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Redefining «Made in China»: Norwegian Consumer Perceptions and Trust in Emerging EV Brands

Ludovica Serafini

SUPERVISOR

Ernesto Cardamone

CO-SUPERVISOR

Julie S. Eidjord, 791261

CANDIDATE

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Writing this thesis has been one of the most meaningful academic milestones of my life. It has not only been the final requirement for my Master's Degree but also a personal journey of growth, persistence, and independent thinking. This has been the first time I have taken full ownership of a research project of this scale, and seeing it through to completion has been both a challenge and a source of deep pride.

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Introduction

In the middle of a global transition toward sustainable mobility, few developments have shaken the automotive industry as profoundly as the rise of Chinese electric vehicle (EV) brands. Once dismissed as low-cost imitators, new brands like BYD, XPeng, and NIO are now emerging as serious contenders in international markets, offering advanced battery technology, futuristic design, and aggressive pricing. As New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman pointed out in a 2025 episode of the podcast *The Ezra Klein Show*, China is not trying to spread ideology but rather competing with innovation. Friedman described the country's strategy as "*putting smartphones on wheels*" and emphasized how quickly Chinese firms are adapting to global competition[1].

Norway provides a unique setting for observing this shift, due to generous governmental incentives and a strong public infrastructure for EVs. The country has become a leader in EV adoption, with over 90 percent of new cars now being fully electric. Over the past few years, more than 20 Chinese brands have entered the Norwegian market. Their presence has grown rapidly, from just 2 percent of new car sales in 2019 to over 22 percent in 2025. According to national automotive publications, this growth is taking place in a mature and competitive market, and it is happening despite ongoing skepticism related to China's political system, data privacy concerns, and a history of lower product quality perceptions (Loftås, 2025; Raaum, 2025a).

At the center of this development is a core marketing question: *how do consumers evaluate trust in unfamiliar brands?* In particular, what happens when these brands come from countries that have historically been viewed with caution? Country-of-origin effect (COO) has long played a key role in how people judge product quality and brand reliability. For instance, many consumers value the label "made in Germany" as a cue for precision and engineering excellence. In contrast, the label "made in China" has often been associated with low quality and low trust (Kim & Chung, 1997; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999; Raditya et al., 2025). This bias spans across several domains, for example, consumer electronics, toys, and clothing, where Chinese products have historically been perceived as less reliable or durable compared to Western alternatives (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1989; Maheswaran, 1994). These generalized perceptions often persist despite improvements in quality, illustrating how COO can function as a powerful heuristic in consumer evaluations.

However, in the case of EVs, these associations appear to be changing.

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[1] *Tom Friedman Thinks We're Getting China Dangerously Wrong* (2025, January 9). *The Ezra Klein Show* [Podcast]. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000010106387/tom-friedman-thinks-were-getting-china-dangerously-wrong.html

This thesis examines what drives Norwegian consumers to shift away from traditional COO perceptions when evaluating Chinese EV brands. It explores how trust is built when the brand is unfamiliar and how key brand signals, such as innovation, partnerships, and customer service, can influence purchase decisions. Using qualitative methods, the study draws on consumer reflections and expert insights to explore how skepticism can be reduced and when new entrants are perceived as trustworthy.

As the automotive industry becomes more global and more digital, the way consumers form trust is also changing. This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how that process works in practice, and what it could mean for the future of brand evaluation in a fast-moving and increasingly competitive market.

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical framework, reviewing key concepts related to consumer behavior, the COO effect, and brand trust. Chapter 2 analyzes the emergence of Chinese EV brands in Norway, situating the phenomenon within the broader context of market dynamics and consumer perceptions. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, including the qualitative design, data collection procedures, and analytical approach. Chapter 4 presents the results of the thematic analysis and integrates responses from both Norwegian consumers with insights from an expert interview, focusing on how Norwegian consumers evaluate unfamiliar brands and form trust. Additionally, it summarizes key findings, discusses theoretical and managerial implications and limitations, and offers suggestions for future research.

Summary

This thesis investigates how Norwegian consumers perceive and evaluate Chinese electric vehicle (EV) brands, focusing on the changing role of country-of-origin (COO) perceptions in trust and purchase decisions. As Chinese EVs gain visibility in Norway's highly developed and competitive EV market, this study explores whether and how, consumers are adjusting their traditional views on product origin in favor of new decision-making criteria.

The theoretical foundation combines literature on consumer behavior, the customer journey, COO effects and brand trust. Together, these frameworks support an on-depth exploration of how consumers form opinions about unfamiliar brands, particularly in high-involvement product categories like cars. To address the research question, a qualitative design was used. The primary data consisted of 63 responses to an open-ended survey targeting Norwegian EV consumers, complemented by an expert interview with the editor-in-chief of a Norwegian automotive publication. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in how trust is formed, how COO influences brand evaluation, and which signals can override initial skepticism.

The findings show that while COO remains a meaningful cue that is often tied to political, ethical or quality based associations, its influence is gradually being balanced by other factors. Many consumers reported being more open to Chinese brands when these brands offered compelling value through innovation, pricing, or Western partnerships. Trust was found to be conditional and shaped by a mix of emotional, practical and social considerations.

This thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of consumer trust in emerging brands and provides insights for marketers navigating reputation-building in culturally sensitive contexts. It also highlights how performance, symbolic branding, and social narratives together shape how unfamiliar brands are received in mature consumer markets.

1. Theoretical framework

Understanding consumer behavior requires an exploration of the psychological, cultural, and contextual factors that influence decision-making, brand perceptions, and trust formation. In particular, concepts such as the country-of-origin (hereafter *COO*) effect, the customer journey, and brand trust have become essential for explaining how consumers evaluate products, especially in contexts involving technological innovation and emerging market entrants.

This chapter reviews these theoretical perspectives, providing a foundation for examining how traditional heuristics are challenged and reinterpreted in a globalized and competitive environment. Specifically, the chapter is organized into four main sections: consumer behavior theory, the customer journey, COO effects, and the role of trust in brand evaluation. These frameworks will later be contextualized in relation to the Norwegian electric vehicle (hereafter *EV*) market, where new Chinese EV brands are reshaping consumer perceptions and decision-making patterns.

The review begins by examining consumer behavior, highlighting the traditional models of decision-making and distinguishing between cognitive and habitual purchasing patterns. This is followed by a discussion of the customer journey framework, which expands these models by incorporating the evolving nature of consumer-brand interactions across touchpoints. The subsequent section on COO effects addresses how perceptions of national origin influence brand evaluation and purchasing decisions, while also discussing the moderating variables that shape these effects. Finally, the role of trust is examined as a central antecedent to shifting perceptions of emerging automotive brands, particularly in high-involvement, technology-driven markets such as EVs.

1.1.Consumer Behavior

Consumer behavior is a foundational concept in marketing, concerned with understanding how and why individuals, groups, or organizations make decisions about the selection, use, and disposal of products and services. It is defined as "[...] *the study of individuals, groups, or organizations and the processes they use to select, secure, use, and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs and the impacts that these processes have on the consumer and society*" (Stankevich, 2017, p.8).

Within this framework, consumer decision-making is a central component, offering insight into the cognitive and emotional processes that guide purchasing choices. However, traditional decision-making models often fall short in capturing the dynamic and iterative nature of modern consumption. This has led to growing interest in the customer journey perspective, which extends beyond the moment of purchase to consider the full experience of engaging with a brand over time. In the following sections, these two perspectives (decision-making and customer journey) will be examined in relation to the Norwegian EV

market, where product complexity, technological innovation, and emerging brand competition heighten the need for a nuanced understanding of consumer behavior.

1.1.1. The Decision-Making Process

The consumer decision-making process is a cornerstone of marketing theory, shaping how individuals purchase, use, and dispose of products and services. At its core, this process refer to the cognitive and behavioral steps individuals undertake when making purchasing decisions (Stankevich, 2017). These steps typically include need/opportunity recognition, information search, brand comparison, and evaluation, ultimately culminating in a purchase decision. Depending on the complexity and significance of the purchase, this process can range from quick, habitual choices to extensive, research-driven decisions.

Understanding consumer decision-making is highly relevant, as all individuals engage in purchasing behaviors daily. From a marketing perspective, however, this knowledge carries even greater significance. It enables businesses to design effective marketing strategies, identify and reach the right target audiences, and optimize product offerings (Stankevich, 2017). Analyzing the factors that shape consumer decisions is crucial, as these insights not only enhance customer satisfaction, but also drive financial value for companies (Stankevich, 2017).

A widely accepted framework for consumer decision-making is the "Five-Stage Model of the Consumer Buying Process," illustrated in Figure 1. This model delineates five key stages that consumers typically navigate when purchasing a product or service (Stankevich, 2017).

***Figure 1**. The Traditional Five-Stage Model of the Consumer Buying Process (Stankevich, 2017).*

A closer examination of each phase offers a more nuanced understanding of how consumers navigate purchase decisions, particularly in high-involvement contexts such as EV purchases.

Need Recognition: The decision-making process begins when consumers perceive a discrepancy between their current state and a desired state (Solomon, 2023). This recognition can stem from a need recognition such as noticing a decline in satisfaction with an existing product, or from an opportunity recognition, where a consumer aspires to enhance their situation (e.g., upgrading to a newer and more sustainable vehicle). Identifying this gap motivates the consumer to seek a solution.

Information Search: Once a problem is recognized, consumers engage in an information search, surveying both internal and external sources for data to support a decision (Solomon, 2023). This search can be either pre-purchase, aimed at gathering information on available alternatives, or ongoing, as part of general

engagement with the marketplace. Importantly, consumers with moderate product knowledge often conduct the most extensive searches, while novices and experts approach information gathering differently.

Evaluation of Alternatives: After collecting information, consumers evaluate potential choices using evaluative criteria, which may include functional, experiential, or symbolic product attributes (Solomon, 2023). The evaluation process may involve compensatory rules, where positive attributes offset negatives, or non-compensatory rules, where failure to meet key criteria results in immediate elimination of an option. In complex categories like EVs, feature overload, also known as feature creep, can sometimes complicate evaluations. This makes clear brand positioning even more critical.

Product Choice (Purchase): Following evaluation, consumers make a product choice by selecting the option that best fits their needs and desires. Decision strategies can range from rational maximization to bounded rationality, where consumers settle for a "good enough" option due to time or cognitive constraints (Solomon, 2023). Brand familiarity, trust, and perceived innovation are often decisive factors in high-stakes purchases like automobiles.

Post-Purchase Behavior: The final stage involves post-purchase evaluation, where consumers assess whether their expectations have been met. Positive experiences can reinforce loyalty and encourage repeat purchases, while dissatisfaction may result in cognitive dissonance and negative word-of-mouth. Increasingly, post-purchase experiences are also mediated by social scoring systems in platform-based economies (e.g., reviews on digital marketplaces), further amplifying the significance of this stage (Solomon, 2023).

Although modern consumer decision-making models are continually evolving, their theoretical foundations still draw from earlier models. The foundation of modern consumer decision-making models can be traced back to the 1960s when seminal theories in marketing and consumer behavior were first introduced (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). A notable example from this period is the Engel, Kollat & Blackwell (*EKB*) model (1968), which remains one of the most influential frameworks in consumer research. The EKB model outlines a structured, linear process comprising five distinct stages: (1) need recognition, (2) information search, (3) evaluation of alternatives, (4) purchase decision, and (5) post-purchase evaluation (Erasmus et al., 2010; Stankevich, 2017).

Despite its origins in the 1960s, the principles of this model continue to hold significant theoretical and practical value for both scholars and marketing practitioners. Kotler et al. (2022), for example, build upon this five-stage process by incorporating a disposal stage, acknowledging the increasing importance of sustainability in consumer decision-making.

The applicability of the consumer buying process extends across diverse industries, including the automotive sector, which is among the most mature and competitive markets (Jørgensen et al., 2016). Understanding the factors that drive brand loyalty is particularly crucial in this industry, where an ever-

expanding range of car brands and models intensifies market competition (Huber & Herrmann, 2011; Jørgensen et al., 2016).

Brand loyalty is defined as a strong commitment to repurchase or consistent choice of a preferred brand over time, regardless of situational influences or marketing efforts from competitors (Oliver, 1999). Consumers who are loyal not only exhibit repeated purchasing behavior but also demonstrate emotional attachment and trust toward the brand. It is crucial, however, to differentiate true brand loyalty from inertia. Although both behaviors lead to repeated purchases, inertia is marked by low cognitive engagement and habitual buying without a strong emotional commitment (Solomon, 2023). In states of inertia, consumers continue to buy the same brand simply due to convenience or familiarity, rather than an active preference. In contrast, loyal consumers are inclined to put in the effort to repurchase their favored brand and may resist switching, even when faced with compelling alternatives. This distinction is particularly important in the automotive sector, where brand loyalty can significantly enhance customer lifetime value, while inertial behavior may be easily disrupted by minor changes in availability, pricing, or competitive offers, for example.

Applying the Five-Stage Model to the context of EV purchases illustrates how consumers engage with complex decision-making. The process often begins with need recognition, driven by factors such as technological advancements, environmental concerns, or government incentives promoting sustainability. This recognition triggers an information search, where consumers explore key aspects such as battery efficiency, charging infrastructure, and smart technology features. A particularly important concern during this phase is range anxiety, which can be explained as the fear that the vehicle will not have enough battery power to complete a trip (Rauh, Franke, & Krems, 2015). Information is typically gathered from online reviews, industry reports, test drives, and word-of-mouth recommendations (Huber & Herrmann, 2011).

Range anxiety is a well-known challenge that affects consumers' willingness to adopt EVs. Research shows that this fear is not only a technical issue but also a psychological one, involving negative thoughts (such as worrying about running out of energy), emotions (like nervousness), behaviors (such as changing driving style to save battery), and even physical reactions (such as feeling stressed) (Rauh, Franke, & Krems, 2015). However, experience plays a big role in reducing range anxiety. Drivers who have spent more time using EVs tend to feel more confident, perceive less threat, and experience less stress than those who are new to EVs. These findings suggest that real-world driving experience helps consumers manage their concerns about range, making them more comfortable with electric vehicles over time. This highlights the importance for new EV brands to support consumers in gaining experience early, in order to build trust and reduce range anxiety.

During the evaluation stage, consumers compare competing EV brands based on factors such as battery technology (e.g., Tesla's high energy density vs. BYD's blade battery longevity), charging network accessibility (e.g., Tesla Supercharger vs. Ionity vs. independent networks), driving experience (e.g., Porsche

Taycan's sporty handling vs. NIO ET7's luxury comfort), and overall brand reputation (legacy brands like Mercedes-Benz vs. newer entrants like XPeng or Zeekr) (Huber & Herrmann, 2011). Here again, perceived driving range and the availability of convenient charging solutions are critical evaluative criteria, particularly for first-time EV buyers who may still be affected by range anxiety.

The purchase decision is typically influenced by financial considerations, perceived long-term benefits, and trust in the brand's innovation and reliability. Finally, post-purchase evaluation plays a crucial role in determining consumer satisfaction and fostering brand loyalty. Positive ownership experiences, including real-world driving that alleviates initial range concerns, can reinforce trust and lead to repeat purchases. In contrast, unmet expectations, especially related to battery range or charging ease, may result in cognitive dissonance, prompting consumers to reassess their choice and consider switching to alternative brands in the future (Huber & Herrmann, 2011).

1.1.2. Cognitive vs. Habitual Decision Making

Consumer decision-making can broadly be categorized into two primary approaches: cognitive and habitual decision-making (Stankevich, 2017). These approaches reflect different levels of effort and reasoning that consumers apply when making purchasing decisions.

Cognitive decision-making is a deliberate and rational process that involves extensive information search, evaluation of alternatives, and weighing of risks and benefits before making a purchase. This type of decision-making is typically associated with high-involvement products, where consumers are highly engaged due to the product's price, complexity, or perceived importance (Stankevich, 2017). In this process, consumers attempt to maximize utility by creating decision strategies that match effort to the complexity of the choice, a process known as constructive processing (Solomon, 2023). In today's consumer environment, constructive processing is particularly relevant, as overwhelming product or brand options can drain psychological energy and hinder effective decision-making, often leading to what is known as decision fatigue (Solomon, 2023). Although cognitive decision-making assumes rational behavior, research shows that people often adjust their effort based on factors like time pressure, product complexity, and emotions. This indicates that even rational decisions are not always fully optimized (Simon, 1990).

In the context of EV purchases, cognitive decision-making plays a central role. Consumers assess various factors such as technological uncertainty related to battery life, charging infrastructure, and software updates, as well as high investment costs that introduce financial risks and require consideration of long-term value and government incentives (Raditya et al., 2025). Additionally, brand perception, which refers to consumer's mental image of a brand based on beliefs, emotions and past experiences (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019), plays a crucial factor, as trust in new versus established manufacturers can significantly influence purchasing decisions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Raditya et al., 2025). Given these complexities, first-time EV buyers are likely to engage in a rational, information-driven decision-making

process, carefully comparing brands, analyzing reviews, and considering the economic and environmental benefits before making a purchase.

Cognitive decision-making aligns with utility theory, which suggests that consumers make rational choices to maximize benefits while minimizing costs (Edwards, 1954). However, while utility theory assumes that consumers act entirely rationally, behavioral insights suggest that emotional and psychological factors also influence choices, leading to the integration of both economic and psychological models in consumer behavior research (Simon, 1990).

