaluation

CONSTRUCTS	NUMBER OF ITEMS	CRONBACH'S ALPHA
RF	3	0.782
CL	11	0.946
SR	13	0.951
ER	4	0.809
BI	3	0.893

Path Coefficient Analysis
The results of the path analysis of the structural model are shown in

Table **5**, and all the paths reach the significant level ($p < 0.01$), which verifies the establishment of the hypotheses of each study.

Table 5
Path coefficients and hypothesis testing results

HYPOTHESIS PATH	β VALUE	STDEV	T VALUE	P VALUE	CONCLUSION
RF→CL(H1a)	0.238	0.057	4.174	0.000	Support
RF→SR (H1b)	0.253	0.050	5.061	0.000	Support
RF→ER (H1c)	0.186	0.057	3.244	0.001	Support
RF→BI (H2)	0.158	0.044	3.591	0.000	Support
CL→BI (H3a)	0.172	0.046	3.701	0.000	Support

SR→BI (H3b)	0.253	0.046	5.513	0.000	Support
ER→BI (H3c)	0.183	0.052	3.552	0.000	Support

Analysis of Mediating Effects

Bootstrapping test in Table 6 showed that reading frequency had a significant indirect effect on ecological behavioral intention through three paths: cognitive level (β = 0.041, p = 0.016), responsibility (β = 0.064, p = 0.002), and emotional resonance (β = 0.034, p = 0.022), which verified the hypotheses H4a, H4b and H4c.

Table 6
Mediating effects and significance results

HYPOTHESIS PATH	β VALUE	STDEV	T VALUE	P VALUE	CONCLUSION
RF→CL→BI (H4a)	0.041	0.017	2.405	0.016	Establishment
RF→SR→BI (H4b)	0.064	0.021	3.096	0.064	Establishment
RF→ER →BI (H4c)	0.034	0.015	2.293	0.022	Establishment

Conclusion

This study centers on the role mechanism of environmental-themed online novels in the formation of environmental behavioral intention, and based on the theory of planned behavior and narrative persuasion theory, a structural model with reading frequency as the starting point, environmental awareness awakening as the mediator, and ecological behavioral intention as the outcome is constructed. The empirical results show that online novels, as a kind of narrative cultural product, can indeed prompt readers to generate stronger psychological motivation for environmental protection by stimulating cognition, moral sense and emotional resonance. The three dimensions of environmental awareness play a key role in this psychological bridge, and the mediating effect of the sense of responsibility is particularly significant, suggesting that "internalized moral identity" may be a deeper path for web novel to guide environmental behavior. The study further suggests that content consumption is no longer just "entertainment is the end", but may become an important channel for environmental protection concepts to spread and individual consciousness to be transformed.

On the theoretical level, this study attempts to introduce digital reading behavior into environmental psychology modeling, which expands the scope of environmental communication research in the field of web novel, and also provides empirical support for the "Narrative-Consciousness-Behavior" path model. On the practical level, the study suggests a synergistic strategy for environmental educators, platform operators, and online creators: by optimizing content curation and highlighting emotion-driven and responsibility-inspired mechanisms, it is possible to transform daily reading behavior into social momentum for environmental action.

Although the results are robust and reliable, the study is still limited by the sample composition, data sources, and variable design, and future research can further incorporate variables such as platform design elements, usage behavior trajectories, and text type differences to expand the explanatory power and adaptability of the model. Overall, this study validates the potential role of digital literature in the communication system of sustainable development, and provides a concrete and actionable paradigm for innovative paths in environmental education.

Ethical Statements
This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Statements and Declarations
Competing Interests
The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.
Ethical statements
This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.
Informed Consent Statement
All participants were fully informed of their anonymity, the reasons for conducting the study, how their data would be used, and that participation in the study would not pose any risk to them.
Author contributions
ZhangMin was responsible for material preparation, data collection and analysis, and writing of the paper.
Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage
This study was conducted in October 2024 using the AI big data model Claud for literature translation and language touch-up work.

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