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From Expertise to Trust: How Parasocial Relationships and Influencer Popularity Shape New Energy Vehicle Purchase Intention in China

Ziyue Liu*
Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Skudai, Johor 81310, Malaysia
Corresponding Author Email: liuziyue@graduate.utm.my

Norzaidahwati Zaidin
Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Skudai, Johor 81310, Malaysia
Email: nzw@utm.my

Batiah Mahadi
Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Skudai, Johor 81310, Malaysia
Email: batiah.kl@utm.my

Ruyue Kou
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Serdang, Selangor 43400, Malaysia
Email: gs72920@student.upm.edu.my

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of the new energy vehicle (NEV) market in China has intensified the role of social media influencers in shaping consumer decision making, yet the psychological mechanisms underlying influencer effectiveness in this high-involvement context remain insufficiently understood. Guided by the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework and integrating parasocial interaction theory and social proof theory, this study investigates how influencer-related cues influence consumers' NEV purchase intention. Using a purposive sampling approach, survey data were collected from NEV consumers in Beijing and Shanghai. A total of 475 valid responses were analyzed. Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses were conducted using SPSS, while hypothesis testing and structural model evaluation were performed using SmartPLS with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that influencer expertise has a significant positive effect on parasocial relationship, which subsequently enhances trust in the influencer. Trust in influencer exerts a strong positive influence on NEV purchase intention. In addition, influencer popularity

significantly moderates the relationship between influencer expertise and parasocial relationship, such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of popularity. By contrast, the direct effect of influencer expertise on NEV purchase intention is not supported. These findings demonstrate that influencer expertise affects NEV purchase intention primarily through relational and trust-based mechanisms rather than through direct influence. By conceptualizing parasocial relationship and trust as interconnected organismic processes, this study advances understanding of influencer effectiveness in high-involvement and high-uncertainty consumption contexts and offers practical guidance for trust-oriented influencer strategies in the NEV market.
Keywords: Influencer Expertise, Parasocial Relationship, Influencer Popularity, Trust in Influencer, New Energy Vehicles, Purchase Intention

Introduction

New energy vehicle (NEV) have been widely promoted as a strategic solution for sustainable transportation and carbon reduction, particularly in China, where supportive policies and market initiatives have accelerated industry development (CAAM, 2024). Alongside this expansion, digital platforms and social media have become important channels through which consumers obtain information and form perceptions about NEV, helping to reduce information barriers associated with complex and unfamiliar technologies (De Veirman et al., 2017). Nevertheless, consumer adoption of NEV remains relatively cautious. Purchase decisions are frequently constrained by perceived risk, technological uncertainty, and limited experiential knowledge, despite increasing exposure to NEV related information (Krishnan & Koshy, 2021). This persistent hesitation suggests that greater information availability alone may be insufficient to explain how consumers evaluate and decide on NEV in high-involvement contexts (Krishnan & Koshy, 2021).

Existing research on NEV has primarily examined determinants such as technological attributes, environmental attitudes, and policy incentives shaping consumers' evaluations and adoption intentions (Feng et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). While these studies have generated valuable insights, they often conceptualize consumer responses at an attitudinal level. In contrast, purchase intention toward NEV reflects a more comprehensive and consequential judgment, encompassing economic costs, technological uncertainty, and long-term usage considerations (Wang & Dong, 2016). Despite increasing market visibility and promotional efforts, consumers' willingness to purchase NEV remains restrained, continuing to impede broader market diffusion (CAAM, 2024). This indicates that purchase intention warrants greater attention as a focal outcome variable in NEV research.

Prior studies investigating NEV purchase intention have generally followed two main lines of inquiry. One stream focuses on product- and technology-related factors, including vehicle performance, cost considerations, and infrastructure availability (Rainieri et al., 2023; Wang & Tian, 2023). Another stream emphasizes contextual influences such as policy incentives, environmental concerns, social norms, and cultural factors (Bai & Tan, 2021; Wang & Tian, 2023). Although these perspectives offer important explanations, they pay limited attention to the evolving information environment in which consumers increasingly rely on social media and influencer-based communication when evaluating complex products. As a result, the role of influencer-related cues in shaping NEV purchase intention remains underexplored.

Within digital marketing research, source expertise has been shown to influence purchase intention through trust-related processes (Lou & Yuan, 2020). However, existing studies have predominantly conceptualized trust as trust in brands, advertisements, or platforms, rather than trust directed toward the information source itself (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). Moreover, the relationship between expertise and trust has often been modeled as a direct effect, providing limited insight into the psychological mechanisms through which trust is formed (Garg & Bakshi, 2024). This leaves the mediating role of trust in linking influencer expertise to purchase intention insufficiently examined, particularly in high-involvement consumption contexts such as NEV.