Conversely, habitual decision-making occurs with minimal conscious effort and is primarily influenced by past experiences, brand loyalty, and routine behaviors (Stankevich, 2017). Instead of engaging in an extensive evaluation of options, habitual consumers rely on prior satisfaction and heuristics, which can be understood as mental shortcuts based on simple rules or market beliefs, to guide their choices (Solomon, 2023). Heuristics serve as examples of bounded rationality, illustrating how consumers tend to "satisfy" rather than maximize utility. They opt for choices that are "satisfactory enough" without dedicating significant cognitive effort (Simon, 1990). While rational consumers are often characterized as "maximizers", habitual consumers exemplify the more typical or "irrational" aspects of consumer behavior, prioritizing ease, familiarity, and emotional comfort over detailed analytical comparisons. See Table 1 for a comparison of cognitive and habitual decision-making characteristics.

Table 1

Comparison of Cognitive and Habitual Decision-Making

Dimension	**Cognitive Decision-Making**	**Habitual Decision-Making**
Consumer Type	Rational maximizer	"Normal" satisfier (bounded rationality)
Level of Effort	High: Extensive search, evaluation	Low: Automatic, minimal conscious effort
Typical Context	High-involvement products, new/complex markets	Familiar products, trusted brands
Decision Strategy	Constructive processing, rational weighing	Heuristics, mental shortcuts, routines
Emotional Influence	Secondary	Primary (emotions, familiarity dominate)
Examples in EV Context	First-time EV buyers comparing brands	Repeat EV buyers loyal to Tesla, NIO, or other brands

Note. Cognitive decision-making is characterized by rational and effortful processing, while habitual decision-making relies on heuristics and emotional familiarity.

According to Howard and Seth's Theory of Buyer Behavior (1970), habitual decisions emerge when repeated positive experiences with a brand create brand trust and loyalty, reducing the need for extensive

cognitive effort in future purchases. For EV buyers, habitual decision-making may naturally be more prevalent among repeat buyers who have already experienced the benefits of an EV brand, built trust in the brand's technology and services, and prefer familiarity and convenience over reassessing alternatives (Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Tueanrat et al., 2021; Mauritzen, 2023). Tesla owners, for example, may continue purchasing Tesla vehicles due to their familiarity with the Supercharger network, over-the-air software updates, and the brand's prestige as one of the pioneer brands in the EV transition. Similarly, NIO customers might remain loyal due to the advantages of battery-swapping infrastructure and positive ownership experience.

Over time, as the EV market matures, more consumers may shift toward habitual decision-making, reducing the importance of extensive evaluations. This transition suggests that cognitive decision-making dominates in early adoption phases, while habitual decision-making increases as brand trust and market penetration grow.

This evolution in consumer decision-making aligns with the broader concept of the product life cycle, which describes the typical stages products and markets go through: introduction, growth, maturity, and decline (Kotler, Keller, & Chernev, 2021). During the introduction phase, when EVs were relatively new to the market, consumer decisions were predominantly cognitive, as buyers faced high uncertainty and lacked extensive brand familiarity. As the EV market progresses into the growth and maturity phases, brand trust and consumer experience increase, reducing perceived risks and encouraging more habitual purchasing behaviors. This shift reflects how consumers adapt their decision strategies over time, moving from extensive evaluation in the early stages to more routine, emotionally driven choices as the product category becomes mainstream (Kotler, Keller, & Chernev, 2021).

Consumer decision-making is rarely exclusively cognitive or habitual; instead, economic and psychological models interact to explain different stages of decision-making. Moreover, affective influences, such as emotional attachment to a brand, social influence, and perceived status, can also drive habitual choices, even when rational evaluation suggests alternative options. Thus, while rational models such as utility theory emphasize economic decision-making, behavioral insights highlight the role of emotions, brand trust, and social influences, making the decision-making process more dynamic.

While consumer decision making models, particularly cognitive and habitual frameworks, explain how individuals arrive at purchase decisions, they do not fully capture the broader, ongoing interactions between consumers and brands, The customer journey perspective expands upon these models by emphasizing the dynamic and iterative nature of consumer experiences across multiple touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Instead of viewing decisions as isolated events, the customer journey highlights how experiences before, during, and after a purchase influence long-term brand relationships, the formation of trust, and repurchase behaviors. This perspective will be explored in more detail in the next section.

1.1.3. Customer Journey

The primary objective of marketing is to engage consumers at critical moments when they are most receptive to influence, often referred to as “touchpoints” or “moments of truth” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Stankevich, 2017). Identifying and leveraging these moments allows marketers to shape consumer perceptions and strengthen brand connections.

Traditionally, consumer touchpoints have been understood through variations of the Five-Stage Model of the Consumer Buying Process shown in Figure 1 (Stankevich, 2017; Følstad & Kvale, 2018). While such models illustrate when purchasing decisions are made, they often lack specificity regarding how companies integrate internal and external factors to enhance the overall consumer experience (Tuenrat et al., 2021). As a result, contemporary marketing research has increasingly adopted the customer journey framework, which offers a more dynamic and consumer-centric perspective.

The customer journey refers to the process consumers experience when engaging with a company’s offerings, from initial awareness to post-purchase interactions (Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Tuenrat et al., 2021). Utilizing customer journeys as a guiding framework for business operations represents a shift from traditional methods, such as service blueprinting, which tend to prioritize the corporate perspective and overlook the customer viewpoint (Tuenrat et al., 2021). This shift aligns with the principles of the Gemba walk philosophy, which originated in Japanese management practices, particularly within the Toyota Production System (Liker, 2004). The term “Gemba” translates to “the real place” in Japanese, and the Gemba walk emphasizes the importance of observing and understanding customer experiences at the actual place where interactions occur, rather than relying solely on reports and second-hand data (Soliman, 2020).

This customer-centric approach makes the customer journey an effective tool for assessing and evaluating customer perceptions, because it pays close attention to the real emotions and challenges that customers face across touchpoints (Solomon, 2023). Consequently, applying the customer journey framework in the context of EV consumption is particularly relevant, as it places customer perceptions at its core, aligning well with the investigation of consumer responses to car brands.

Lemon and Verhoef’s (2016) “Process Model for Customer Journey and Experience” (Figure 2) is to this day the most widely accepted representation of the customer journey (Tueanrat et al., 2021). The model depicts an iterative and dynamic process through three stages: prepurchase, purchase, and post-purchase. It incorporates past experiences and external factors that influence customer interactions at various touchpoints, many of which may not be directly controlled by the firm. This approach is therefore more adaptable to understanding the complexities of modern customer behavior, emphasizing that experiences are shaped by factors both within and outside a company's control. Additionally, it acknowledges that customers may revisit stages and that their experiences can be influenced by prior interactions, in contrast to the traditional view that often overlooks the broader context of consumer interactions.

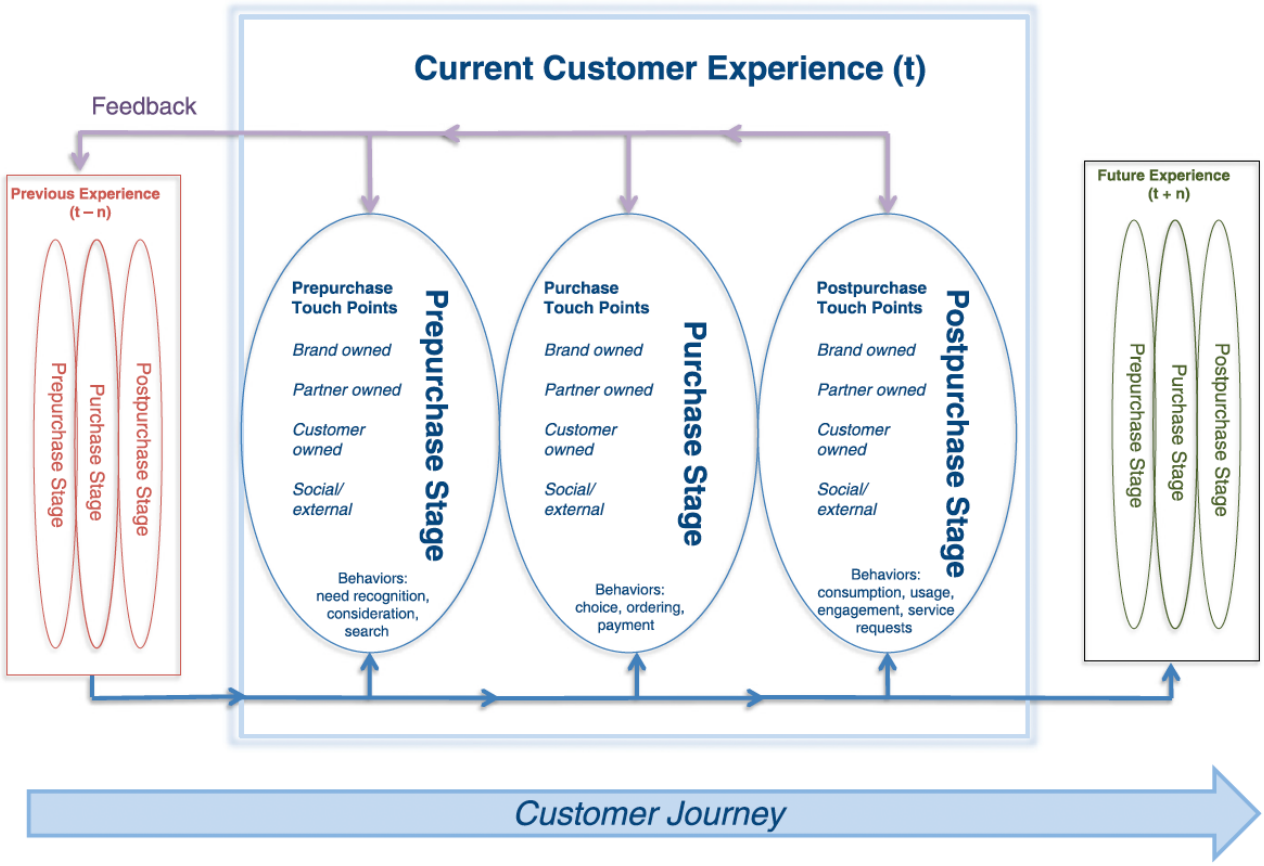

Figure 2. *Process Model for Customer Journey and Experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).*

In the automotive industry, the consumer journey extends far beyond the moment of purchase, encompassing a series of brand interactions that shape consumer trust and long-term loyalty. Research on the Norwegian car market suggests that brand loyalty is primarily driven by long-term brand relationships and perceived product quality, rather than impulsive or short-term decision-making (Jørgensen et al., 2016).

During the pre-purchase phase, consumers rely on external information sources and prior experiences to evaluate key attributes such as reliability, innovation, and sustainability. For EV buyers, this process is particularly rigorous, often involving extensive research into charging infrastructure, battery longevity, and technological advancements before committing to a purchase. For example, in the case of BYD Norway, the customer journey often begins with digital touchpoints, such as browsing the official website (https://byd.no/) to explore models and specifications. Potential customers can then schedule test drives directly through the site or locate the closest dealership to physically experience the EV model of interest. These touchpoints enable customers to evaluate factors such as innovation, range capabilities, and technological features firsthand, contributing to an overall brand impression.

While information-seeking behaviors are crucial in the early stages, post-purchase experiences ultimately play a defining role in fostering brand loyalty. Elaborating on the BYD case, once converted, consumers will, after their purchase, interact with brand services during the vehicle delivery, maintenance appointments, and new feature updates, all of which will further influence their long-term perceptions.

Satisfied EV owners are more likely to remain with a brand due to positive experiences with technological reliability, brand transparency, and ongoing product innovation, reinforcing habitual purchasing patterns over time (Huber & Herrmann, 2011).

Consumer involvement levels also play a crucial role in shaping the journey. Highly involved consumers, who actively research and compare brands, tend to develop stronger brand attachments, reinforcing their likelihood of repurchasing from the same manufacturer. In contrast, consumers with lower involvement may rely on heuristics, making strong brand positioning essential in influencing their decision-making. (Huber & Herrmann, 2021).

As the EV market matures and brands establish credibility, the reliance on habitual decision-making may increase, with repeat buyers favoring brands they trust over extensive re-evaluation. This means that repeat buyers may rely more on trust in a familiar brand rather than re-evaluating the market each time they purchase a vehicle. For automotive brands such as BYD, this highlights the importance of strategic brand communication across all touchpoints, ensuring that pre- and post-purchase interactions reinforce consumer confidence and create a seamless ownership experience that fosters long-term loyalty. (See Table 2 for an overview of a typical customer Journey for BYD buyers in Norway).

Table 2

Customer Journey of a Typical BYD Buyer in Norway

Stage	Activity	Key Touchpoints
Pre-Purchase	Website Visit	Browsing byd.no for models, specifications, and incentives
	Inquiry Submission	Filling out forms for brochures, price quotes, or dealership contact on byd.no
	Test Drive Scheduling	Booking test drives via the website or contacting dealerships
	Store Experience	Visiting BYD showrooms for physical inspection and test driving
Purchase	Purchase Decision	Negotiation and signing contracts at dealership
Post-Purchase	Service Experience	Post-purchase services such as maintenance scheduling and software updates
	Loyalty and Advocacy	Positive ownership experiences, after-sales services, and brand community engagement

Note. This figure illustrates a typical customer journey based on the BYD Norway website, adapted to the Lemon and Verhoef (2016) customer journey stages.

As consumer decision-making and customer journeys evolve, brand perceptions play an increasingly central role in influencing purchase behavior (Huber & Herrmann, 2011; Jørgensen et al., 2016). One particularly significant factor in brand perception is the effect of country of origin (COO). Traditionally, COO has served as a heuristic for assessing product quality, reliability, and innovation. However, as the automotive landscape shifts and brands from emerging markets gain traction, consumer attitudes toward non-traditional car manufacturers are evolving. The following section explores how COO influences consumer trust and purchase decisions.

1.2. Country-of-Origin Effects

As consumer-decision-making models emphasize the complexity of choices, especially in high involvement contexts, brand perceptions become central to how consumers evaluate alternatives. One such perception is the country-of-origin (hereafter COO), which has been widely studied due to its influence on how consumers evaluate products and brand image, which again can influence their purchase intentions. COO effects are understood as a cognitive cue, shaping consumer beliefs about product quality, reliability, and authenticity based on the country from which a product originates or is manufactured (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). One can therefore say that COO can be categorized as a heuristic, since consumers draw on a product's national origin to simplify more complex decisions. As discussed in Section 1.1.2, heuristics guide habitual decision-making, especially when consumers face information overload or lack either motivation or ability to evaluate all available attributes in depth.

Even though they can be efficient, heuristics can also introduce systematic biases into consumer judgements (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). In the case of COO effects, generalized beliefs about a country's reputation related to, for instance quality, reliability, or innovation can be activated. Such beliefs may not necessarily reflect the actual performance of the product. Regardless, these beliefs often rely on cognitive biases such as the halo effect, in which positive associations with a country (e.g., German engineering or Japanese reliability) spill over into favorable evaluations of all products from that country (Han, 1989; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). This way, one could say that COO serves both as a shortcut and a filter that shapes consumer expectations, even before a direct product experience occurs.

The impact of COO on consumer decision-making varies depending on prior knowledge and experience with a product or country. Several theoretical frameworks explain how this construct influences consumer perceptions and evaluations. One of the earliest is the "Halo Model" (Johansson et al., 1985), which suggests that a country's overall image creates a cognitive "halo" that shapes beliefs about product attributes, which then influence overall product evaluation. This model is particularly relevant when consumers lack direct experience with a product, leading them to rely on generalizations about a country (Han, 1989). However, these perceptions are often broad and imprecise, subject to change depending on new information or experiences (Maheswaran, 1994).

In contrast, the “Summary Construct Model” suggests that COO serves as a reinforcing cue rather than a primary determinant of product evaluation (Han, 1989). According to this mode, consumers who already have prior knowledge or experience with a product, use COO to validate their existing beliefs about a brand, rather than making entirely new perceptions. This implies that COO effects are in many cases more pronounced among customers with high product involvement. The reliance on COO to reinforce prior beliefs also relates to confirmation bias, where individuals selectively interpret information in ways that support their pre-existing attitudes (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

Beyond cognitive evaluation, COO can also evoke emotional associations, influencing purchase intentions based on national pride, symbolic benefits, or cultural affiliation (Luis-Alberto et al., 2021). This indicates that COO is not only a rational cue but also an affective and symbolic signal that connects consumers to a product’s country of origin through personal experiences, societal perceptions, and media influence. A framework that recognizes this comprehensiveness is offered by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1989). Their framework categorizes COO effects into three distinct dimensions: cognitive, affective, and normative, each influencing consumer decision-making in different ways. Each of these dimensions influence decision-making in their own way, highlighting that COO perceptions are multifaceted rather than just cognitive.

The cognitive dimension describes COO as an informational cue that helps consumers assess a product's quality, reliability, and technical attributes (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). In this view, consumers rely on COO as a signal of expertise in industries that require advanced skills, such as automotive manufacturing or electronics production. For instance, consumers may perceive cars manufactured in Germany as superior due to the country’s strong reputation for precision engineering and technical excellence (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). This dimension suggests that COO functions as a quality heuristic, particularly for high-involvement products, where consumers seek reassurance about durability and performance. However, it is also susceptible to stereotyping, where generalized assumptions about a country’s capabilities (both positive and negative) are applied to all its products, regardless of brand or performance (Maheswaran, 1994). For instance, consumers might assume that all vehicles from German producers are exceptionally durable, even if specific brands or models do not necessarily perform better than competitors.