Beyond trust, emerging research suggests that source expertise may also contribute to the formation of parasocial relationships, although empirical findings remain mixed (Lawrence & Meivitawanli, 2023). While some studies report a positive association between expertise and parasocial relationships (Fatima & Usamah, 2023; Liu et al., 2023), others find no significant effect, indicating that this relationship may be context dependent (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Muhammad & Hartini, 2023). These inconsistencies imply that relying solely on direct effects provides an incomplete understanding of how expertise translates into relational engagement. Identifying relevant boundary conditions is therefore essential (Miles, 2017). In this regard, influencer popularity has been proposed as a potentially important yet underexamined contextual factor, as popularity cues may intensify audience familiarity and parasocial engagement (Manchanda et al., 2021).

In response to these gaps, this study aims to make several contributions to the existing literature. First, it examines influencer expertise as a key antecedent shaping consumer responses in the NEV context, where purchase decisions involve high involvement and uncertainty. Second, the study investigates the mediating role of parasocial relationship in explaining how influencer expertise contributes to trust in influencer, thereby offering deeper insight into the psychological processes underlying trust formation. Third, it explores the moderating effect of influencer popularity on the relationship between influencer expertise and parasocial relationship, highlighting how social endorsement cues condition the effectiveness of expertise-based influence. By integrating antecedents, mediating mechanisms, and boundary conditions within a unified framework, this study provides a more coherent and nuanced explanation of how influencer-related factors jointly shape consumers' purchase intention toward NEV.

Theoretical Background

NEV Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is commonly defined as an individual's subjective probability or willingness to purchase a specific product and has been widely regarded as a proximal antecedent of actual purchasing behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of NEV, purchase intention reflects consumers' overall evaluation and readiness to adopt vehicles characterized by technological innovation, long-term usage uncertainty, and relatively high financial investment (Rezvani et al., 2015). Unlike conventional vehicle purchases, NEV purchase intention captures not only utilitarian considerations but also consumers' expectations regarding future performance, reliability, and policy stability (Chen et al., 2021).

Prior studies emphasize that NEV purchase intention is a particularly important construct because it represents consumers' decision-making outcomes in high-involvement and high-risk contexts, where actual purchase behavior may be delayed or constrained by external conditions (Wang & Tian, 2023; Bai & Tan, 2021). As such, NEV purchase intention has been widely adopted as a core dependent variable in NEV research to assess consumers' evaluative judgments and behavioral readiness in response to evolving market and informational environments (Wang & Tian, 2023; Bai & Tan, 2021).

Parasocial Interaction Theory

Parasocial interaction theory explains how individuals develop one-sided, illusionary relationships with media figures through repeated mediated exposure. Originally proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956), the theory suggests that audiences may experience feelings of intimacy, familiarity, and emotional connection toward media personas despite the absence of reciprocal interaction. This framework was developed to address how interpersonal-like bonds can emerge in mass communication settings and has since been widely applied to explain audience engagement, emotional attachment, and relational perceptions in television, online media, and social networking environments (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Parasocial interaction theory is particularly relevant to the present study because social media platforms enable frequent exposure, perceived interaction, and self-disclosure, all of which facilitate the formation of parasocial relationships with influencers. These perceived relationships represent an important intervening psychological mechanism through which external cues are internalized and evaluated. Prior research indicates that parasocial relationships reduce psychological distance and enhance perceived relational closeness, thereby shaping subsequent cognitive and affective responses toward influencers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Accordingly, this study draws on parasocial interaction theory to identify parasocial relationship as a key intervening variable that explains how consumers process influencer-related cues and form subsequent evaluations in digital consumption contexts.

Social Proof Theory

Social proof theory explains how individuals rely on the opinions, behaviors, and endorsements of others as heuristic cues when making judgments under conditions of uncertainty. Originally proposed by Cialdini (2007), the theory suggests that people tend to view behaviors or choices as more appropriate when they are widely adopted or approved by others. Social proof has been widely used to explain decision making in marketing and online contexts, particularly where individuals face information overload, limited expertise, or perceived risk (De Veirman et al., 2017). In digital environments, observable indicators such as popularity, visibility, and audience engagement function as signals of collective endorsement, helping users simplify evaluations of information sources.

Social proof theory is particularly relevant to this study because consumers evaluating complex products often rely on social cues to guide their perceptions of information sources. In influencer marketing contexts, influencer popularity reflected through follower numbers and public visibility serves as a salient social proof cue that enhances perceived social relevance and legitimacy (Rihl & Wegener, 2017). Such popularity cues increase familiarity and perceived significance, thereby facilitating emotional engagement and relational closeness with influencers. Through this process, social proof contributes to the development

of parasocial relationships by strengthening audiences' perceived connection with widely endorsed influencers. Accordingly, social proof theory provides a theoretical basis for understanding how popularity-related cues shape parasocial relationship formation in social media environments. Overall, the research model shown in figure 1 is based on SOR theory, source credibility theory, social proof theory and parasocial interaction theory.

SOR

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), explains how external stimuli influence individuals' internal cognitive and affective states, which subsequently shape behavioral responses. Within this framework, stimuli refer to environmental cues, organism represents internal psychological processes, and response denotes approach or avoidance behaviors. The S–O–R model has been widely applied in marketing and consumer behavior research to explain decision making in complex and information-rich contexts, particularly in online and digital environments (Kim & Lennon, 2013). Prior studies demonstrate that the framework effectively captures how informational and social cues influence trust, emotional responses, and purchase-related outcomes (Zhao et al., 2020).

The S–O–R framework is particularly suitable for this study because purchasing NEV involves high perceived risk, technological complexity, and information asymmetry, making consumers sensitive to external information cues (Chen et al., 2021). In such contexts, consumers' behavioral intentions are shaped through internal psychological processes rather than direct stimulus–response mechanisms. Social media environments provide salient cues that influence how information is processed and evaluated under uncertainty (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In this research, influencer expertise and influencer popularity are stimulus. Additionally, parasocial relationship and trust in influencer are organism. At them same time, NEV purchase intention is response. Overall, the research model shown in figure 1 is based on SOR theory, social proof theory and parasocial interaction theory.

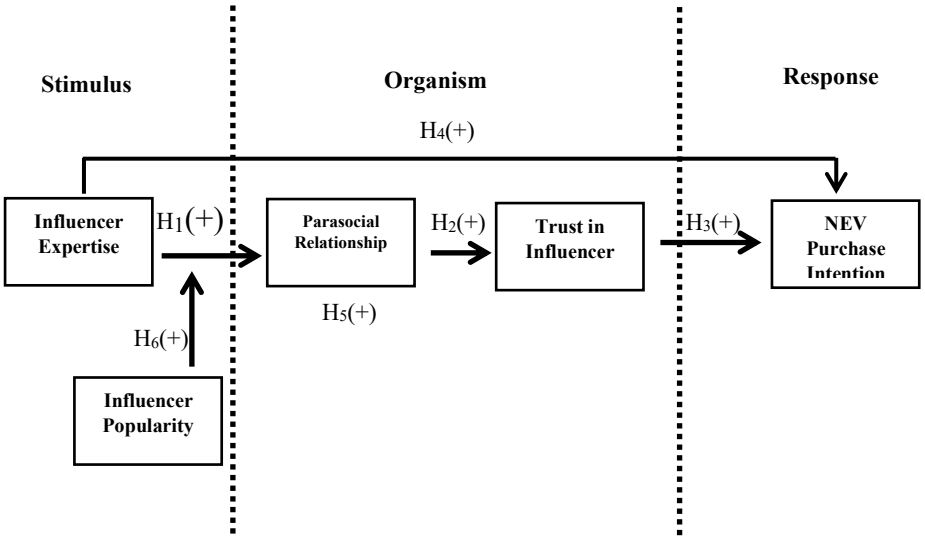

Figure 1. Research model

Research Hypotheses

Influencer Expertise and Parasocial Relationship

Influencer expertise refers to the extent to which an influencer is perceived as knowledgeable, experienced, and capable of providing accurate and reliable information within a specific domain (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Fatima & Usamah, 2023; Liu et al., 2023). Prior research suggests that perceived expertise enhances audiences' cognitive evaluations of an influencer and increases attentional engagement with influencer-generated content (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In social media environments, repeated exposure to expert opinions and consistent demonstrations of competence can foster familiarity and perceived intimacy, which are central conditions for the development of parasocial relationships. From a parasocial interaction perspective, audiences are more likely to form one-sided relational bonds with media figures whom they perceive as credible and professionally competent, as expertise reduces uncertainty and enhances perceived interaction quality (Lawrence & Meivitawanli, 2023; Tran et al., 2024). Empirical studies provide further support for this association. Several scholars have found that higher levels of influencer expertise are associated with stronger parasocial relationships, suggesting that expertise facilitates emotional attachment and perceived relational closeness (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Fatima & Usamah, 2023; Liu et al., 2023). Although some studies report mixed findings, the prevailing evidence indicates that expertise serves as an important informational cue that encourages audiences to engage more deeply with influencers and perceive them as relatable and trustworthy social actors (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Influencer expertise has a positive effect on parasocial relationship.

Parasocial Relationship and Trust in Influencer

Parasocial relationship describes a one-sided, perceived interpersonal bond that audiences develop with media figures through repeated mediated exposure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In social media environments, such relationships are strengthened through frequent content consumption, self-disclosure, and perceived interaction, leading followers to experience emotional closeness and a sense of familiarity with influencers (Chung & Cho, 2017). These relational perceptions are critical antecedents of trust formation, particularly in online contexts where direct interpersonal interaction is limited. Trust in an influencer is more likely to develop when followers perceive the influencer as sincere, relatable, and emotionally connected. Prior research indicates that parasocial relationships enhance perceived benevolence and authenticity, which are central dimensions of interpersonal trust (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Empirical evidence further suggests that stronger parasocial bonds lead audiences to evaluate influencer messages more favorably and attribute higher credibility and trustworthiness to the influencer (Yang et al., 2025). By reducing psychological distance and uncertainty, parasocial relationships create a relational context in which trust can emerge more readily, especially in high-involvement consumption settings. Drawing on parasocial interaction theory and prior empirical findings, this study posits that stronger parasocial relationships will be associated with higher levels of trust in the influencer. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Parasocial relationship has a positive effect on trust in influencer.