The affective dimension emphasizes the emotional and symbolic meanings that consumers attach to products based on their country of origin. These emotional associations can stem from personal experiences, such as travel or cultural exposure, or from indirect sources, such as media representation or historical narratives. In some cases, consumers may develop positive emotional connections to a country, leading to a preference for its products as a way to express cultural appreciation or social status (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Conversely, negative associations with a country’s political climate, historical conflicts, or economic policies can lead to consumer animosity, where individuals deliberately avoid products from certain regions

(Raditya et al., 2025). For example, studies have shown that Chinese consumers' willingness to buy Japanese products has been affected by geopolitical tensions between the two countries (Klein et al., 1998; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Similarly, Arab-American consumers may acknowledge the superior quality of Israeli-made optical instruments but still refrain from purchasing them due to political and social tensions (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1989).

The normative dimension focuses on the role of moral and ethical considerations in COO effects, particularly how consumer ethnocentrism influences purchasing decisions (Raditya et al., 2025). Consumer ethnocentrism refers to the belief that purchasing domestic products is more appropriate and morally correct than buying foreign products, because it supports the national economy and protects local jobs (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). This dimension suggests that some consumers view buying domestic products as a civic duty, believing that their purchases contribute to national economic growth and job creation (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Ethnocentric consumers tend to prefer locally produced goods over foreign alternatives, even when the latter may be of equal or superior quality. At the same time, this dimension also explains why some consumers actively avoid products from countries with objectionable political systems or controversial global practices. For example, consumer boycotts of products from certain countries may occur in response to perceived ethical violations, political conflicts, or human rights concerns (Klein et al., 1998).

Obermiller and Spangenberg's framework helps explain why COO perceptions can vary widely among consumers, depending on their personal knowledge and experiences, their position in the customer journey, and socio-political context. Additional research has revealed several moderators that can either amplify or diminish the extent to which COO affects product evaluations and purchase decisions.

One key factor moderating COO effects is globalization and increased brand awareness. With greater exposure to multinational brands through online reviews, international marketing, and cross-border trade, consumers increasingly rely on brand familiarity and performance metrics rather than COO stereotypes. As a result, a brand's reputation, innovation, and consumer trust tend to carry more weight in purchase decisions than its country of origin (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

Detachment from COO bias through product performance and sustainability messaging occurs when brands successfully shift consumer focus from national stereotypes to measurable attributes such as innovation, reliability, and environmental responsibility. A key example is Japan's automotive industry, which overcame early negative perceptions by consistently delivering high-quality, fuel-efficient, and technologically advanced vehicles (Kim & Chung, 1997). Similarly, emerging brands in China and South Korea are now leveraging EV technology and sustainability efforts to reshape their global reputation.

Consumer ethnocentrism and national loyalty influence COO effects by shaping preferences for domestic over foreign products. Consumers with strong ethnocentric tendencies favor local brands regardless of quality comparisons (Bruning, 1997). However, education, socio-economic status, and international

exposure can reduce COO biases, making affluent and well-traveled consumers more open to foreign brands (Paswan et al., 2004).

Perceived risk and motivation also determine the strength of COO reliance. In low-risk purchases, consumers prioritize price and convenience over COO. However, in high-risk purchases, such as automobiles, COO serves as a risk-reduction strategy, reinforcing trust in brands from countries with strong manufacturing reputations (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

1.3. Trust

Trust in marketing can be broadly defined as the degree to which one party in an exchange relationship perceives the other party as honest and benevolent. In the context of interpersonal or channel relationships, honesty refers to the belief that a partner is reliable, honors commitments, fulfills obligations, and acts with sincerity, while benevolence reflects the belief that a partner genuinely cares about the interests and well-being of the other party, prioritizing mutual benefits over short-term self-interest (Geyskens et al., 1998). However, in the context of consumer-brand relationships, trust is more often conceptualized as a consumer's confident expectation that the brand will deliver on its promises, behave ethically, and maintain the consumer's long-term interests. In this view, brand trust depends not only on perceptions of integrity but additionally on the brand's competence and reliability, that is its ability to meet expectations in a consistent way (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003). Trust plays a crucial role in reducing perceived uncertainty and vulnerability in consumer decision-making, especially in high-risk product categories, and is therefore essential for building long-term brand relationships.

Trust is fundamentally a relationship between two parties: the trustor, who extends trust, and the trustee, who is expected to act in a trustworthy manner (Hancock et al., 2023). In the context of marketing and market relations, trust operates between individuals, between firms, and between firms and individuals (Raimondo, 2000). Some scholars differentiate between trust in individuals and trust in organizations (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Zaheer et al., 1998), while many studies adopt a generalized trust mechanism that applies across various contexts. Importantly, trust is often viewed as a reciprocal and symmetrical phenomenon, meaning that both parties in an exchange expect mutual reliability and good intentions (Ganesan, 1994; Raimondo, 2000). However, this symmetry is not always upheld, as power imbalances and differing incentives can create asymmetries in trust expectations and behaviors.

Historically, trust as an overall assessment of a firm's reliability and benevolence has not primarily been considered a state variable that directly influences customer experience in the customer journey (Geyskens et al., 1998). However, research on the customer journey has questioned this point of view. Since positive customer experiences are known to build trust, one could argue that trust has an impact on customer decisions during the customer journey because it reduces cognitive effort and attention paid to monitoring

relationships, including influencing the experience via the "halo effect" (Johansson et al., 1985; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The halo effect is a cognitive bias whereby positive impressions in one domain (such as perceived brand reliability) spill over to influence evaluations in other domains (such as product quality or service experience) without direct evidence (Thorndike, 1920; Johansson et al., 1985; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Through this mechanism, trust shapes how customers interpret subsequent brand encounters, which again could create self-reinforcing cycles of favorable evaluations. This dynamic suggests that once trust is established, consumers are more likely to view future brand interactions in a favorable way. These interactions may relate to product performance, service quality or communication efforts, and over time, this positive interpretation could contribute to the development of stronger brand loyalty.

Trust has in addition been identified as a key driver of technology adoption (Blut & Wang, 2019), making it particularly crucial for EVs, which rely on more advanced and unfamiliar technology than traditional internal combustion engine vehicles. Given the elevated perceived risk associated with new technologies, consumers are more likely to rely on trust as a means of reducing uncertainty in the decision-making process. Thus, aiming to increase trust among their consumers should be a strategic priority for newer Chinese EV brands, helping to overcome consumer skepticism, establish legitimacy, and improve competitive positioning in a highly saturated industry.

Extensive research on trust in the marketing field clearly indicates that scholars regard it as a crucial factor in fostering valuable long-term relationships between businesses and consumers. Furthermore, there is significant agreement on how trust is defined within this context and its operationalization through honesty and benevolence (Geyskens et al., 1998). However, reaching a consensus on the relationship between trust and other variables has been challenging, largely due to the diverse perspectives from which it has been examined (Geyskens et al., 1998).

Geyskens et al., have identified several key antecedents as crucial in shaping trust perceptions in their meta-analysis on the topic (1998). They have highlighted how environmental uncertainty plays a significant role, and consumers are less likely to place trust in brands when external conditions are volatile or unpredictable. In such cases, trust is built when a brand consistently delivers stable and reliable experiences, reducing perceived risks. Dependence on a brand also influences trust. When consumers perceive themselves as reliant on a specific product or service, their trust tends to increase, provided the brand demonstrates reliability and competence.

Another critical antecedent is communication, which fosters trust by aligning expectations and enhancing transparency (Geyskens et al., 1998). Open and consistent communication signals a brand's commitment to its consumers, reinforcing trust over time. Additionally, past economic outcomes impact

trust, as positive experiences lead consumers to attribute credibility to the brand, whereas negative financial experiences can erode trust (Geyskens et al., 1998).

In addition to these antecedents, research on brand alliances has shown that trust can be transferred from one entity to another through associative mechanisms. When a lesser-known brand collaborates with an established and trusted partner, consumers may extend their positive expectations and confidence to the unfamiliar brand. This phenomenon is often referred to as trust spillover effects (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Simonin and Ruth (1998) demonstrated that in co-branding contexts, consumers form attitudes about an unknown brand based on their pre-existing evaluations of the partner brand, particularly when knowledge about the new entrant is limited. Similarly, Rao et al. (1999) argue that brand alliances serve as market signals of quality and credibility, reducing perceived risk and information asymmetry in high-involvement purchase decisions. This effect is especially relevant for Chinese EV brands attempting to establish legitimacy in foreign markets, where partnerships with reputable Western firms may act as a trust-enabling mechanism, softening the impact of COO skepticism and enhancing perceived brand reliability, particularly in contexts where COO biases persist.

While the consequences of trust, such as brand loyalty and long-term commitment, provide motivation for companies to cultivate trust, the antecedents of trust are more relevant in understanding what drives consumers to shift away from traditional COO perceptions. In the context of Chinese EV brands entering the Norwegian market, these antecedents become particularly important in determining whether consumers will overcome initial skepticism and establish trust in unfamiliar brands. By focusing on stability, transparency, and proven product performance, emerging brands can strategically address the factors that shape trust perceptions, facilitating consumer adoption.

1.4. Research Gap and Contribution

While COO effects and brand trust have been extensively studied in marketing literature, most of the existing research has focused on well-established brands or broad consumer attitudes across markets. However, in the context of newly introduced Chinese EV brands, these constructs remain underexplored. Norway, as the leading global adopter of EVs, offers a unique testing ground for understanding how traditional COO perceptions are challenged by innovation, affordability, and changing consumer expectations. Yet, there is still limited academic research that isolates the psychological and trust-related drivers behind Norwegian consumers' willingness to consider new and less familiar Chinese car brands.

Mauritzen (2023) offers an important first step in exploring this phenomenon, providing early descriptive evidence that peer effects significantly increase the likelihood of purchasing Chinese cars in Norway. However, his analysis also reveals a lack of consistent patterns when controlling for macro-level EV penetration, indicating that the mechanisms behind consumer trust and brand evaluation are likely more

complex and not easily captured by quantitative proxies alone. Mauritzen himself notes that the sparse data and reliance on observational models limit the depth of causal interpretation. This highlights a need for deeper, more nuanced inquiry, particularly into how and why consumers shift away from traditional COO heuristics.

By using a qualitative methodology (including qualitative survey and in-depth interviews), this study aims to uncover the underlying attitudes, perceptions, and trust-building processes that shape Norwegian consumers' openness toward Chinese EV brands. As such, this thesis contributes not only to closing a theoretical gap in COO and trust research but also offers timely, practical insight into consumer behavior in one of the most dynamic EV markets globally.

2. Analysis of the Phenomenon

The automotive market is often characterized by information asymmetries, where consumers struggle to assess product quality before purchasing (Kim, 1985). Although this issue is traditionally associated with the used car segment, where uncertainty about e.g., previous ownership, maintenance history, and hidden defects limits product transparency, many of the same challenges persist in the new car market. This is because new, modern vehicles involve complex technical specifications and long-term performance uncertainties that are difficult to assess at the point of sale. Moreover, many consumers lack the expertise to evaluate advanced features. Automobiles are complex, high-involvement products that demand significant financial investment, yet their long-term reliability, performance, and quality are often opaque to the average buyer at the point of sale (Chao & Gupta, 1995; Huber & Herrmann, 2011; Raditya et al., 2025).

In this context, established brands have historically played a pivotal informational role (Anisimova, 2016; Raditya et al., 2025). Well-known automotive names carry reputational capital that helps reduce uncertainty and guide consumer decision-making. For example, some brands have become synonymous with attributes such as durability or performance, with Mercedes-Benz often representing long-lasting engineering quality and BMW being associated with driving performance and precision. Thus, these associations act as heuristics in a marketplace characterized by imperfect information.

However, the same brand-driven trust mechanisms that provide consumer reassurance can also pose significant barriers for new entrants (Mauritzen, 2023). New and unfamiliar car brands frequently struggle to secure market share, particularly in mature and competitive automotive markets where consumer loyalty and perceived quality are deeply entrenched. Nonetheless, history shows that disruptive market conditions, such as oil crises or technological shifts, can create openings for lesser-known or emerging brands. Japanese and South Korean manufacturers like Honda and Toyota, for instance, successfully entered Western markets

during periods of upheaval by offering vehicles that aligned with changing consumer preferences and macroeconomic trends (Anisimova, 2016).

Today, the global shift toward EVs represents a similarly transformative moment. With falling battery costs and increasing regulatory pressure for cleaner transport, the EV landscape has become fertile ground for new competitors (Aarstad & Kvitastein, 2020). While Tesla has dominated headlines as a first mover, a new wave of Chinese EV brands is rapidly gaining ground. These brands are increasingly seen as capable challengers to traditional Western automakers, not only due to their technological innovation and affordability, but also because of extensive government support and aggressive international expansion strategies.

The relevance of this development is particularly visible in the European market, where Chinese EV brands are making strategic inroads. Concerns about potential market disruption have already triggered political responses, including investigations into the pricing practices and subsidy structures of Chinese manufacturers (Mauritzen, 2023). These dynamics suggest a significant shift in the structure of the global automotive industry where brand perception, COO effects, and consumer trust play decisive roles in shaping market outcomes.

To contextualize the evolving perceptions of Chinese automotive brands in Norway, it is necessary to clarify which brands are encompassed in the research of this thesis. As Mauritzen (2023) points out, the category of "Chinese EV brands" in the Norwegian market is not homogenous, and consumer perceptions of what constitutes a "Chinese brand" are shaped not only by ownership or production location, but also by brand heritage and how the brand is culturally positioned. For the purposes of this study, the term Chinese EV brands refer to electric vehicle brands that are both Chinese-owned and manufactured in China. This includes, but is not limited to, BYD, XPeng, Seres, NIO, Hongqi, Lotus, Voyah, Aiways, Maxus, and Zeekr. These brands are explicitly positioned as new entrants in the European market and are often marketed as Chinese innovations, both in origin and production.

In contrast, brands such as Volvo and Polestar (while owned by the Chinese automotive group Geely) are not included in this category. As Mauritzen (2023) argues, Norwegian consumers tend to perceive these brands as European due to their Scandinavian heritage, longstanding presence in the Norwegian market, and branding strategies that emphasize their design and engineering roots in Sweden. Additionally, some EV brands are merely produced in China but owned by non-Chinese companies such as Tesla, which manufactures some of its Model 3 and Model Y units in its Shanghai Gigafactory yet retains a strong American brand ownership (Jing, 2025). Traditional European brands like Volkswagen, BMW, and Renault are naturally excluded from the category of Chinese EV brands, even if some of their EV components or models are partially produced in China (Smith, 2024; Auto World Journal, 2025). This categorization

ensures that the thesis focuses on consumer perceptions related specifically to brands that are explicitly and recognizably Chinese in both origin and market positioning.

This chapter explores the implications of these shifts in more detail by presenting the relevance of the phenomenon, supporting empirical data, and articulating the research question that guides this thesis. Building on the theoretical constructs discussed in the previous chapter (consumer behavior, COO effects, and brand trust), this analysis positions the emergence of Chinese EV brands as a test case for re-evaluating traditional consumer heuristics.

2.1. Country-of-Origin Effects in Consumer Decision-Making

The COO effect refers to the influence that a product's national association has on consumer perceptions and evaluations. As shown in the previous chapter, within the marketing literature COO is considered a powerful cognitive and affective cue, particularly when consumers face high levels of uncertainty or limited product knowledge (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999; Han, 1989). This is especially true for high-involvement purchases such as automobiles, where both financial and emotional stakes are considerable.

High consumer involvement refers to the personal relevance and perceived risk a consumer associates with a purchase decision (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Involvement is not only determined by the extent of information search, but also the depth of cognitive and affective processing (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985). The hierarchy of effects model (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961) provide a useful understanding of this dynamic, proposing that consumer decision-making unfolds in the following sequential stages: cognitive (awareness and knowledge), affective (liking and preference), and conative/experiential (purchase intention and behavior). In high involvement-contexts such as buying a car, consumers proposedly follow this kind of standard learning hierarchy, by investing substantial effort in learning about the product, forming attitudes and making deliberate choices (Solomon, 2023).

Applied to EV purchases, this means consumers are likely to engage in extended problem-solving, systematically comparing brands, technologies, and specifications before reaching a purchase decision. This contrasts with low-involvement purchases, where the decision-making process may bypass detailed evaluation in favor of habitual or heuristic-driven choices (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). COO often acts as a proxy for quality, reliability, and expertise, helping consumers simplify their decision-making processes by drawing on national stereotypes. For instance, German cars are frequently associated with precision and engineering, while Japanese cars are linked to fuel efficiency and long-term reliability (Bruning, 1997; Maheswaran, 1994). These COO effects can be particularly influential in the early cognitive stages, acting as a salient heuristic that informs perceptions of product quality and reduces perceived uncertainty. However, as involvement deepens and consumers accumulate knowledge, COO influences may be moderated by factors such as direct product experience or brand reputations (Luis-Alberto et al., 2021).

While cognitive shortcuts still influence purchasing decisions, the Norwegian EV market presents a context where traditional COO effects appear to be weakening or evolving. Here, functional attributes such as range, battery technology, digital features, and environmental performance increasingly compete with country-based assumptions. Chinese EV brands, for instance, are entering the market with highly competitive offerings that challenge preconceived notions tied to their origin. As a result, COO now interacts with a broader set of evaluative criteria, and its influence depends more heavily on product-specific credibility, social proof, and media framing. This supports recent literature suggesting that COO no longer operates in isolation but rather as part of a composite evaluation process moderated by context, involvement, and available information (Luis-Alberto et al., 2021; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

This gradual shift in evaluative focus invites marketers and researchers alike to reconsider the relative weight of national image versus product performance in brand building. In high-tech, fast-evolving industries like EVs, the opportunity exists for unfamiliar or non-traditional brands to transcend initial COO skepticism: provided they can signal competence, innovation, and alignment with consumer values. The following sections explore how the structure of the Norwegian market and the mechanisms of trust interact with these shifting perceptions.

2.2. Changing Automotive Market

The Norwegian automotive market has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades. This shift cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader context of the global EV market. Globally, the transition toward electric mobility was initially driven by pioneering models such as the Toyota Prius, the first mass-produced hybrid car in 1997, and the Tesla Roadster, which debuted in 2008 and demonstrated high-performance electric driving. These vehicles shifted consumer expectations, moving EVs from niche products to mainstream options. The Nissan LEAF's launch in 2010 further confirmed the market potential for EVs[2].

In parallel, global climate agreements, such as the 2015 Paris Agreement, accelerated political and regulatory momentum around sustainable mobility (UNFCCC, 2015). At the regional level, the European Union enforced stricter CO_2 emissions standards, culminating in the 2022 decision to phase out internal combustion engine car sales by 2035 (European Parliament, 2023; European Commission, 2018). These initiatives have redefined competitive dynamics, pressuring both legacy and emerging automakers to expand their EV offerings (Auto World Journal, 2025).

[2] Source: company websites
The evolution of the Prius. Retrieved April 2025, from Toyota Global: https://global.toyota/en/prius20th/evolution/
About Us. Retrieved April 2025, from Tesla About: https://www.tesla.com/about
A decade of innovation – the LEAF's incredible journey. Retrieved April 2025, from Nissan Motor Corporation: https://www.nissan-global.com/EN/STORIES/RELEASES/nissan-leaf-10years/

In recent years, Norway has emerged as a global frontrunner in the transition to electric mobility. With around 90% of all new car sales now being electric (OFV, 2025a), the country offers a distinctive landscape for studying the dynamics of brand trust, market entry, and consumer openness. While the shift toward battery electric vehicles was once spearheaded by a handful of pioneering brands such as Tesla and Nissan, the landscape is rapidly evolving with the entry of over 20 Chinese EV brands, including but not limited to BYD, XPeng, and NIO (Skillebæk, 2024b). These developments signal a fundamental transformation in how Norwegian consumers perceive automotive brands, challenging traditional brand hierarchies and assumptions tied to COO.

Between 2019 and 2025, the market share of Chinese car brands in Norway has increased more than tenfold: from 2.1% to 22.8% of new car imports (Loftås, 2025). This growth has taken place in a highly saturated market with an annual ceiling of approximately 150,000 new registrations (OFV, 2025b), and against a backdrop of intense competition from well-established European, American, Japanese and Korean brands. Notably, this expansion has occurred despite the absence of long-standing brand equity or consumer familiarity, which are factors traditionally considered essential for success in the automotive sector (Jørgensen et al., 2016; Jeon, 2017; Huber & Herrmann, 2011).

One explanation for this trend lies in the way Chinese brands have leveraged Norway's EV-friendly environment as a strategic entry point into the European market. The absence of punitive EU-level tariffs, combined with generous national incentives for zero-emission vehicles, has enabled these brands to offer high-spec vehicles at competitive prices (Loftås, 2025). As early as the 1990s, Norway began incentivizing EV purchases through toll exemptions and tax breaks, but it was from 2009 onward that these measures were scaled up decisively (Norwegian Ministry of Transport, 2025). Key measures include a CO_2 tax applied to petrol and diesel vehicles, combined with registration taxes that escalate according to emission levels, making combustion vehicles significantly more expensive. In contrast, EVs benefit from full exemptions from registration taxes and enjoy VAT (Value Added Tax) exemptions to a purchase price of NOK 500,000. In addition, EV owners receive a substantial reduction in toll fees (paying no more than 70% of the standard rate) and are granted access to many bus lanes in urban areas, providing an attractive incentive to improve travel time by easing traffic congestion. Beyond these financial incentives, regulatory frameworks have played a central role. Since 2022, all public sector purchases of passenger cars have been required to be zero-emission. This mandate was expanded in 2023 to also include light and heavy vans, and in 2024 to cover local buses (Norwegian Ministry of Transport, 2025).

At the same time, the availability of digital channels and direct-to-consumer sales models has reduced dependency on traditional dealership networks, which historically have been considered a key barrier to entry (Skillebæk, 2024a). Chinese manufacturers have also adopted diverse market entry strategies to build visibility in Norway. For instance, brands like NIO and XPeng have opened high-end showrooms in

lucrative locations in Oslo to reinforce their image as innovative and premium, while others, such as RSA (the national dealer of JAC, Maxus and BYD among others), have focused on expanding traditional dealership networks to ensure local service availability (Skillebæk, 2024b; Raaum, 2025b). These strategies exemplify that these brands seem to have a broader understanding that credibility is built not only through product specifications, but also on local presence and touchpoints throughout the entire customer journey.

From the consumer side, the growth of Chinese EV brands challenges prior assumptions about the stability of brand loyalty and ethnocentric preferences. Research has shown that Norwegian car owners have traditionally displayed high degrees of brand loyalty based on perceived reliability and long-term value (Jørgensen et al., 2016). However, the near doubling of sales for Chinese EVs between 2023 and 2024 indicates a shift in consumer openness toward previously unfamiliar brands, even in the presence of uncertainty regarding servicing, insurance, or brand longevity (Skillebæk, 2024a). This suggests that other factors, such as perceived innovation, price, design, or technological sophistication, may be increasingly influential in shaping trust and reducing the perceived risk of trying new entrants.

In fact, survey data from Norstat (the leading European data collector for market research) reveal that while more than half of Norwegian consumers cite affordability as a key advantage of Chinese EVs, concerns about political and ethical implications remain significant, with 41% expressing reluctancy due to China's geopolitical positioning (Raaum, 2025b). Moreover, the evolution in product quality and technology seems to contribute to Chinese brands' repositioning in the eyes of consumers. Once seen as low-cost imitators, manufacturers like BYD and NIO now offer innovations such as blade batteries, smart information and entertainment systems, and even battery-swapping infrastructure, which may resonate with tech-savvy early adopters in the Norwegian market (Raaum, 2025b).

Table 3 below summarizes key milestones in the global EV transition, with a focus on the interplay between worldwide trends and Norway's distinctive leadership role. This timeline not only illustrates the technological and regulatory turning points but also highlights the evolving context within which Norwegian consumers evaluate emerging EV brands.

Table 3

Key Milestones in the Global and Norwegian EV Transition (source: author's elaboration)

Year	Global Milestones	Norwegian Milestones
1997	Toyota launches the Prius, the first mass-produced hybrid car (Toyota, 2017).	

2008	Tesla unveils the Roadster, proving EVs can have long ranges and performance (Tesla 20204).	
2009		Norway expands EV incentives, including VAT exemption and free tolls (Norwegian Ministry of Transport, 2025).
2010	Nissan releases the LEAF, the first mass-market all-electric car (Nissan 2020).	
2013	Tesla launches the Model S globally, setting new benchmarks (Jørgensen et al., 2016).	Tesla Model S becomes a top-selling car in Norway (OFV, 2025b.
2015	Paris Agreement spurs global focus on sustainability (UNFCCC, 2015).	Oslo commits to fossil-free city goal (Oslo Municipality, n.d.).
2017	China announces phase-out plans for internal combustion engines (Institute for Security & Development Policy 2018).	Norway's EV fleet exceeds 50,000 units (OFV, 2025b).
2018	EU enforces stricter CO_2 emission targets (European Commission, 2018).	EVs reach 31% of new car sales (OFV, 2025b).
2019	Tesla Model 3 becomes the best-selling EV globally (Mauritzen, 2023).	Norway's EV market share surpasses 42% (OFV, 2025b).
2020	COVID-19 accelerates green recovery strategies (Skillebæk, 2024a; Norwegian Ministry of Transport 2025).	Norway reaffirms 2025 zero-emission goal (Norwegian Ministry of Transport 2025) .
2021	BYD and XPeng begin European expansion via Norway (Skillebæk, 2024b; Raaum, 2025b).	BYD and XPeng open flagship showrooms in Oslo Norway (Skillebæk, 2024b; Raaum, 2025b).
2022	EU votes to ban petrol and diesel car sales by 2035 (European Parliament, 2023).	EVs account for 80% of new car sales (OFV, 2025a).

2023	Major automakers pledge full-electric futures (Auto World Journal, 2025).	Over 20 Chinese EV brands operate in Norway (Skillebæk, 2024b).
2024	Solid-state battery breakthroughs announced (Loftås, 2025).	Norway nears 90% EV share in new car sales (OFV, 2025a).
2025	Global EV sales forecast to exceed 20 million units (Raaum, 2025a).	Norway set to ban new internal combustion engine car sales (Norwegian Ministry of Transport, 2025a).

Note. This figure summarizes the main milestones in the global and Norwegian EV transition.

In essence, the rise of Chinese brands in Norway not only illustrates a shifting competitive landscape but also reveals broader changes in how consumers evaluate automotive trust. While legacy brands have historically built trust over decades through performance consistency and brand symbolism (Gutiérrez et al., 2024; Keller & Swaminathan, 2019), newcomers appear to be establishing credibility through sustainability-value-driven propositions, social proof, and early adopter endorsement. This emerging dynamic raises questions about the mechanisms through which trust is formed in low-familiarity, high-risk product categories, and sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the psychological drivers behind this shift in the sections that follow Section 2.2.1.

2.2.1. Macro-Level Perspective: Global Shifts and the New Geo-Economic Landscape

While Norway's domestic policies and market dynamics have been pivotal in shaping the rapid EV adoption, these local trends cannot be understood in isolation from broader global developments. Nor does the value of reference cover its full potential if it is discussed in a national perspective. The competitive push by Chinese EV brands into the Norwegian market reflects a much larger geo-economic transformation, where China is positioning itself as a technological and industrial leader globally. This context has been discussed by New York Times columnist Tom Friedman in *The Ezra Klein Show* podcast episode "*Tom Friedman Thinks We're Getting China Dangerously Wrong"*[3], where he emphasizes how China's technological ambitions are redefining global competition.

Friedman notes that China is no longer merely a manufacturing hub but has evolved into a cutting-edge powerhouse: "*China is moving incredibly fast [...] they have put their smartphones on wheels"* (2025). This captures how companies like Huawei, once purely focused on smartphones, have now become significant

[3] *Tom Friedman Thinks We're Getting China Dangerously Wrong* (2025, January 9). *The Ezra Klein Show* [Podcast]. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000010106387/tom-friedman-thinks-were-getting-china-dangerously-wrong.html

contributors in the automotive industry (Ren, 2025). Similarly, ride-hailing services like Didi (the Chinese version of Uber) offer a *"completely seamless technical experience"*, which underscores the deep integration between digital ecosystems and physical mobility. The modern Chinese tech industry is structured for agility, which Friedman draws the analogy to personal fitness, stating that *"[...] if you are fit, you are able to face new challenges faster than someone who doesn't train"* (2025). This allows Chinese firms to innovate at a remarkable speed. Lastly, Friedman reframes Western perceptions of China's ambitions, stating that *"China is not trying to spread Marxism; they are trying to spread Musk-ism [...] , they are trying to beat us at our own game"* (2025). Through such a statement, he shares an opinion supporting that the influx of Chinese EVs in Norway (and the rest of the world) is a part of a global strategy to dominate key industries through technological and economic strength more than ideological motives.

Further insight can be drawn from *Motor*, the official magazine published by NAF (Norwegian Automobile Association) (Raaum, 2025a). The magazine offers a detailed analysis that illustrates how China's automotive transformation has shaken the foundations of the global industry. In interviews with automotive experts Michael Dunne and Klaus Maier (former head of Mercedes-Benz China), the performance of Chinese EV brands at the 2023 Shanghai Auto Show is described as a signal for a definitive shift in global market dynamics, driven by the quality and competitiveness of these new vehicles (Raaum, 2025a).

China's rapid progress is described as no coincidence, but rather the result of a deliberate industrial strategy. Through policies like *Made in China 2025*, the Chinese government has funneled billions into battery production, supply chains, and EV innovation in order to create an independent and highly competitive automotive industry (Institute for Security & Development Policy, 2018; Raaum, 2025a). Editor Peter Raaum in *Motor,* cites Dunne's explanation of the China's industrial environment as a *"pressure cooker"*, where competition and a relentless work ethic (often described as the "996" culture, that is, working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week) drives rapid advancements (2025a). Crucially, China's strategy seems to include opening the automotive sector to tech innovators, attracting investments and expertise from people like William Li (NIO), Li Xiang (Li Auto), and He Xiaopeng (XPeng), who merges cutting-edge digital technology with automotive design, often hiring top Western designers to enhance their appeal (Raaum, 2025a).

Matthias Schmidt of Schmidt Automotive Research notes to *Motor* that this shift has been enabled by early joint ventures between Western brands and Chinese state-owned enterprises, where the latter have gained critical know-how. For example, Volkswagen's network of 39 factories in China now faces a paradox: while China was essential for VW's global rise, it is also contributing to its current challenges, as Chinese firms now appear to outcompete their former mentors in both cost-efficiency and innovation (Raaum, 2025a). Giles Taylor, former design chief at Rolls-Royce and now with Chinese state-owned brand

Hongqi, support this view by pointing out that Chinese brands increasingly match Western brands in both quality and technology (Raaum, 2025a). This emerging reality not only challenges traditional brand hierarchies but also forces a rethinking of what credibility and trust, prestige, and competitive advantage mean in today's EV market.

2.3. Barriers to Trust: Stereotypes and Perceived Risk

For many consumers, brand trust is cultivated over time through repeated, positive experiences and consistent performance. In markets like Norway, where Japanese and South Korean automakers have dominated the Asian car segment for decades, trust in these brands has largely been built through long-term exposure, product familiarity, and high perceived quality (Jørgensen et al., 2016). In contrast, Chinese brands are still relatively new entrants, meaning that Norwegian consumers are likely to be first-time buyers with little or no prior experience. This absence of historical reference points means that trust cannot rely on habitual decision-making or brand loyalty and must instead be shaped by other mechanisms, such as COO perceptions, symbolic brand cues, or perceived value propositions.

In the absence of familiarity, consumers often fall back on country-level stereotypes as a heuristic for evaluating product quality and reliability. As discussed in Section 1.2, COO perceptions are not just cognitive assessments but are also colored by affective and symbolic associations. When a brand lacks an established reputation, these broader national images may significantly shape consumer evaluations. While there is limited academic research specifically mapping Norwegian perceptions of "Made in China," findings from other Western markets have consistently shown that Chinese products are often associated with mass production, lower price points, and concerns about quality and durability (Kim & Chung, 1997; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). These perceptions are not limited to fast-moving consumer goods but also extend to more complex and higher-risk product categories such as automobiles (Luis-Alberto et al., 2021).

In the case of the automotive industry, trust becomes even more critical due to the high involvement nature of the purchase. Consumers perceive significant functional and financial risk when buying a vehicle, especially when the brand is unfamiliar and lacks a strong local service or dealership network. This makes Chinese EV brands particularly vulnerable to stereotype-based evaluations, where their COO may signal perceived risk rather than reassurance. In the Norwegian context, the absence of a longstanding Chinese automotive presence makes it harder for these brands to benefit from established reputation effects or word-of-mouth credibility. As such, their entry into the market must rely heavily on symbolic cues (such as innovative design, tech integration, and sustainability messaging) and alternative trust-building strategies.

Research by Phuong et al. (2020) identifies the car brand as the single most significant factor in the vehicle selection process, even though their study focused on Southeast Asian consumers. While cultural and market differences limit direct generalization, the structure of the customer journey (particularly in the

prepurchase evaluation phase) remains similar across global contexts. These findings underscore the need for strong brand positioning as a core mechanism for reducing perceived risk and gaining consumer trust.

Adding to this, consumers often look to car brands not only for functional performance but also for symbolic and emotional value. The automotive category is deeply intertwined with identity expression, as vehicles often reflect social status, lifestyle preferences, and personal values (Belk, 1988). Importantly, this symbolic dimension also ties into the perceived social risk associated with purchase decisions, which can be understood as the potential for negative judgment or loss of esteem within one's social circle based on the product owned (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003). Adding to this, research in the automotive sector confirms that social image concerns play a significant role in shaping consumer attitudes toward car brands (Phuong et al., 2020). COO perceptions can reinforce or conflict with this symbolic value. For instance, European car brands may carry connotations of prestige and heritage, whereas emerging Chinese brands may struggle with outdated or negative associations. Until these stereotypes shift, they remain a barrier that Chinese brands must actively overcome through consistent communication, credible brand narratives, and reliable product performance (Anisimova, 2016; Kotler, Keller & Chernev, 2021).

Brand trust can be fragile, even for well-established brands and EV market leaders. A recent example involves controversies related to the Tesla brand. Despite its strong associations with innovation and technological leadership, Tesla has faced backlash due to CEO Elon Musk's public behavior and political affiliations, including his leadership role in the U.S. Department of Government Efficiency under President Donald Trump (Reston, 2025). These controversies have led to both consumer protests and reputational damage, particularly in European markets, which have been key growth areas for the brand. For instance, Tesla experienced an 81% drop in sales in the Swedish market compared to the previous year, reflecting a significant consumer response to the Musk controversy (Parodi, 2025).

In contrast, the Norwegian market presents a more nuanced picture. While there has been public debate and some consumer hesitation towards Tesla due to the same case, the Norwegian sales numbers have not experienced a dramatic decline. In fact, Tesla's new car sales in Norway rose by 11.8% in April 2025 compared to the same month the previous year, totaling 873 vehicles (OFV, 2025b). This resilience could suggest that Norwegian consumers may differentiate between the brand's products and the leader's personal actions, by choosing to focus more on the performance and value of the vehicle.