Trust in Influencer and NEV Purchase Intention

Trust in influencer refers to consumers' confidence in an influencer's reliability, sincerity, and credibility as an information source. Prior research consistently emphasizes trust as a central

determinant of purchase intention in online and social commerce contexts, particularly when consumers face high levels of uncertainty and perceived risk (Zhao et al., 2020). In influencer-driven environments, trust functions as a key psychological mechanism that reduces information asymmetry and enhances consumers' willingness to rely on influencer-provided recommendations (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Empirical studies demonstrate that when consumers trust an influencer, they are more likely to accept the information shared, perceive lower decision risk, and exhibit stronger purchase intention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). This effect is especially salient for high-involvement and technologically complex products, such as NEV, where consumers often lack sufficient expertise to independently evaluate product performance and long-term value (Chen et al., 2021). In such contexts, trust in the influencer serves as a substitute for direct product knowledge, guiding consumers' evaluations and purchase decisions (Jiang et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study proposes that higher levels of trust in influencer will lead to stronger purchase intention toward NEV.
H3: Trust in influencer has a positive effect on NEV purchase intention.

Influencer Expertise and Trust in Influencer
Influencer expertise refers to the extent to which an influencer is perceived as knowledgeable, experienced, and competent in a specific product domain. Prior research suggests that perceived expertise enhances information diagnosticity and message persuasiveness, thereby increasing consumers' confidence in decision making (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In digital consumption contexts, especially those characterized by information asymmetry, consumers tend to rely on expert sources to evaluate complex products and reduce perceived uncertainty (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). This effect is particularly salient in the context of NEV, which involve high financial investment, technological complexity, and long-term usage uncertainty. When influencers demonstrate strong expertise, consumers are more likely to perceive the information provided as accurate and useful, leading to more favorable evaluations and stronger purchase intention (Jiang et al., 2024). Empirical studies further indicate that influencer expertise directly enhances purchase intention by improving consumers' understanding of product attributes and increasing perceived decision confidence (Do et al., 2024). Accordingly, influencer expertise serves as an important informational cue that positively shapes consumers' behavioral intentions toward NEV. Based on the above reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H4: Influencer expertise has a positive effect on NEV purchase intention.

The Mediating role of Parasocial Relationship
Influencer expertise is an important informational cue that enhances audiences' evaluations of influencers and their content (Lou & Yuan, 2019). However, the effect of expertise on trust may not be purely direct, but instead operate through relational mechanisms. Parasocial interaction theory suggests that repeated exposure to knowledgeable and competent media figures fosters familiarity, emotional closeness, and perceived interpersonal connection, which are central to parasocial relationship formation (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Chung & Cho, 2017). Empirical studies indicate that higher levels of influencer expertise are associated with stronger parasocial relationships, as expertise enhances perceived credibility and approachability (Aw & Chuah, 2021).

Stronger parasocial relationships, in turn, facilitate trust formation by reducing psychological distance and uncertainty and enhancing perceived sincerity and benevolence (Sokolova & Kefi,

2020). Accordingly, influencer expertise may foster trust indirectly through parasocial relationships. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H5: Parasocial relationship positively mediates the relationship between influencer expertise and trust in influencer.

The Moderating Role of Influencer Popularity
Influencer popularity reflects the extent to which an influencer is widely recognized and followed, often indicated by follower count, engagement level, and overall visibility on social media platforms. Drawing on social proof theory, popularity serves as an important heuristic cue that signals social endorsement and collective approval, thereby shaping how audiences interpret other influencer attributes, such as expertise (De Veirman et al., 2017). When an influencer is perceived as popular, their expertise is more likely to be validated by the broader audience, enhancing followers' confidence in the influencer's competence and relevance. Prior research suggests that parasocial relationships are not formed solely through perceived competence, but are also influenced by social cues that increase familiarity and perceived significance of media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Chung & Cho, 2017). Empirical studies indicate that higher levels of influencer popularity are associated with stronger parasocial bonds, as increased visibility and social recognition amplify emotional involvement and perceived closeness (Rihl & Wegener, 2017; Manchanda et al., 2021). In this context, influencer popularity may strengthen the extent to which expertise translates into parasocial relationship formation by reinforcing the influencer's social presence and attractiveness. Accordingly, when influencer popularity is high, followers are more likely to engage with and emotionally connect to an influencer whose expertise is recognized and endorsed by others. Conversely, when popularity is low, the effect of expertise on parasocial relationship may be weaker. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H6: The positive relationship between influencer expertise and parasocial relationship will be stronger when influencer popularity is higher.