2.3.1. Consumer Typologies

To further contextualize the evolving consumer landscape for EVs in Norway, it is useful to consider the typologies of adopters within the framework of Rogers' (2003) *Diffusion of Innovations* theory. This theory posits that the adoption of new technologies follows a predictable curve, segmented into five distinct consumer categories: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Each group is

characterized by differing levels of risk tolerance, openness to innovation, and social influence (Rogers, 2003).

Based on this framework's categorization, the early phases of Norway's EV transition (particularly around 2010) were driven primarily by innovators and early adopters. These consumers are typically risk-tolerant, value technological novelty, and are often motivated by environmental concerns or a desire to signal progressive values (Rogers, 2003; Axsen et al., 2015). However, as the Norwegian EV market has matured and government incentives have lowered the financial and functional barriers to entry, adoption has increasingly spread to the early and late majority. These groups are more pragmatic, often motivated by proven benefits such as cost savings, convenience, and social proof rather than a primary interest in innovation itself (Bohnsack et al., 2014).

The shift toward mainstream adoption has important implications for brand perception and trust formation. While early adopters may be more willing to experiment with new or unfamiliar brands (such as emerging Chinese EV manufacturers), the early and late majority typically exhibit greater brand conservatism and are more susceptible to country-of-origin effects and perceived risks (Pappu, 2006). As such, the ability of Chinese brands to build credibility and reduce perceived uncertainty becomes even more critical as they aim to penetrate deeper into the Norwegian market.

Recent statistics suggest that Norway is now firmly situated in the early-to-late majority phase of EV adoption, with market penetration exceeding 90% of new car sales (OFV, 2025a). This saturation indicates that the market is no longer dominated by risk-tolerant pioneers but by mainstream consumers who prioritize practicality, reliability, and social validation (Mersky et al., 2016). For new entrants, understanding and addressing the preferences and concerns of these mainstream consumers will be valuable in achieving sustained market success.

2.4. Evolving Customer Perceptions of Chinese Automotive Brands

Historically, Chinese products have faced significant COO-related stigma in many Western markets, where "Made in China" has often been synonymous with low-cost manufacturing, imitation, poor quality, and limited durability (Kim & Chung, 1997; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). While increasingly outdated, these perceptions remain embedded in the collective consumer mindset and continue to influence purchasing decisions, especially in high-involvement categories such as automobiles. In such contexts, where trust, safety, and long-term performance are critical factors, consumers may be particularly cautious toward unfamiliar brands from countries perceived as having weaker manufacturing standards or limited automotive heritage.

These biases have historically disadvantaged Chinese car manufacturers in their attempts to enter mature and competitive markets (Raditya et al., 2025). Unlike Japanese or South Korean brands, which gradually

overcame initial skepticism through consistent quality improvements and long-term market presence, many Chinese automotive brands are still in the early stages of global expansion. As a result, they must contend not only with the challenges of market saturation and strong incumbents but also with ingrained stereotypes that associate their COO with inferior quality and unproven reliability.

However, consumer perceptions are not static. Global trends centered around sustainability, digital transformation, and innovation, are creating new avenues for reputation-building and market legitimacy. The rise of EVs offers a particularly valuable opportunity for Chinese brands to challenge outdated assumptions and reframe their identity. By investing heavily in battery technology, AI integration, and smart mobility solutions, Chinese manufacturers are positioning themselves not as imitators, but as innovators capable of shaping the future of mobility (Luis-Alberto et al., 2021; Rajavi et al., 2022). In this context, technological leadership can act as a powerful trust signal, potentially overriding historical COO biases.

Moreover, many Chinese EV brands are aligning themselves with global sustainability narratives, offering models with strong environmental performance, competitive range, and digital interfaces that resonate with younger, eco-conscious consumers. This shift is important because it taps into a new set of brand associations that are less tied to COO stereotypes and more grounded in performance, innovation, and shared values. As Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) note, COO effects are malleable and can be reshaped through credible brand signaling and sustained positive experiences.

In Norway, where consumers are generally early adopters of green technologies and sustainability plays a central role in public discourse, this shift in positioning may be particularly impactful. The growing openness toward Chinese EV brands, reflected in their rising market share, suggests that at least some consumers are willing to look beyond COO stereotypes when the product offering aligns with current values and expectations. This evolution reflects a broader trend in which symbolic and affective brand dimensions increasingly outweigh traditional national cues, allowing new entrants to redefine their image through innovation rather than heritage.

2.5. Research Question

The emergence of Chinese EV brands in Norway presents a compelling case for reevaluating traditional consumer heuristics tied to country-of-origin perceptions. As this chapter has shown, while COO remains a powerful cue in high-risk purchase contexts, Norwegian consumers are increasingly confronted with value propositions that challenge the dominance of legacy brands. This shift, driven by factors such as technological innovation, sustainability, competitive pricing, and social proof, suggests that trust formation may no longer hinge solely on national image or brand familiarity.

However, the psychological mechanisms underpinning this shift remain underexplored. How do Norwegian consumers make sense of unfamiliar yet innovative brands from traditionally distrusted origins?

What enables them to override initial skepticism and place trust in products from countries that historically carried negative COO associations? And to what extent does trust act as a bridge between brand unfamiliarity and willingness to purchase?

Against this backdrop, the central research question guiding this thesis is:

Main Research Question: *What drives Norwegian consumers to shift away from traditional country-of-origin perceptions in their trust and purchase decisions for Chinese car brands?*

To address this overarching investigation, the study further examines three interconnected sub-questions:

1. *How do Norwegian consumers perceive the country of origin (COO) in the context of newly introduced Chinese EV brands?*
   This sub-question explores whether perceptions of COO remain the way they previously have been, are undergoing a transformation, or are becoming less influential over time.

2. *What role does trust play in shaping willingness to consider or purchase Chinese EV brands?*
   This question focuses directly on the discussed trust mechanisms, investigating how trust could have an impact on the relationship between unfamiliarity and purchase intention.

3. *Which brand cues influence consumers to override COO-based skepticism?*
   Here, the emphasis is on identifying and analyzing the brand-level signals that function as trust-enablers and thereby support potential brand acceptance.

To answer these questions, this thesis adopts a qualitative approach to uncover how consumers perceive, interpret, and ultimately respond to the trust signals and brand cues communicated by newly introduced Chinese EV manufacturers. By exploring these underlying dynamics, the study aims to contribute both theoretical insights and practical implications for understanding brand evaluation in an era of increasing market globalization and technological disruption.

The following chapter outlines the methodological approach of this thesis. Given the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative research design was considered the most suitable.

Data collection consisted of two complementary components: a qualitative survey targeting Norwegian consumers in order to capture their firsthand reflections on COO-perceptions, trust formation, and brand evaluation, and a semi-structured, in-depth interview with the editor-in-chief of a leading Norwegian automotive publication. This dual method strategy was implemented to triangulate consumer insights with expert perspectives, thereby ensuring both depth and contextual validation.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the methodological choices, the data collection procedures, and the analytical framework applied to interpret the findings.

3. Methodology

This study investigates the factors that shape Norwegian consumers' trust and purchase decisions related to new Chinese EV brands, with a particular focus on the evolving role of COO perceptions. Through the investigation of brand-level signals, trust mechanisms, and consumer heuristics, the research aims to shed light on how traditionally skeptical consumers navigate unfamiliar but increasingly competitive market entrants.

The thesis is guided by the following overarching research question: *What drives Norwegian consumers to shift away from traditional country-of-origin perceptions in their trust and purchase decisions regarding Chinese car brands?* To structure the investigation, three pillars further examine: (1) how COO perceptions are evolving, (2) the role of trust in purchase consideration, and (3) which brand cues help mitigate COO-based skepticism.

These research questions underpin the methodological approach detailed in the following sections.

3.1. Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how Norwegian consumers evaluate Chinese EV brands, with a focus on evolving COO perceptions and trust mechanisms. Given the complex and subjective nature of consumer attitudes and brand perceptions, a qualitative approach is well-suited to capturing nuanced insights that are not easily accessible through quantitative methods (Belk et al., 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Qualitative research focuses on understanding how people interpret their experiences and the meanings they attach to them. Unlike quantitative research, which exploits statistical techniques to achieve generalization through summarization, qualitative research captures the complexities of human behavior through detailed verbal and visual data (Belk et al., 2013). While both types of research are interpretive in nature, qualitative research is especially useful when the goal is to explore complex social and psychological processes in depth (Belk et al., 2013).

Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative research design has been adopted to capture the depth and complexity of how Norwegian consumers perceive Chinese electric EV brands, how they build trust in these unfamiliar brands, and what influences their purchase decisions. These questions are tied to consumers' personal experiences, attitudes, and cultural assumptions, which cannot easily be captured through quantitative measures. Qualitative methods are well-suited to uncovering these kinds of subtle and layered insights (Belk et al., 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

To triangulate perspectives and enhance credibility, the research integrates two qualitative methods: an asynchronous open-ended survey targeting consumers, and a semi-structured in-depth interview with an automotive industry expert. Together, these methods provide both depth and breadth, allowing for a richer

interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. The survey captures a variety of consumer views, while the interview offers a deeper understanding of the market context. This approach allows for an exploration of how trust is formed and how consumers navigate their perceptions of unfamiliar brands, which is a complex process that requires more than just surface-level data (Belk et al., 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

3.2. Methodological Framework

The methodological choices were informed by a set of sensitizing concepts outlined in the theoretical framework: COO effects, consumer trust, brand signaling, and symbolic brand value. These concepts guided both the development of data collection instruments and the thematic analysis, without imposing rigid analytical categories (Blumer, 1954). The approach balances inductive openness with theory-driven awareness.

Thematic analysis was selected as the primary analytical technique, following Clarke & Braun's (2017) framework. This method enables systematic identification of patterns across the dataset while allowing flexibility to accommodate unexpected findings. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed using Kallio et al.'s (2016) five-step guide, and the qualitative survey design was informed by best practices outlined by Bingley et al. (2023) for open-ended digital consumer research.

3.3. Study 1: Qualitative Survey

In order to investigate the nuanced and evolving perceptions of trust toward Chinese EV brands among Norwegian consumers, Study 1 of this thesis exploits the methodology of a qualitative survey. A qualitative survey is a form of open-ended questionnaire that gathers written reflections from a broad range of participants, allowing for the exploration of underlying attitudes and behavioral drivers across a diverse sample (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Jansen, 2010). Unlike structured surveys or interviews, this approach captures both the flexibility of qualitative input and a broader reach because of the digital design that facilitates wider distribution.

A qualitative survey was particularly well-suited for this research for several reasons. First, it allows for broader reach compared to one-on-one interviews, enabling the collection of diverse perspectives from a wider range of participants within a limited timeframe. This approach is ideal for exploring attitudes and behavioral drivers across different consumer segments, ensuring variation in age, experience with and exposure to the object of the research (in this case, EVs and Chinese car brands). Additionally, the anonymous nature of the survey was designed to foster honesty, especially around sensitive topics such as skepticism and trust in Chinese car brands, where social desirability bias that is the tendency of respondents to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others, rather than reflect their true opinions (Fisher, 1993), could otherwise influence responses especially if they are politically or ethically charged (Fisher, 1993; Bingley et al., 2023).

3.3.1. Survey Design

The consumer survey was structured as an open-ended questionnaire administered via Nettskjema.no. It included 15 core questions divided into four thematic areas: COO perception, brand trust, brand cues, and decision-making (see Appendix section A). The open-ended format allowed participants to reflect and respond through their own words, reducing social desirability bias and fostering more authentic insights.

Within the "COO perception" theme, participants were asked to reflect on the meaning and significance they attach to a car brand's country of origin, whether they actively consider it in their evaluations, and how they perceive Chinese EV brands in comparison to those from other countries. The goal was to assess whether traditional COO heuristics continue to shape perceptions or if these associations are shifting. The brand trust section investigated which factors contribute to trust in new or unfamiliar brands, including the role of Western partnerships and perceived legitimacy. Here, questions targeted both positive drivers of trust and potential sources of skepticism, particularly regarding Chinese EVs. The "brand cues" theme examined which product or symbolic attributes might persuade consumers to override initial skepticism, such as price, design, technological innovation, or exposure through advertising and showrooms. Participants were also invited to name Chinese brands (in a phase of unaided recall) and describe what they expected from them. Finally, the "decision-making" section encouraged respondents to articulate the most important factors influencing their car purchase choices, offering insight into how COO perceptions and brand signals translate to actual consumer priorities.

Together, these question areas were designed to elicit rich responses that connect psychological mechanisms to observable shifts in consumer openness toward emerging EV brands (see Appendix section A for full list of questions). In addition, some demographic questions were included in the survey to ensure participants met the inclusion criteria and to provide contextual insight into the sample. The survey was conducted in Norwegian for cultural accessibility and later translated into English for analysis. Efforts were made to avoid priming effects by restructuring question order and keeping thematic groupings hidden from participants.

3.3.2. Sampling and Recruitment

The target group for this study consisted of Norwegian consumers at the age above 18, with an emphasis on participants who had exposure to EVs. To ensure relevance and reliability of the responses, the inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) reside in Norway, and (2) are legally eligible to drive, in order to ensure some familiarity with the current Norwegian passenger car market This focus ensured that respondents had sufficient context to reflect meaningfully on the relevant questions since they are above the legal driving age in Norway.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants, focusing on consumers with demonstrated interest in EVs. To reach this audience, I contacted several of Norway's largest EV-focused

organizations, including leading EV newspapers, national EV associations, and the marketing and communications departments at the country's largest car dealerships. The aim was to encourage these venues to distribute the survey through their digital platforms. While many were hesitant to share the survey publicly, one of Norway's largest car dealers agreed to distribute it internally among candidates who fit the sampling criteria. Additionally, the Norwegian Electric Vehicle Association and Norway's leading online newspaper dedicated to electric cars granted access to post the survey in their exclusive EV interest forums, collectively reaching over 30,000 members. This targeted approach helped ensure that the participants who participated in the survey were relevant respondents for addressing the research questions of this study.

One potential limitation of this sampling strategy is that members of exclusive EV forums are likely to be more engaged and informed about EVs than the average consumer. Their heightened interest may color some responses, potentially reflecting more favorable or detailed perceptions than those of a typical EV buyer. However, these participants are still active consumers within the Norwegian EV market, and their insights remain valuable for the purposes of this study, even if they may not fully represent the perspectives of less-engaged consumers.

Although the sampling strategy was purposive in targeting a specific consumer segment, there were elements of convenience sampling as well, since the recruitment was partly shaped by the availability of channels and the willingness of organizations to cooperate. The initial sample size goal was up to 50 participants to ensure a rich and varied dataset (Bingley et al., 2023). Through strategic outreach, the final sample size reached 63 valid responses, exceeding the original target.

Table 4 outlines the demographic profile of the survey respondents. The final sample (N = 63) included respondents primarily in the 45–59 age group (48.4%), with a majority identifying as male (66.1%). All participants had resided in Norway for over five years. In terms of education, 37.1% held a bachelor's degree and 35.5% a master's degree. Notably, 38.7% already owned an electric vehicle, and 45.2% reported a household income exceeding NOK 1,200,000. A full breakdown of the responses is provided in Chapter 4.

Table 4

Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents (N = 63) (source: author's elaboration)

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–29 years	19.4
	30–44 years	16.1
	45–59 years	48.4
	60 years ≤	16.1
Gender	Male	66.1
	Female	33.9

Residency	Lived in Norway > 5 years	100.0
Education	Primary or Secondary School	9.7
	Vocational School or Trade Education	17.7
	Bachelor's Degree	37.1
	Master's Degree or Higher	35.5
EV Ownership	Already Own an EV	38.7
	Would Consider Buying an EV	59.7
	Would Not Consider Buying an EV	1.6
Household Income	Under 400,000 NOK	3.2
	400,000–799,999 NOK	21.0
	800,000–1,199,999 NOK	29.0
	1,200,000 NOK ≤	45.2
	Prefer Not to Say	1.6

Note. Percentages are based on 63 self-reported responses collected via the qualitative survey.

3.3.3. Data Collection and Ethics

The survey remained open for four weeks. The asynchronous nature of the survey was particularly important for this study because it encouraged participants to reflect honestly on sensitive topics such as brand skepticism and trust formation. Prior research has highlighted that anonymity and reflective pacing are especially useful in qualitative research when exploring potentially sensitive or value-loaded topics (Bingley et al., 2023).

All responses were anonymous and handled in accordance with GDPR (EU Regulation 2016/679). Participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and all data were stored securely. Ethical considerations included ensuring voluntary participation and cultural relevance in question phrasing.

3.4. Study 2: Expert Interview

To complement the consumer data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with a 61-year-old senior editor of Scandinavia's leading automotive publication. As he described during the interview, his role entails writing, editing, and commissioning content with a particular focus on the intersection of car technology, politics and consumer trust. In his own words he described the publication and its readers as follows:

> *"The typical* [redacted] *reader is a fairly average Norwegian car owner.* [redacted] *print magazine is the largest print magazine in Scandinavia, with 630,000 readers. It's published four times a year. That's more than 10% of the Norwegian population, so it really reflects a broad segment. These are not*

hardcore car enthusiasts, they don't need help figuring out what to buy. It's mostly people who need a car in daily life and want it to be as hassle-free, affordable, and safe as possible. So it's quite close to the core of the general car-buying public in Norway."

Thus, in order to satisfy their readers, the publication produces content with a particular focus on the intersection of car technology, politics, and consumer trust. With over three decades of experience in the Norwegian media and automotive sectors combined (see Appendix section B.2), the expert provided contextual insight into the Norwegian EV market, brand dynamics, and media framing of Chinese entrants. To clearly distinguish his contributions in the analysis, all quotes from the expert interview are marked with "*(EXP)*" in Chapter 4. With deep insights into consumer trends and media influence, the expert is well-positioned to provide valuable context on the evolving landscape of Chinese EV brands in Norway. This perspective was particularly useful for triangulating consumer data from the qualitative survey with industry-level understanding, in order to ensure a more holistic view of the research topic.

The interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and was conducted digitally to accommodate geographical constraints. This online format ensured logistical feasibility while allowing for face-to-face interaction, which helped maintain conversational flow and engagement. It was recorded, transcribed using the digital transcribing tool Amberscript, and manually verified for accuracy.

The protocol covered five areas: market dynamics, brand perceptions, trust formation, media influence, and strategic challenges for Chinese brands (see Appendix section B). The area of "market dynamics" aimed to clarify how the Norwegian EV landscape has developed in recent years, and what conditions have made it receptive to emerging brands. The expert was, for instance, asked to reflect on how he would characterize the current state of the Norwegian EV market, which led him to also elaborate on previous waves of market innovations on his own initiative. The second theme, "brand perceptions", explored whether and how the country of origin influences how consumers view unfamiliar brands. Questions such as *"Do you think the perception of where a car brand comes from matters to Norwegian car buyers?"* and "*[...] how would you describe Norwegian consumers' attitudes toward Chinese car brands today?"*, invited reflections on whether "Made in China" still carries stigma, or whether such perceptions are evolving, and how these compare with historical trajectories seen for Japanese or Korean Brands.

The third area focused on "trust formation", aiming to identify the mechanisms through which new EV brands can build credibility. The expert was invited to comment on which brand cues, such as price, design, dealership strategy, media coverage, and Western partnerships, seem effective in reducing skepticism. In the fourth section on media influence, the mission was to turn the conversation toward the role of journalistic framing in shaping consumer understanding and sentiment. Here, the expert offered reflections on how narratives in the media may amplify, neutralize, or reshape public attitudes toward Chinese brands. Lastly, the interview concluded with a discussion of strategic challenges and opportunities for both Western and Chinese

Brands. Questions included "*Do you foresee any particular threats or opportunities for legacy brands as these new entrants grow their presence?"*, and the expert also considered long-term prospects for Chinese brands in Norway, and the extent to which they are likely to overcome entry barriers and establish trust at scale.

Ethical standards were upheld throughout: the interviewee received full information about the study, gave informed consent, and is kept anonymous in this thesis.

3.5. Analysis

Data from both the survey and the interview were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). After familiarization with the data, open coding was conducted manually, supported by AI-based tools to identify recurring patterns and minimize subjective bias. Throughout the coding process, reflexive awareness was maintained to recognize how the researcher's own cultural and academic positioning might influence interpretation. Codes were then grouped into four overarching themes aligned with the study's research questions:

1. COO Perception
2. Trust Formation
3. Brand Cues
4. Purchase Decision Criteria

These themes were iteratively refined to ensure internal consistency and distinctiveness. Triangulation between the survey and expert interview strengthened the validity of the findings by highlighting both convergent and divergent perspectives.

3.5.1. Development of Coding System

To make sense of the large volume of qualitative data collected through the consumer survey and expert interview, an inductive thematic coding system was developed. These steps followed Clarke and Braun's (2017) six-phase process: data familiarization, code generation, theme development, review, definition, and write-up. The data familiarization phase involved reading the full set of responses to become deeply immersed in the material. This included initial notes and impressions that helped identify interesting or recurring ideas. The second phase, generation of initial codes, required systematically labeling features of the data that appeared relevant to the research questions. These codes represent the building blocks of the analysis, revealing specific segments of meaning found across participants' reflections.

In the next phase, searching for themes, the researcher examined how different codes might cluster together to form broader patterns of meaning. At this point, the analysis began to shift from descriptive labeling to interpretive synthesis. In the phase of reviewing themes, these initial theme candidates were tested for

coherence: first by checking their internal consistency of whether the codes within a theme logically fit together, and then by ensuring they captured something meaningful across the broader dataset.

Once themes were reviewed, the fifth phase (defining and naming themes) involved refining their scope and focus. Each theme was clearly defined to articulate the underlying concept that unified the various codes within it. This phase also required distinguishing overlapping themes to ensure conceptual clarity. Finally, in the sixth phase revolving around producing the report, the themes were organized and written up in relation to the research questions, supported by illustrative quotes and analytical comments.

The researcher manually coded the data in several rounds of iteration, clustering patterns of meaning across participant responses and expert commentary. Codes were developed inductively from the data, then grouped into overarching themes aligned with the research questions: COO perception, trust formation, brand cues, and purchase criteria. The full coding system comprises 18 codes distributed across these four themes. Each code reflects a recurring idea, evaluation, or heuristic decision observed in the material. Table 5 below provides an overview of the thematic structure and associated codes.

Table 5

Overview of Thematic Coding Framework

Theme	Code Name	Description
COO Perception	1. Traditional COO Heuristics	Country-of-origin used as a shortcut to evaluate expected quality and brand reputation.
	2. Ethical and Political Aversion	Distrust linked to political regimes, human rights concerns, and moral disapproval of the Chinese political outlook.
	3. Desensitization and Shifting Perceptions	COO becomes secondary when the product meets technical and experiential expectations (recognition of technological progress and growing legitimacy of Chinese EV brands)
	4. Symbolic Meaning and Identity signaling	Brand origin contributes to personal and social identity signaling.
Trust Formation	1. Social Proof & User Experience	Trust built through testimonials, reviews, and peer influence.
	2. Service Infrastructure and Brand Stability	Trust reinforced through reliable, local service and known distribution partners. Skepticism of unfamiliar brands with little track record, regardless of origin.

	3. Data Privacy & Geopolitical Concerns	Distrust rooted in fears of surveillance, data misuse, or political control.
	4. Perceived Legitimacy trough Western Alliances	Perceived safety and risk reduction when brands partner with Western firms (e.g., Volvo).
Brand Cues	1. Price Expectations	Chinese EVs are associated with affordability and high value-for-money.
	2. Technological Advancement (Functional)	Appeal based on innovation in range, charging, and hardware.
	3. Technological Styling (Symbolic)	Digital dashboards, smart features, and futuristic aesthetics signal modernity.
	4. Design Fit and Aesthetics	Mixed perceptions about aesthetic appeal and cultural resonance.
	5. Showroom and Brand Experience	Physical spaces and visibility in media shape brand impressions.
Purchase Criteria	1. Functional Priorities	Consumers prioritize range, safety, reliability, and everyday usability in EV selection.
	2. Service and Warranty Assurance	Concerns about repair access and brand stability over time.
	3. Value-for-Money Trade-offs	Purchase decisions often hinge on whether unknown brands can deliver superior value at a lower cost
	4. Conditional Openness	Consumers express willingness to "override" skepticism if core expectations are met or exceeded.
	5. Symbolic Fit and Social Risk	Some buyers consider how brand choice reflects on them socially, especially in politically sensitive contexts.

Note. Codes were developed through inductive thematic analysis of 63 consumer survey responses and one expert interview, using Clarke & Braun's (2017) as the analytic framework.

The coding framework presented in Table 5 served as a structural bridge between the raw data and the final thematic analysis. It captures the multidimensional ways in which Norwegian consumers evaluate emerging Chinese EV brands, guided by evolving country-of-origin perceptions, trust dynamics, and brand-related cues. By categorizing codes under distinct yet interconnected themes, the framework facilitates both analytical depth and alignment with the thesis's central research questions.

3.6. Research Ethics and Quality Criteria

This research adheres to established ethical principles and Luiss University academic guidelines. Informed consent, anonymity, and data security were ensured for all participants. Reflexivity was practiced throughout, acknowledging the researcher's positionality and potential influence on interpretation.

Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation and a transparent coding process. The triangulation approach allowed for cross-validation of the findings, where patterns emerging from one dataset could be compared and contextualized with insights from the other. In addition, the transparent coding process involved several rounds of data immersion, re-coding, and theme refinement, as outlined in section 3.5.1. Representative quotes from participants were used to anchor the analysis in the raw data, helping readers to see how conclusions were derived and supporting trust in the interpretations that are presented. While findings are not statistically generalizable, the detailed presentation of data supports transferability to similar contexts.

Dependability was addressed through documentation of the analytic decisions made throughout the study, creating a traceable pattern of logic. Confirmability, understood as the degree to which the findings reflect the participants' views rather than researcher bias, was addressed by incorporating direct participant quotes and maintaining a reflexive stance throughout the research. This reflexivity involved regularly questioning how the researcher's own background, expectations, and interpretations may have influenced the analysis, and intentionally limiting these influences when coding and writing the results.

4. Analysis and Results

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative analysis conducted to explore the overarching research question: What drives Norwegian consumers to shift away from traditional COO perceptions in their trust and purchase decisions regarding EV brands?

To guide the analysis, the following three sub-questions are addressed: 1) How do Norwegian consumers perceive the country-of-origin in the context of newly introduced Chinese EV brands? 2) What role does trust play in shaping willingness to consider or purchase Chinese EV brands? 3) Which brand cues influence consumers to override COO-based skepticism?

As described in Chapter 3, the study employs a qualitative design consisting of two data sources: (1) a digital, open-ended survey of Norwegian EV consumers and (2) a semi-structured interview with an expert in the Norwegian automotive media landscape. Using inductive thematic analysis following Clarke & Braun's (2017) six-step framework, the data were coded, categorized, and interpreted across four overarching themes: COO perception, trust formation, brand cues, and purchase decision criteria. Themes were validated through cross-source triangulation to ensure credibility.

4.1. Theme 1: Perceptions of Country-of-Origin

This section explores how Norwegian consumers perceive COO in the context of newly introduced Chinese electric vehicle (EV) brands. Four subthemes emerged from the data: (1) traditional COO heuristics, (2) ethical and political aversion, (3) desensitization and shifting perceptions, and (4) symbolic meaning and identity signaling.

4.1.1. Traditional Country-of-Origin Heuristics: trust and Stereotypes

Many participants rely on traditional COO heuristics as mental shortcuts for assessing quality, reliability, and brand credibility. German brands were frequently cited as synonymous with engineering excellence, while Chinese brands were more often associated with uncertainty.

"I have always chosen German-produced because of quality."

"I associate German brands with quality and precision, while Italian brands are associated with design, speed and passion."

In contrast, several participants expressed doubt about Chinese manufacturing capabilities, describing the vehicles as *"cheap, plastic, noisy, squeaky",* or *"copies of the real thing".* The expert interview echoed this pattern but with a positive view on the future market potential, noting that Chinese cars lacked credibility in Western markets until recent years:

> *"Until 2018, they didn't have the quality to hold their own in a strong buying market like Norway. [...] but now they're making cars that are at least as good as in Europe" (EXP).*

This observation highlights a growing technical parity that some consumers have yet to fully recognize. While stereotypes persist, the expert's comments support the view that industry insiders perceive this gap as narrowing, suggesting that consumer skepticism may lag behind actual product evolution. The findings indicate that despite increased parity in innovation and performance, the automatic reliance on COO based stereotypes persists for many.

4.1.2. Ethical and Political Aversion

Beyond functional assessments, some consumers expressed clear aversion toward buying cars from countries they perceive as politically or ethically misaligned. This dimension aligns with the normative COO effects framework discussed in Chapter 2. Many of the comments regarding political and ethical associations were also closely tied to how supporting the Chinese automotive industry would influence their image in the eyes of others (see section 4.1.4).

> *"Wouldn't consider a car from China, due to the country's totalitarian government and lack of human rights."*

"I want to avoid Chinese products [...] because of how associations will be transferred to my identity."

Several respondents explicitly mentioned China's geopolitical behavior, including surveillance, censorship, and the potential invasion of Taiwan, as reasons to avoid Chinese brands.

"The fact that they might invade Taiwan makes me more skeptical about buying than leasing."

"The political regime is a significant factor. [...] It has an impact on my confidence."

The expert acknowledged this barrier in a statement related to how China has been accused of committing crimes against humanity and possibly genocide against the Uyghur population, but simultaneously shared observations that such convictions may change when price enters the equation:

"Now there are many people who say that no, I will never buy a Chinese car. And remember the Uyghurs. Oh no, and it's not that policy and so on. [...] But when you show up with your wallet and say you're going to pay 700,000 (NOK) for an Audi so you can get a Chinese car for 500,000 (NOK), I'm not sure you're thinking much about the Uyghurs" (EXP).

This tension suggests that while ethical resistance is present, it may not always translate into purchasing behavior, particularly when tangible economic benefits are at stake. The expert quote also states an example of the emotional ambivalence that consumers who experience that they are ethically torn but practically compelled may feel.

4.1.3. Desensitization and Shifting Perceptions

Despite initial skepticism, several participants acknowledged that their views on Chinese COO had softened over time, especially with increased visibility, improved product quality, and their competitive pricing.

"It used to be of great importance to me" (when asked about the importance of where a brand originates). *"Today, medium to less importance."*

"Volvo became Chinese-owned and they continued to deliver the same or better quality, design, and technology development."

These evolving views were also highlighted by the expert, stating that:

"There are fewer messages from readers who are angry or skeptical about Chinese brands now than a year ago. More people have experienced that the cars are good" (EXP).

This shift suggests that familiarity and experience have a normalizing effect. As more people encounter Chinese EVs on the road or in showrooms, COO effects appear to lose emotional intensity. Over time, this

may signal a numbing of origin-based resistance. Thus, this could indicate a gradual shift toward outcome-based evaluation rather than reliance on COO stereotypes.

4.1.4. Symbolic Meaning of Country-of-Origin and Identity Signaling

For some respondents, COO was deeply symbolic and intertwined with personal values and social signaling. The origin was seen not only as a quality mark but also as a reflection of identity.

> *"When I know where a car brand comes from, I automatically associate it with certain values."*

> *"The country of origin is important because it says something about the identity of the brand and how it will be perceived by others."*

These symbolic associations sometimes reinforce avoidance, often associated with political and ethical considerations (see section 4.1.2):

> *"I want to buy a car that I can vouch for and that others will perceive as being in line with my values."*

> *"It's important that I feel good about driving the car - that it says something about who I am."*

From a cultural branding perspective, the survey responses provide evidence that COO plays a dual role: as a cognitive heuristic and as a symbolic boundary marker for social identity. This aligns well with the theories of consumer ethnocentrism and brand signaling.

Interestingly, several of the younger consumers seemed more pragmatic in their responses, and COO was often detached from the symbolic meaning. Many responses indicated a growing indifference to brand origin, provided that the product met expectations in terms of technology, price, and battery range. The generational divergence could point to a cultural shift in the role of COO as a signal for i.e., status or value. At the same time, other participants viewed openness to Chinese brands as a form of social distinction in itself, positioning themselves as forward-thinking and tech-savvy. In this light, social signaling through COO is not always about avoidance, but can also reflect a progressive identity or willingness to break with tradition.

Together, the findings emphasize that COO perceptions are not solely functional. For many consumers, they tap into deeper concerns such as ethical alignments. However, as the expert and several consumers noted, these symbolic meanings may lose salience with rising brand familiarity, social proof, and market competition. COO may still influence early impressions, but in a shifting EV market the effects do not necessarily define them.

4.2. Theme 2: Trust Formation Mechanisms

This section explores how Norwegian consumers form trust in new and unfamiliar Chinese EV brands. Thematic analysis revealed four dominant mechanisms that influence trust: (1) social proof and user experience, (2) service infrastructure and brand stability, (3) data privacy and geopolitical concerns, and (4) perceived legitimacy through Western alliances.

4.2.1. Social Proof and User Experience

A recurring theme in the data was the reliance on third-party evaluations, including peer reviews, media tests, as well as visible presence in the market. Many respondents explicitly stated that they trust a new car brand only after observing positive user experiences or reading credible expert evaluations.

> *"Good reviews from others, and that people I know and trust share positive experiences."*
>
> *"I browse the internet for tests, reviews, experiences etc."*
>
> *"Positive car tests in media I trust, experiences from acquaintances, that they have existed for a while without going bankrupt."*

Social proof acts as a cognitive anchor in situations where consumers have limited first-hand experience with a brand. The expert interview reinforced this mechanism pointing out that many consumers rely on media coverage and peer experiences as a form of "borrowed familiarity":

> *"For many people who don't know much about cars [...] electric cars are new. [...] When you've had an electric car for a while, you act like a normal car buyer and go for what you like and have seen work" (EXP).*

This suggests that trust builds cumulatively through familiarity and observational learning. Early adopters play an informal but influential role by legitimizing the brand through visible usage. This kind of peer filtering seems to reduce the perceived risk for more hesitant consumers. Thus, trust towards EV brands seems to form through vicarious learning and visible signs of brand adoption in the market.

4.2.2. Service Infrastructure and Brand Stability

Trust in Chinese EV brands was also shaped by concerns about after-sales support, service accessibility, and brand longevity. Respondents emphasized that even if a car's initial appeal was strong, they would not consider purchasing it unless the brand had a well-established service network and demonstrated financial stability.

> *"Little faith in new brands. They haven't built up an aftermarket network in Norway."*

"For me, the car is a big and important investment. [...] Access to service and dealers in a longer time perspective is therefore crucial."

"Nothing at all" (when asked about what generates trust of a new or unknown car brand). *"I let others be guinea pigs."*

The expert confirmed that this issue is central in the Norwegian market:

"The brands that succeed in Norway are either so large that they can build a service infrastructure on their own, or they collaborate with well-known Norwegian importers who already have workshops and parts systems" (EXP).