Methodology

Data Collection and Sample Characteristics
This research adopted a purposive, non-probability sampling strategy due to the absence of an established sampling frame for Chinese consumers who either intend to purchase or are in the process of evaluating new NEV. The use of purposive sampling enabled the identification of respondents whose characteristics closely aligned with the objectives of the study. Eligibility was determined based on two criteria: first, respondents were required to demonstrate a prospective intention to purchase an NEV or to be actively assessing NEV as a viable purchase option; second, they needed to have followed or engaged with social media influencers who create or disseminate content related to NEV. Data collection was conducted from 1 to 13 November 2025 at NEV exhibition venues in Beijing and Shanghai, focusing on consumers aged 18–60 years who were active users of social media platforms and capable of making independent purchasing decisions. To ensure sample relevance, a set of screening questions was administered prior to the main survey, and only individuals with recent exposure to influencer generated NEV content were invited to complete the questionnaire. A total of 1,200 questionnaires were returned, of which 475 responses met the validity criteria and were retained for analysis. This final sample size substantially surpassed the minimum threshold of 119 cases recommended by G*Power, thereby ensuring sufficient statistical power for subsequent structural equation modeling procedures.

Among the 475 valid respondents, 50.65% were female (N = 241) and 49.35% were male (N = 234). The sample was predominantly composed of individuals aged 30–39 years (48.05%, N = 228), followed by those aged 40–49 years (29.87%, N = 142) and 20–29 years (15.58%, N = 74), while respondents aged 50–60 years accounted for a smaller proportion (6.49%, N = 31), no respondents were under the age of 20. In terms of monthly income, the majority reported earning between 5,001 and 10,000 yuan (40.26%, N = 191), followed by 10,001–15,000 yuan (26.62%, N = 126) and below 5,000 yuan (16.88%, N = 80). Smaller proportions reported higher income levels, including 15,001–20,000 yuan (9.74%, N = 46), 20,001–30,000 yuan (5.19%, N = 25), and 30,001–50,000 yuan (1.30%, N = 6), with no respondents earning above 50,000 yuan per month. Regarding educational attainment, 37.01% (N = 176) held a bachelor's degree, 29.22% (N = 139) had completed diploma-level education, and 21.43% (N = 102) possessed a postgraduate qualification or above, while 12.34% (N = 58) reported secondary education or lower. Overall, the demographic profile indicates a socioeconomically diverse sample that aligns with the study's target population of consumers exposed to influencer-generated NEV-related content.

Measures

All measurement instruments employed in this study were adapted from prior validated studies to ensure both reliability and content validity. Items measuring NEV purchase intention were derived from Jiang et al. (2024) and Wang et al. (2024). Measures of influencer expertise were adapted from the scales developed by Masuda et al. (2022) and Nouira and Boukamcha (2023). The parasocial relationship construct was operationalized using items based on Chung and Cho (2017) and Yang et al. (2025). Influencer popularity was assessed using measurement items adapted from Ladhari et al. (2020) and Filieri et al. (2023), while trust in influencer was measured using established scales from Venciute et al. (2023) and Guo et al. (2021). To maintain measurement consistency across constructs, all items were evaluated using a five-point Likert-type scale anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data Analysis Plan

Preliminary data analysis was conducted using SPSS and SmartPLS 4.0, with an initial focus on assessing potential common method variance. Subsequently, both the measurement model and the structural model were evaluated using SmartPLS 4.0. This software employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is widely recognized as a robust analytical technique for assessing construct reliability and validity, as well as for examining complex relationships among latent variables. PLS-SEM is particularly appropriate for research models that incorporate mediating and moderating mechanisms, involve formative measurement specifications, or rely on relatively small sample sizes. Given these methodological advantages, the PLS-SEM approach was deemed appropriate for addressing the objectives of the present study and provides a rigorous framework for testing the proposed theoretical model.

Data Analysis

Common Method Variance

To mitigate potential common method variance (CMV), several procedural and statistical remedies were implemented. Prior to the main survey, the questionnaire underwent rigorous pretesting, incorporating feedback from domain experts as well as a pilot study with

prospective respondents to ensure item clarity and comprehensibility (Hair et al., 2019). Respondents were explicitly informed both on the cover page and throughout the questionnaire that there were no right or wrong answers, and were encouraged to provide candid responses. The anonymity of responses was assured to further reduce evaluation apprehension and promote truthful reporting. In addition, Harman's single-factor test was conducted as a post hoc diagnostic, revealing that the largest proportion of variance explained by a single factor was 33.211%, which is well below the recommended threshold of 50% (Aguirre-Urreta & Hu, 2019). These results suggest that CMV is unlikely to pose a serious threat to the validity of the findings.

Measurement Model

To assess the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement model, Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) were calculated using SmartPLS 4.0. As reported in Table 1, all constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with CA values ranging from 0.852 to 0.934 and CR values ranging from 0.900 to 0.943, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). Convergent validity was evaluated by examining the average variance extracted (AVE) and the factor loadings of individual measurement items. All AVE values were above the acceptable minimum of 0.50, ranging from 0.601 to 0.710, indicating adequate convergent validity. In addition, all item loadings exceeded 0.70, confirming that each indicator adequately represented its corresponding latent construct. Collectively, these findings indicate that the measurement model satisfies the requirements for reliability and convergent validity, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Measurement model assessment

Variables	Items	Factor loadings (≥0.5)	Cronbach's alpha (≥0.07)	Composite reliability (≥0.07)	Average variance extracted (AVE) (≥0.05)
IE	IE1	0.865	0.861	0.906	0.706
	IE2	0.812			
	IE3	0.858			
	IE4	0.825			
IP	IP1	0.867	0.898	0.924	0.710
	IP2	0.873			
	IP3	0.805			
	IP4	0.818			
	IP5	0.848			
NPI	NPI1	0.872	0.852	0.900	0.693
	NPI2	0.793			
	NPI3	0.836			
	NPI4	0.826			
PSR	PSR1	0.797	0.934	0.943	0.601
	PSR2	0.817			
	PSR3	0.794			
	PSR4	0.750			
	PSR5	0.734			
	PSR6	0.767			
	PSR7	0.777			

Variables	Items	Factor loadings (≥0.5)	Cronbach's alpha (≥0.07)	Composite reliability (≥0.07)	Average variance extracted (AVE) (≥0.05)
TII	PSR8	0.758	0.883	0.911	0.632
	PSR9	0.750			
	PSR10	0.785			
	PSR11	0.798			
	TII1	0.792			
	TII2	0.795			
	TII3	0.781			
	TII4	0.756			
	TII5	0.806			
	TII6	0.830			

Discriminant validity was evaluated using two complementary approaches. First, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was applied by comparing the square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct with the corresponding inter-construct correlation coefficients. As reported in Table 2, the square roots of the AVE values for all constructs exceeded their respective correlations with other constructs, indicating adequate discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2021). Second, the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio was employed to further assess construct distinctiveness. Consistent with the guideline proposed by Franke and Sarstedt Sarstedt et al., 2019), HTMT values below 0.85 provide evidence of satisfactory discriminant validity. As shown in Table 3, all HTMT ratios were below this recommended threshold, thereby confirming that the constructs are empirically distinct (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 2
Discriminant Validity via HTMT criterion

	IE	IP	NPI	PSR	TII
IE					
IP	0.212				
NPI	0.448	0.331			
PSR	0.659	0.371	0.486		
TII	0.716	0.260	0.711	0.680	

Table 3
Discriminant Validity via Fornell and Larcker Criterion

	IE	IP	NPI	PSR	TII
IE	**0.840**				
IP	0.190	**0.842**			
NPI	0.384	0.291	**0.832**		
PSR	0.592	0.341	0.433	**0.776**	
TII	0.628	0.234	0.617	0.618	**0.795**

To ensure the robustness and stability of the results, the bootstrapping procedure implemented in SmartPLS 4 was employed with 10,000 resamples to estimate the path coefficients and assess the statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships. Following the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988), R^2 values of 0.26, 0.13, and 0.02 are interpreted as indicating substantial, moderate, and weak explanatory power, respectively. In the present study, the endogenous construct NEV purchase intention exhibited an R^2 value of 0.380 (adjusted R^2 = 0.379), while parasocial relationship showed an R^2 of 0.444 (adjusted R^2 = 0.441). Similarly, trust in influencer demonstrated an R^2 value of 0.489 (adjusted R^2 = 0.486). These results indicate that the structural model explains a substantial proportion of variance in the key endogenous constructs, thereby demonstrating strong explanatory power.

Model testing results are summarized in Table 4. The findings indicate that all hypothesized relationships were statistically supported. Specifically, influencer expertise exerted a strong and positive effect on parasocial relationship ($\beta = 0.556$, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.535$), providing support for H1. Parasocial relationship was found to significantly enhance trust in influencer ($\beta = 0.380$, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.183$), supporting H2, while trust in influencer, in turn, had a substantial positive influence on NEV purchase intention ($\beta = 0.617$, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.614$), confirming H3. In addition, influencer expertise directly and positively affected NEV purchase intention ($\beta = -0.004$, $p = 0.469$, $f^2 = 0.000$), thereby not supporting H4. The indirect effect of influencer expertise on trust through parasocial relationship was significant ($\beta = 0.211$, $p < 0.001$), indicating the presence of a mediating mechanism and lending support to H5. Furthermore, influencer popularity was found to significantly moderate the relationship between influencer expertise and parasocial relationship ($\beta = 0.196$, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.070$), suggesting that higher levels of influencer popularity strengthen this association and providing support for H6.

Finally, the predictive capability of the proposed model was evaluated using the PLS-Predict procedure with a 10-fold cross-validation approach. As reported in Table 5, the prediction errors generated by the PLS model were consistently lower than those produced by the two benchmark models, namely the linear model (LM) and the indicator average (IA) model. These results indicate that the proposed model demonstrates strong out-of-sample predictive power, thereby further supporting the robustness of the structural model.