This comment highlights that trust is generated through an entire ecosystem of support, not only from performance or other brand cues such as design. Without such a foundation, even innovative products risk being perceived as short-lived or risky. Additionally, the expert pointed to RSA's (dealer of BYD, among other brands) success as a local partner, explaining how its large dealership network across Norway helps build familiarity and mitigate concerns about service access. This supports the idea that trust is closely linked to perceived organizational readiness and long-term presence. Trust, in this context, is therefore not just about the product itself but also about the ecosystem in which the product (in this case, EVs) is embedded.

4.2.3. Privacy and Data Concerns

While less universally cited than service and social proof, data privacy emerged as a notable trust barrier. Several respondents expressed discomfort with the potential for surveillance or misuse of data by Chinese authorities, reflecting broader geopolitical anxieties. For instance, one participant responded *"Security and compliance with GDPR"* related to personal importance of COO in relation to car brands. On more direct questions related to establishing trust to Chinese EV brands others responded followingly:

"Skepticism about GDPR compliance and use of information."

"Don't trust China to produce quality [...] and fear surveillance."

Furthermore, one respondent articulated a layered concern:

"I'm most skeptical about survival in the market if the brand is new and unknown. [...] But also that they collect a lot of data on you and give it to the authorities - that's not so nice."

Some parts of the expert interview mirrored this anxiety, e.g. noting that *"too close a link between the automotive industry and the Chinese regime" (EXP)* could be a dealbreaker for some consumers. This reflects a deeper emotional unease revolving around a fear that purchasing the vehicle could open access for foreign data exploitation. Furthermore, these concerns were particularly salient among older participants and those

who seemed more politically engaged based on their response patterns. Data privacy concerns reflect the affective and normative dimensions of trust, where perceived intent and moral alignment have the ability to influence consumer judgements beyond performance metrics.

4.2.4. Trust via Western Alliances

Finally, many consumers reported increased trust when a Chinese brand was affiliated with a known Western company. These partnerships were for many respondents perceived as a form of brand legitimacy, acting as a "bridge of trust" that alleviated skepticism. When asked to elaborate on whether trust towards a Chinese brand increase if it's owned by or cooperate with a known Western brand some replied accordingly:

> *"It increases my trust. When they work with or are owned by a well-known Western company, I associate it with higher quality standards, better safety and more reliable customer service."*

> *"Yes, it leads to western standards and legislation."*

> *"Yes. Volvo/Polestar as an example."*

However, a minority of the respondents dismissed these alliances as superficial when asked the same question:

> *"Not directly - I just see it as a form of political money laundering."*

> *"It reduces the trust I have in the European car brand.*

According to the expert, such alliances are valuable from a practical standpoint, especially when they include shared service networks:

> *"Polestar and similar brands are perceived as safe purchases because they have service services together with Volvo. It gives a sense of security even though the car is Chinese" (EXP).*

These findings support prior research on trust spillover effects in co-branding and joint ventures. However, the variation in consumer responses suggests that trust spillover is not automatic. For some, especially the more consumers who seemed more politically skeptical, partnerships with Western firms risk being viewed with suspicion, raising questions about ethical consistency, but maybe mostly the corporate integrity.

4.3. Themes 3 and 4: Brand Cues and Purchase Drivers

This section examines how specific brand cues influence Norwegian consumers' willingness to consider Chinese EV brands and what ultimately drives their purchase decisions. Two interrelated themes emerged from the data: (1) brand attributes as trust-enhancing signals and (2) perceived value and decision-

making trade-offs. These themes reflect a behavioral shift away from rigid COO-based heuristics toward more pragmatic and experience-oriented evaluations.

4.3.1. Design, Price, Range, and Innovation as Trust-Enhancing Signals

Numerous respondents highlighted product-level attributes (especially price, technology, range, and design) as central in moderating initial skepticism. When a brand delivered on key performance indicators, consumers were more likely to look past country-of-origin biases. The following statements cover recurring attributes that could make the respondents consider Chinese EVs over other alternatives:

> *"Price, range and technology/innovation."*

> *"Quality and durability must exceed my expectations and the price should be below Western or Japanese cars."*

> *"Low price, but first in class when it comes to technology development."*

Chinese EV brands were frequently associated with strong performance in areas like battery range and price competitiveness. Some respondents even framed their purchase intention in explicitly comparative terms:

> *"I would expect a Chinese EV brand to offer competitive pricing, especially when it comes to cars with good range and modern technology."*

> *"Lower price than competitors from other countries, cool design and good technology."*

The expert interview supported this trend, noting that Chinese brands are closing the gap in quality and functionality at a much faster pace then their Western competitors:

> *"A Chinese premium car is hundreds of thousands (NOK) cheaper than an equivalent European-built car. [...] It doesn't run any shorter, doesn't have any worse range - and yet it's considerably cheaper" (EXP).*

Thus, superior price-to-performance ratios can act as "signal amplifiers", pushing consumers to override their initial biases and explore new brand options.

4.3.2. Showroom Experiences, Familiarity, and Reputational Momentum

In addition to technical attributes, experiential and symbolic brand cues also played a role in shaping willingness to consider Chinese EVs. Some respondents referred to showrooms, test drives, and visual brand presence as soft cues that helped legitimize the brand:

> *"Showroom on Karl Johans gate in Oslo and an exhibition at Gardermoen [...] It arouses interest in the brands."*

"Have test driven the Xpeng G9 and it was an impressive car."

"NIO has professional showrooms that increase confidence."

However, the expert expressed skepticism about the lasting effect of these branding efforts, suggesting they may create visibility more than trust:

"They like the showrooms, [...] and the Chinese are quite good at shopping [...]. They like going to the store, but I don't know if I'm aware of how well it meets a Norwegian temperament [...] but there's nothing to suggest that it's spot on. They're closing their showroom. Polestar has closed its showroom in central Oslo. Xpeng has probably left it to Bilia, which uses it more as an office. Lotus closes its office or showroom [...]" (EXP).

The expert also express that he does not think Norwegian EV consumers are convinced by a café on Karl Johan, referring to NIO's showroom experience in the busiest shopping street in Oslo.

"There are plenty of NIO houses in Europe, but they hardly sell any cars" (EXP).

These reflections could suggest that while experiential cues can spark initial interest, they may not translate into long-term consumer confidence unless they are reinforced by a deeper brand substance, such as after-sales support and consistent visibility in the market. Yet, several respondents still indicated that even superficial familiarity (e.g., seeing a car brand repeatedly in media, showrooms, or on the road) could make them feel more at ease with the brand's legitimacy.

"If the brand seems credible and serious, I'm more open to considering it."

"Credible marketing and a solid, well-known support network and reliable customer service in Norway."

"A stable and secure position in the market and the perception that it is accepted by others."

These findings could suggest that trust in EV brands is not solely cognitive or ethical, but it can also emerge from repeated exposure and brand fluency, especially in such a maturing product category that EVs are.

4.3.3. "Override Moments" and Conditional Openness

Although many respondents reported initial skepticism, a subset described scenarios in which compelling brand cues would override their COO concerns. These "override moments" often involved a combination of economic incentives, data security, and technological promises. On questions regarding what could make people consider a new Chinese entrant some responded followingly:

"Innovative technology, little connection to the state and price."

"Certainty that I have full control over data flow [...] but if the technology is good and the car is up to scratch, then I'll consider it."

"Exceptionally good customer service also for those who have problems with the cars [...] then I can consider it."

Here, trust was framed as contingent but not guaranteed. However, it could be earnable through consistency and experienced value in the form of real-world performance. This underscores that consumers does not have to be rigid in their brand preferences, but they need persuasive evidence to shift their attitudes. For some, this threshold is economic (e.g., significant price difference and value for money), while for others, it lies in symbolic legitimacy or after-sales support. The expert interview supported this conditional mindset, noting that some consumers who indicate skepticism later consider or choose a Chinese EV anyway. This nuanced openness illustrates how even skeptical consumers are capable of reevaluating unfamiliar brands if strong brand cues are present.

In total, all findings indicate that there is potential for the new Chinese EV brands to overcome COO skepticism by signaling value through brand-level cues specially: design, range, technology and affordability. While some consumers remain immovably critical, a growing number are willing to engage in bounded rationality, reassessing risk when brand signals are sufficiently strong. This supports the idea that brand trust can be constructed through experiential value, even when macro-level reputational barriers persist.

4.4. Summary of Key Findings

This section contains an interpretation of the core findings that emerged from the thematic analysis. Across the material, four overarching themes were identified: perceptions of COO, trust formation mechanisms, brand cues, and purchase decision criteria. These themes represent distinct yet related factors influencing how Norwegian consumers evaluate and respond to Chinese EV brands. From the first theme, the analysis showed that COO still matters and often functions as a heuristic shortcut or symbolic marker. For many consumers, Chinese origin was associated with negative perceptions of quality, ethics and political alignment. At the same time, signs of change emerged. Some participants expressed softer views affected by increased brand exposure in the market, modern design and shifting associations with well-known western brands turning Chinese such as the Volvo and Polestar situation. A more symbolic view of COO also emerged, where brand origin was seen as connected to personal identity and how one might be perceived by others. This dual role of COO (both as a signal of quality and identity), played a significant part in shaping consumer attitudes.

The second theme explored how trust is formed and maintained. Trust was not static or binary, but rather highly conditional and responsive to reassurance of stable after consumption maintenance, and alignment with western standards. Four primary trust mechanisms emerged from the data: trust trough social proof and peer

influence, trust trough service infrastructure and perceived stability, concerns linked to data privacy and geopolitical risk, and spillover effects trough Western partnerships. Importantly, these trust mechanisms often intersected. For example, service reliability and politics could either reinforce or undermine each other, depending on the consumer's existing worldview and experience level.

The third and fourth themes addressed the cues that help consumers override initial skepticism and the decision criteria they ultimately use. Here, strong emphasis was placed on performance signals such as price, battery range, design, and technical innovation. These cues helped frame Chinese EVs as increasingly competitive, even for the more skeptical consumers. Repeated brand exposure through media, showrooms, and peer adoption further legitimized unfamiliar brands. Some respondents described these "override moments" trough instances where compelling and trustworthy communication, or positive reviews by others led them to reconsider their initial hesitations. Ultimately, the findings suggest that trust is not always formed by engagement. It can also be earned through positive consumer experiences and transparency, contributing to reputational momentum.

These insights collectively play a part in answer the overarching research question: *What drives Norwegian consumers to shift away from traditional COO perceptions in their trust and purchase decisions regarding EV brands?* This research has revealed that the answer is complex and probably involves more factors than what has been uncovered by the collected data. However, what the data has shown is that some of the answers to this question lie in the evolving consumer capacity to expand traditional heuristics with performance signals in their evaluations. While COO remains a significant interpretive frame (especially among the older and more politically oriented consumers), it is being actively renegotiated among younger, tech-savvy consumers, and more experientially involved consumers groups. This shift is not uniform but occurs when trust-building mechanisms are in place, and when brand cues successfully signal legitimacy, high quality, and good value.

The three sub-questions are also directly addressed by the data. First, in relation to how Norwegian consumers perceive COO, the findings reveal a dynamic tension: COO is still influential, but increasingly interpreted from symbolic, ethical and experiential consumer angles. Second, regarding the role of trust, the findings emphasize that trust can function as an important mediator, which can be built through social reassurance, visible service infrastructure, and cultural adaptation. Trust is neither automatically granted, nor is it purely rational. It also contains affective dimensions conditioned through social negotiations. Third, related to the cues that override skepticism, the findings point to a clear preference for outcome-based signals (e.g. innovation, service quality, affordability, and brand fluency) as trust-enhancing features that could encourage reevaluations.

To provide a clear overview of the dominant patterns that emerged from the data, Table 6 summarizes key demographic characteristics and recurring response themes based on the full set of survey responses. This

overview helps contextualize the thematic findings by illustrating how participant characteristics and perceptual tendencies align. While the analysis has explored these themes in depth, the table below offers a compact representation of the most frequently occurring response patterns.

Table 6

Qualitative Survey Summary Table (source: author's elaboration)

Category	Response patterns
Age group	Majority aged 45-59 (48.4%)
Gender	66% men, 34% women
Years Lived in Norway	100% lived in Norway >5 years
Education	73% have a bachelor's or higher education
Willingness to Buy EV	60% open to buying an EV, 39% already own
Household Income	Most earn above NOK 800,000
Associations with Chinese EVs	Common: Cheap, modern, innovative, unknown, controversial
Trust Factors	Common: reviews, peer experiences, infrastructure, branding
Barriers to Trust	Common: state control, surveillance, service access, durability
Influence on Western Partnerships	Mixed: most indicate increased trust (Volvo effect), but some perceive it as "whitewashing" which decrease their trust

Note. Percentages and insights are based on 63 self-reported responses collected via the qualitative survey.

4.5. Discussion: Converging and Diverging Views

This discussion synthesizes empirical insights from the consumer survey and the expert interview, placing them within broader theoretical and managerial contexts. It draws attention to converging and diverging perspectives, the underlying cultural and psychological mechanisms shaping consumer trust, and the interpretive lens through which Norwegian consumers evaluate emerging Chinese EV brands.

4.5.1. Alignments and Contrasts Between Consumer Perspectives

Across the data, substantial alignment was observed between consumers and the industry expert in identifying the key drivers of trust. Both sources identified price, performance, and after-sales infrastructure as critical trust-enabling factors decisive for overcoming skepticism. Additionally, they also acknowledged a gradual shift towards increased acceptance in perceptions over recent years. For instance, the expert observed

fewer critical letters from readers than in previous years, a finding mirrored in survey comments indicating greater openness to reconsidering initial judgments related to mental heuristics and biases on EVs produced by Chinese brands. Both sources further highlighted the importance of reliable service networks and emphasized that perceived brand stability is essential in high-involvement categories like electric vehicles. This indicates that prior skepticism has softened, partly due to improved quality, positive reviews and increased brand visibility.

The participants and the experts also agreed that service access and brand stability remain pivotal concerns. Respondents frequently expressed worry about *"unknown brands"* disappearing from the market or lacking after-sales support. The expert reinforced this stating that *"The brands that succeed in Norway are either so big that they can build up a service network on their own, or they work with well-known Norwegian importers" (EXP).*

Despite broad areas of consensus, some meaningful contrasts emerged when the data was segmented by generation and EV involvement. Older and less tech-oriented participants appeared more likely to associate Chinese brands with political skepticism, low quality or cultural unfamiliarity. For example, one respondent in the oldest age group (60 years ≤) wrote *"Wouldn't consider a car from China, due to the country's totalitarian government",* while another in the same age group emphasized that he had overall *"little faith in electric cars made in China".* In contrast, younger consumers or more EV-experienced consumers showed greater openness, often focusing on value-for-money and expressing conditional trust. Related to this, one participant delivered a statement illustrating a shift toward technology-first evaluation over geopolitical anchoring:

> *"I have great confidence that China can build just as good cars as Europeans and Americans. Largely because they start at a better end than Europeans. BYD is great at batteries, and that's kind of one of the most important things for an electric car. Xpeng, like Tesla, is a tech company as much as a traditional car manufacturer".*

A further segmentation revealed that the consumers that seemed generally more brand-conscious, placing high importance on brand identity, prestige, or symbolic value, tended to be more skeptical. These individuals often framed their resistance in terms of what the brand "stood for". This could include not only political stances and ethical alignment, but also impressions of the brand's cultural symbolism. For example, some saw Chinese brands as incompatible with democratic ideals or environmental sincerity, while others viewed them as lacking authenticity or status appeal. Conversely, participants who emphasized functionality over brand recognition expressed significantly greater openness to considering newer or unfamiliar Chinese entrants. These respondents prioritized product-level features such as technology, price, and utility over

heritage or reputation, suggesting that lower brand attachment may facilitate more flexible, evidence-based trust-formation.

These findings suggest that trust formation is increasingly segmented: where some consumers rely on traditional heuristics, others build trust through direct experience, peer validation, or digital reputation signals. Particularly the latter applies among early adopters and tech-oriented segments. The expert interview supported this divide, noting that newer EV buyers behave more like *"ordinary car buyers"* after gaining firsthand experience, thereby relying less on stereotypical shortcuts.

4.5.2. Cultural and Psychological Mechanisms Behind Trust

The findings also underscore that trust in unfamiliar brands is not purely a functional assessment. Rather, it is deeply entangled with social and cultural identity, as well as moral alignments. Consumers do not evaluate Chinese EVs based solely on performance, they also consider what the brand adoption *says about them* and whether it *supports their values*. This corresponds with both the affective-, and normative dimension of Obermiller and Spangenberg's framework (1989) (see section 1.2). More specifically it connects to consumer animosity, where individuals deliberately avoid products from certain places because of negative associations with a country's political climate (Raditya et al., 2025), and consumer ethnocentrism where individuals believe that purchasing domestic products is more appropriate and morally correct than more foreign alternatives (Shimp & Sharma, 1987) (also described in section 2.2).

For some, buying a Chinese EV would contradict their moral stance or sense of European loyalty. One participant noted *"I want to buy a car I can vouch for",* highlighting the role of normative COO associations in shaping perceived identity treats. The expert acknowledged similar forces, remarking that *"People need peace of mind. [...] They already have enough questions about electric cars".* The statement implies that brand unfamiliarity combined with political unease could create a psychological overload, particularly for less experienced buyers.

Psychologically, trust formation is therefore governed not just by credibility and competence (see trust theory section 1.3), but also by cognitive fluency, affective resonance, and congruence with buyer identity. When a brand feels easy to process or intuitively makes sense, for example, through familiar design or a recognizable name, consumers are more likely to trust it, illustrating the effect of cognitive fluency. Affective resonance, on the other hand, is about how the brand makes people feel, meaning that brands that trigger excitement or a sense of belonging, tend to be judged more favorably. Trust grows when the brand aligns with how consumers see themselves. Thus, if a brand fits with that identity, whether it is environmentally conscious or tech-savvy, it feels more meaningful and ultimately more trustworthy.