Table 4
Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	SB	SE	t-value	p-value	PCI LL	PCI UL	f^2	Decision
H1	IE→PSR	0.556	0.029	18.963	0.000***	0.507	0.604	0.535	Supported
H2	PSR→TII	0.380	0.038	9.943	0.000***	0.318	0.444	0.183	Supported
H3	TII→NPI	0.617	0.028	22.257	0.000***	0.571	0.662	0.614	Supported
H4	IE→NPI	-0.004	0.052	0.007	0.469	-0.091	0.080	0.000	Not Supported
H5	IE→PSR→TII	0.211	0.024	8.845	0.000***	0.174	0.252	-	Supported
H6	IP×IE→PSR	0.196	0.032	6.175	0.000***	0.144	0.248	0.070	Supported

Note(s): Significant at one-tailed test with bootstrapping of 10000 re-samples, ***denotes significant at p<0.001, ** denotes significant at p<0.01, *denotes significant at p<0.05.

Table 5
PLS-Predict

Item	Q^2predict	PLS	LM	IA_RMSE	PLS-LM	PLS-IA
NPI1	0.120	0.950	0.951	1.012	-0.001	-0.062
NPI2	0.092	0.859	0.864	0.901	-0.005	-0.042
NPI3	0.124	1.026	1.017	1.096	0.009	-0.07
NPI4	0.115	0.942	0.949	1.002	-0.007	-0.06

Subsequently, an interaction plot was constructed, as illustrated in Figure 2, to further interpret the moderating effect. As shown in the figure, the positive relationship between influencer expertise and trust in influencer becomes stronger at higher levels of influencer popularity. These findings provide additional support for the positive moderating role of influencer popularity in the relationship between influencer expertise and trust in influencer.

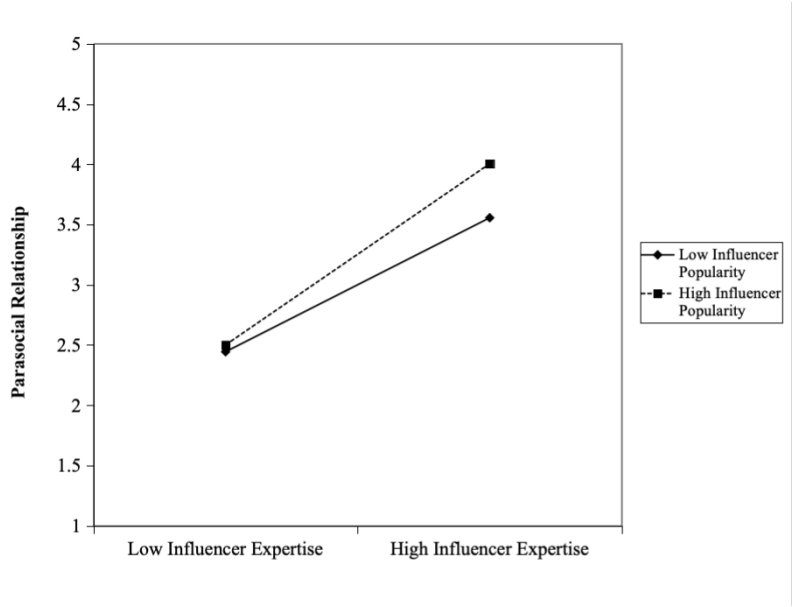

Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Infuencer Popularity on Influencer Expertise and Parasocial Relationship

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigates how social media influencers affect Chinese consumers' purchase intention toward new energy vehicles (NEVs) by integrating the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework with social proof theory and parasocial interaction theory. Using survey data from NEV consumers in Beijing and Shanghai and structural equation modeling, the study examines how influencer-related cues are internalized through parasocial relationships and trust before shaping purchase intention. The findings clarify key psychological pathways underlying influencer effects in a high-involvement, high-uncertainty context and identify which influence mechanisms are more effective in facilitating NEV purchase decisions.

Theoretical Implications

Parasocial interaction theory has traditionally been applied to entertainment-oriented and hedonic consumption settings characterized by relatively low consumer involvement. Extending this perspective, the present study demonstrates that parasocial relationship functions as a mediating mechanism through which influencer expertise translates into trust in influencer in a high-involvement decision context. Specifically, the findings indicate that influencer expertise does not directly produce trust in isolation, but instead operates by fostering feelings of relational closeness, familiarity, and perceived interpersonal connection, which subsequently facilitate trust formation. In the context of new NEV purchasing where decisions involve substantial financial commitment, technological complexity, and perceived risk this mediating role of parasocial relationship highlights the continued relevance of relational processes even in high-stakes consumption environments. By identifying parasocial relationship as an intervening pathway, this study broadens the theoretical scope of parasocial interaction theory and underscores its value in explaining trust formation toward influencers beyond low-involvement settings.

Beyond the relational mechanism itself, this study further refines theoretical understanding of influencer effectiveness by clarifying the moderator role of influencer popularity. The

results indicate that influencer popularity strengthens the relationship between influencer expertise and parasocial relationship, suggesting that social recognition amplifies the psychological salience of expertise. By conceptualizing influencer popularity as a contextual amplifier rather than a direct influence factor, this study provides a more nuanced account of how social endorsement cues condition the translation of expertise into relational engagement, particularly in high-involvement consumption settings.

At a broader theoretical level, this study also extends the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework by reconceptualizing the organism component as a processual mechanism rather than a single evaluative construct. Instead of treating the organism stage as an isolated cognitive response, the findings illustrate how parasocial relationship and trust in influencer operate as interconnected organismic states through which influencer-related stimuli are internalized and converted into purchase intention. This relational and trust-based conceptualization enhances the explanatory depth of the S–O–R framework and demonstrates its applicability to complex, influencer-driven decision-making contexts such as NEV purchasing.

Practical Implications

For NEV enterprises, the results underscore the strategic importance of influencer popularity in strengthening the relational impact of expertise. In practice, firms often face a choice between collaborating with highly knowledgeable but niche experts and partnering with influencers who enjoy broader visibility. The findings suggest that expertise alone may be insufficient to generate relational closeness in the absence of social recognition. When expert influencers are also perceived as widely followed and socially endorsed, consumers are more likely to develop familiarity and psychological closeness, which enhances the relational influence of expertise. Accordingly, influencer selection should be approached as a balancing exercise rather than an either–or decision between credibility and visibility. Identifying influencers who combine professional knowledge with visible audience endorsement, or structuring influencer portfolios that pair expert communicators with socially prominent figures, can increase the likelihood that expertise-driven messages foster relational engagement rather than remaining purely informational. The results further highlight trust in influencer as a decisive factor shaping NEV purchase intention. While influencer collaborations are often used to increase exposure or stimulate short-term interest, their effectiveness in driving purchase intention depends largely on consumers' trust perceptions. From a managerial perspective, this suggests the value of adopting a longer-term orientation toward influencer collaborations. Practices such as repeated partnerships with the same influencer, transparent disclosure of sponsorship relationships, and consistency between influencer messaging and actual product performance can help reinforce trust over time. When trust is established, consumers are more inclined to accept recommendations related to complex and high-risk products, reducing hesitation and increasing purchase readiness.

For social media platforms, the findings emphasize the role of platform design in shaping relational and trust-based outcomes. Because parasocial relationships develop through repeated exposure and growing familiarity, platforms influence trust formation by structuring the temporal and relational patterns of user influencer interaction. Features that support stable and continuous exposure to the same expert influencers such as follower-based content prioritization, creator subscriptions, and series-based formats can strengthen

familiarity and relational closeness. In addition, platform-controlled visibility and engagement cues amplify the effect of expertise by signaling social recognition. Platforms that prioritize continuity and sustained exposure over short-lived virality are therefore better positioned to support trust formation in high-involvement decision contexts such as NEV purchasing.

Conclusion

This study provides a refined understanding of how social media influencers shape consumers' purchase intention toward NEV in China. Drawing on the S–O–R framework and integrating parasocial interaction theory with social proof perspectives, the findings demonstrate that influencer expertise alone does not directly translate into purchase intention. Instead, its influence operates through relational and trust-based psychological mechanisms. Specifically, parasocial relationships serve as a pathway through which influencer expertise fosters trust, while influencer popularity amplifies the strength of this relational process. By highlighting the mediating role of parasocial relationship and the moderating role of influencer popularity, this study moves beyond linear and purely informational explanations of influencer effectiveness. The results underscore the importance of relational closeness, familiarity, and social recognition in shaping trust and behavioral intention in high-involvement consumption contexts such as NEV purchasing. Theoretically, this research enriches the application of the S–O–R framework by conceptualizing the organism stage as a relational process rather than a single evaluative response. Practically, the findings offer guidance for designing influencer strategies that prioritize trust-building and sustained relational engagement over short-term exposure. Future research may extend this framework by examining additional contextual factors or adopting longitudinal designs to further explore the dynamic evolution of parasocial relationships and trust in sustainable technology adoption.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged, which also point to directions for future research. First, this study adopts a cross-sectional research design with data collected at a single point in time. While suitable for examining structural relationships, this approach limits the ability to capture the dynamic evolution of parasocial relationships, trust in influencer, and purchase intention. These constructs are likely to develop through repeated exposure and sustained interaction with influencers, particularly in high-involvement contexts such as NEV purchasing. Future research could employ longitudinal or time-lagged designs to better examine temporal dynamics and strengthen causal inference. Second, the empirical scope of the study is constrained by the sample, which was drawn from economically developed urban areas with relatively mature NEV markets. Consumer responses in such contexts may differ from those in less developed regions. Extending the framework to alternative geographic and economic settings would help assess the generalizability of the findings. Third, although the study focuses on parasocial relationship and trust in influencer as key psychological mechanisms, the model does not explicitly examine more complex process structures between these variables. Future research could explore sequential or process-oriented mediation models to provide deeper insight into influencer-driven decision making. Finally, future studies may enhance robustness by incorporating additional control variables relevant to NEV purchase decisions, such as price sensitivity or prior vehicle ownership, to better isolate influencer-related effects.

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