These mechanisms help explain why even objectively similar EVs are perceived so differently based on their national origin and branding narratives.

4.5.3. Distrust within Broader Narratives

The hesitation many Norwegian consumers may feel toward Chinese EV brands cannot be fully explained trough product performance or brand exposure alone. Rather, these attitudes are shaped by broader cultural narratives and inherited geopolitical assumptions. In analyzing the qualitative data, it becomes evident that some participants' distrust is embedded in a larger framework of national identity, moral positioning and their perceived ideological alignment.

A closer reading of these perspectives suggest that consumer resistance may stem from what we could call a "Western default script" that continues to position China primarily as a political and ethical antagonist, specifically in discussions around surveillance and labor conditions. While such concerns are not completely unfounded, they risk becoming cognitively rigid frameworks that overshadow the nuances of consumer evaluations. As EV technology becomes increasingly globalized, it is possible that some Norwegian consumers are caught between to modes: one seeing Chinese brands through a geopolitical lens, and another evaluating on a basis of more objective factors e.g., innovation, affordability or market responsiveness.

Importantly, car purchases may represent one of the most concentrated forms of consumer power. Unlike more frequent or routine purchases, the car is a high-value, high-visibility item, and for many, a rare opportunity to make a financially significant decision aligned with personal ethics and political values. Several consumers in the study seemed to reflect on this deeper responsibility, implicitly or explicitly questioning which regimes or industries they are willing to support through their purchasing power. This may help explain why some participants were more reluctant to separate the product from the producer in the case of Chinese EV brands, even if the car itself met functional expectations.

This tension reflects a phenomenon that could be termed as a "narrative lag", which could be explained as a mismatch between technological progress and the persistence of political heuristics. Some consumers appear willing to update their views in favor of tangible value (e.g., price and battery innovation), while others continue to interpret COO as a proxy for trustworthiness. In this way, attitudes toward Chinese EVs in Norway are not simply a matter of brand strategy or consumer experience, but involve the complexity of larger cultural myths about power and identity in a shifting global market. Understanding these layered processes of trust formation is essential for both academic inquiry and strategic brand positioning in an increasingly globalized, but ideologically fragmented, EV marketplace.

4.6. Implications for Theory

The findings of this study offer several theoretical contributions to the literature on consumer trust, COO effects, and brand evaluation in high-involvement categories like EVs. First, the results support and extend existing trust models by emphasizing that trust formation in emerging brands is not purely based on functional competence and reliability, but also deeply shaped by emotional, and symbolic identity-related

factors. This reinforces recent calls in the literature to integrate affective and sociocultural dimensions into the understanding of consumer trust, particularly in contexts marked by geopolitical tension or moral ambiguity.

Next, the study nuances the classical COO framework by showing how COO operates not only as a heuristic but also as a symbolic filter for social and political meaning. While earlier COO models focused primarily on perceived quality and economic development, this study highlights how consumers use COO as a proxy for values, ethics, and ideological alignment. These findings match with and expand normative and affective COO theories, which suggests that in highly political markets, COO perceptions may function more like identity signals than just product evaluations.

The findings also challenge the notion of static consumer skepticism toward unfamiliar or foreign brands. “Conditional openness” (see section 4.3.3.) suggests that trust in emerging EV brands can evolve when consumers are presented with credible brand cues, strong experiential value, or social proof through peer influence. This aligns with dynamic trust theories and introduces a more flexible model of trust recalibration, where even negative COO associations can be moderated through brand strategy, market exposure, or third-party legitimacy.

Lastly, this research contributes to branding theory by demonstrating how trust can be constructed through the alignment of brand cues with consumer identity and cognitive fluency (see section 4.5.2). Consumers in this study were not merely evaluating features, but interpreting brand meaning in relation to their values and self-concept. This adds weight to identity-based brand theories, and underscores the importance of perceived congruence between brand symbolism and the consumer’s self-image in driving acceptance or rejection of unfamiliar brands.

4.7. Managerial Implications

The findings from the research carry important implications for brand strategists and marketing managers entering the Norwegian automotive market. First, new entrants should actively signal credibility through external sources (e.g., independent reviews and peer validation), and not just through advertising. These other sources are harder to control since they will be an effect of the total quality of the products they deliver, containing robust service infrastructure and competitive technology. Second, Chinese EV brands need to be aware of the affective and normative dimensions of trust: brands are being evaluated not only on what they do, but also what they represent. Branding themselves and aligning with values such as sustainability, transparency, and safety, may help reduce some ideological skepticism. Third, strategic alliances with Western companies offer a powerful tool to bridge trust gaps in the current status, as co-branding, shared service centers, or partnerships with trusted importers can lend legitimacy and reduce perceived risk. However, this does not mean that this may change in the future depending on how the brand mix changes in the Norwegian

market. Lastly, targeting younger, and tech-involved consumers as early adopters may generate positive word-of-mouth and reputational capital that can contribute to reducing the size of skeptical segments over time.

As trust in Chinese EV brands is shaped not only by product characteristics but also by complex cultural narratives and psychological processes, these managerial considerations must account both for tangible and symbolic factors. The findings suggest that the future of trust in this category will likely depend on not only performance metrics, but the evolving ability of brands to resonate with consumers' personal values and social identities. In sum, the research has demonstrated that while skepticism towards Chinese EVs persist, the mechanisms for trust-building is clearly identifiable, and in many cases, already under way.

4.8. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into how Norwegian consumers evaluate EV brands and how trust is formed in a context affected by COO tensions, there still exists several limitations that must be acknowledged. These limitations relate to the methodological choices, scope of study and external factors that could influence interpretation or applicability.

First, the methodological constraints associated with the data collection process will be addressed. The qualitative study relied on non-random sampling, distributed primarily through professional and social networks. This introduces the risk of self-selection bias, as individual who chose to participate may have had particularly strong opinions about Chinese products or EVs in general. Moreover, as mentioned in section 3.3.2, a specific limitation of this sampling strategy is that members of exclusive EV forums are likely to have increased knowledge and engagement on the topic in question compared to the average consumer. This interest may have colored some responses than those of a typical EV buyer. However, as these participants are still active consumers in the Norwegian EV market, their insights contribute with valuable perspectives, even if they not necessarily reflect the perspectives of less-engaged consumers. In addition, the expert interview, while rich in contextual depth, represents one single viewpoint within a complex media and automotive ecosystem. While triangulation across data sources improved credibility, it is difficult to consider the sample representative of the Norwegian population as a whole.

Relatedly, the findings carry limitations of generalizability and transferability. The insights gained from Norwegian consumers in their unique EV policy landscape characterized by high adoption rates and generous subsidies, may not directly apply to other European or global markets yet. However, it could indicate future trends if other countries take inspiration from the Norwegian approach towards a complete EV transition. Furthermore, the political and cultural meanings attached to China may differ by country, as this has not been within the scope of this investigation. As such, the transferability of themes like ethical resistance, trust spillover, and identity signaling should be approached with caution when considering other contexts.

There were also interpretive challenges during the analysis. Since the survey responses and in-depth interview had to be translated from Norwegian into English, this may have led to minor losses in nuance or

tone. Although care was taken to retain the original meaning and register of responses, there is a risk that some expressions may have been partially diluted. Additionally, as qualitative interpretation involves a degree of subjectivity, the thematic coding process may reflect interpretive choices that are not universally replicable, despite the approach being grounded in Clarke and Brown's framework (2017).

Finally, the study must acknowledge ethical and uncontrollable contextual factors that may influence consumer attitudes. For example, during the time of data collection, media coverage of geopolitical tensions (e.g., China-Taiwan relations, data privacy concerns, or Western economic sanctions) may have shaped participants' views in ways that are time-sensitive or reactive. These influences are difficult to control for in retrospective interpretation and may mean that consumer perceptions could shift rapidly depending on developments in politics, regulations, or corporate scandals involving specific EV brands.

Taken together, these limitations do not undermine the validity of the study's findings, but they do highlight the importance of situating the results within their methodological and socio-political context. Acknowledging these constraints ensures transparency and provides a realistic foundation for the implications and future research directions discussed in the next sections.

4.9. Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the transferability of the findings from this research being somewhat limited (see section 4.8) they still offer a valuable foundation for further exploration into how trust is formed in the context of emerging EV brand and how consumers negotiate complex cultural and geopolitical narratives in their purchase decisions. While this study provides in-depth qualitative insights, several avenues for future research could expand and validate its conclusion.

First, future studies could benefit from quantitative follow-up research aimed at testing specific hypotheses that have emerged from the present themes. For instance, it would be valuable to statistically examine whether variables such as perceived access, affiliation with western brands, or peer influences significantly predict trust in Chinese EVs. These studies could employ structured surveys using validated trust and COO perceptions scales to assess casual relationships in larger, more diverse samples, and increase generalizability.

Second, there is a strong potential for cross-cultural comparative studies, particularly in the Nordic region or within different European markets. While this thesis focuses on Norway because of its high EV penetration and strong policy incentives, consumer perceptions of Chinese EV brands may vary significantly in countries with different political climates, trust cultures or economic involvement level or exposure to China. Comparing different countries in Europe could shed light on the degree to which trust drivers are universal or context dependent.

Third, longitudinal research would provide critical insights into how consumer trust evolves over time. Since many of the findings in this study suggest that trust is a contingent and dynamic process (shaped by

experience, media narratives, and cultural context), studies that follow consumer perceptions across a longer time horizon could reveal how durable or fragile these trust formations are. Such research would also allow scholars to investigate whether initial skepticism eventually dissolves with prolonged product familiarity or whether certain symbolic boundaries persist despite positive brand experiences.

Forth, more in-depth investigation into brand touchpoints is eligible. This study has highlighted the relevance of showrooms, test drives and visual brand cues such as increased media visibility. However, it has not deeply analyzed how these experiences are strategically designed and then perceived by the audience in certain ways that translates into degrees of trust. Future research could explore how physical and digital environments function as trust-building platforms, for example examining how digital storytelling and interactive apps versus documented real experiences contribute to consumer confidence in unfamiliar brands.

Finally, there is a pressing need for research into media framing and policy narratives related to new Chinese brands and other non-Western market entrants. As this study found, trust in this context can be mediated not just by the quality of the product itself, but by larger political and ethical frames. Additionally, many people often rely on media reviews and peer influences when evaluating different alternatives when buying a new car. Future studies could therefore analyze how news coverage, influencer disclosure or governmental messaging impacts public sentiment and brand evaluation. Likewise, policy-oriented research could explore how trust is institutionally shaped through safety regulations, privacy laws or sustainability reporting requirements.

Taken together, these research directions could not only strengthen the empirical foundation for understanding trust in emerging EV brands, but also contribute to broader conversations about globalization, consumer identity and brand ethics in high-tech, high-involvement markets.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore what drives Norwegian consumers to move away from traditional country-of-origin (COO) perceptions when it comes to trusting and purchasing Chinese electric vehicle (EV) brands. Using a qualitative approach that combined consumer surveys and expert insight, the findings show that trust plays a key role in shaping these decisions, and that trust itself is influenced by several interrelated factors.

The results reveal that COO is still an important reference point for many consumers. It often shapes how consumers view product quality, reliability and the political or ethical values they associate with a brand. For some, Chinese origin still triggers skepticism, especially around issues like surveillance, human rights, or long-term brand stability. However, many consumers, especially young EV purchasers, are becoming more open-minded because of increased exposure to Chinese brands trough peer influence, brand experiences increasing familiarity such as showrooms, and positive product encounters that challenge their

initial expectations. While Chinese EV brands demonstrate strong value through competitive pricing, modern technology, and increasing visibility in the Norwegian market, some are willing to reconsider their views.

This shift does not happen automatically. Trust is built gradually, and the study identified several mechanisms that support this process. Social proof, service structure, Western partnerships, and transparent communication were all found to build consumer confidence. At the same time, concerns around data security or political ties with China can create hesitation, especially among older or more politically cautious consumers.

A key contribution of this thesis is showing that consumer trust is shaped not only by practical experiences, but also by emotions, social identity, and values a brand appears to represent. Younger and more tech-savvy consumers seem more willing to look past COO stereotypes if the brand delivers good value and aligns with their practical expectations. This means that trust can be earned in the Norwegian car market, even by unfamiliar or emerging brands, as long as key expectations are met.

For companies, the findings suggest that trust must actively be built through more than just product quality. New EV brands, especially from China, need to communicate longevity, transparency, and alignment with local values if they want to succeed. Strategic partnerships with well-known companies and strong service systems can also help reduce risk perceptions and boost legitimacy.

In summary, while COO still matters in the minds of many Norwegian consumers, it is not the only factor that shapes trust and purchase decisions. The rise of Chinese EV brands shows that trust can be formed through strong and consistent value signals, and gradual exposure. This reflects a broader shift in how consumers evaluate unfamiliar brands in a globally connected, fast-moving market. The results of this thesis offer both academic insight and practical guidance for brands looking to navigate this evolving trust landscape.

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Appendix

A. Survey Materials

A.1 Survey Screenshot Set

Masterundersøkelse: Merkevareoppfatning i elbilmarkedet

Side 1

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

SEKSJON 1 – BAKGRUNN OG SAMTYKKE

Hei!

Jeg skriver masteroppgave i markedsføring ved LUISS University, og ønsker å undersøke hvordan norske forbrukere oppfatter elbilmerker. Dette er en kvalitativ undersøkelse, noe som betyr at spørsmålene er åpne og handler om dine egne tanker og erfaringer. Det finnes derfor ingen riktige eller gale svar.

Undersøkelsen tar omtrent 10–15 minutter å gjennomføre. Alle svar behandles anonymt og samlet, i tråd med GDPR og etiske retningslinjer for forskning.

Tusen takk for at du vil bidra!

Samtykke *

Jeg samtykker i at mine anonyme svar kan brukes i en masteroppgave ved LUISS University

- ○ Ja

Side 2

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Hvilken aldersgruppe tilhører du? *

- ○ Under 18 år
- ○ 18–29 år
- ○ 30–44 år
- ○ 45–59 år
- ○ 60 år eller eldre

Hvilket kjønn identifiserer du deg med? *

- ○ Mann
- ○ Kvinne
- ○ Annet
- ○ Ønsker ikke å oppgi

Har du bodd i Norge i mer enn 5 år? *

- ○ Ja
- ○ Nei

Hvilket utdanningsnivå har du fullført? *

- ◯ Grunnskole eller videregående skole
- ◯ Fagskole eller yrkesutdanning
- ◯ Universitet eller høyskole – bachelorgrad
- ◯ Universitet eller høyskole – mastergrad eller høyere

Kunne du vurdert å kjøpe en elbil? *

- ◯ Ja
- ◯ Nei
- ◯ Jeg eier allerede en elbil

Hva er ditt årlige husholdningsinntektsnivå? *

- ◯ Under 400 000 kr
- ◯ 400 000 – 799 999 kr
- ◯ 800 000 – 1 199 999 kr
- ◯ 1 200 000 kr eller mer
- ◯ Ønsker ikke å oppgi

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

SEKSJON 2 – OPPFATNINGER OM OPRINNELSESLAND

Hva betyr det for deg hvor et bilmerke kommer fra? *

Er opprinnelsesland noe du legger merke til når du vurderer bilmerker? Hvorfor / hvorfor ikke? *

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

SEKSJON 3 – TILLIT TIL NYE MERKER

Hva gjør at du stoler på et nytt eller ukjent bilmerke? *

Hvilke faktorer må være på plass for at du skal vurdere å kjøpe fra et merke du ikke kjenner fra før? *

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

SEKSJON 4 – KINA OG BILMERKER

Hvilke adjektiver forbinder du med bilmerker fra Kina? *

Hva tenker du når du hører at en bil er produsert eller eid av et kinesisk selskap? *

Hvordan vil du sammenligne kinesiske bilmerker med merker fra andre land når det gjelder kvalitet, innovasjon og design? *

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

SEKSJON 5 – TILLIT OG KINA

Er det noe som gjør at du ikke ville stole på et kinesisk elbilmerke? *

Øker det din tillit til et kinesisk bilmerke dersom det eies av eller samarbeider med et kjent vestlig selskap? Hvorfor / hvorfor ikke? *

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

SEKSJON 6 – MERKEVARER OG VURDERINGER

Hva kunne fått deg til å vurdere et kinesisk elbilmerke fremfor et europeisk, japansk eller amerikansk merke? *

Kjenner du til noen kinesiske elbilmerker? *

Skriv ned de bilmerkene du kommer på

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Har du hørt om noen av følgende merker? *

Kryss av et eller flere alternativ

- [ ] XPENG

- [ ] MG

- [ ] BYD

- [ ] NIO

- [ ] VOYAH

- [ ] Usikker / Har ikke hørt om noen av disse merkene

Side 9

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Hva ville du forventet når det gjelder pris, design eller teknologi fra et kinesisk elbilmerke for at det skulle være attraktivt for deg? *

Kan du huske noen reklamer, medieomtaler eller showroom-opplevelser som har påvirket hvordan du ser på kinesiske elbiler? *

Side 10

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

SEKSJON 7 – REFLEKSJON OG AVSLUTNING

Hvis du skulle kjøpe en ny elbil i morgen, hvilke faktorer ville vært avgjørende for valget ditt? *

Hvorfor er faktorene du nevnte i forrige spørsmål viktige for deg? *

A.2 Survey Design and Research Plan

Main RQ

What drives Norwegian consumers to shift away from traditional country-of-origin (COO) perceptions in their trust and purchase decisions for Chinese electric vehicle (EV) brands?

Sub-questions:

1. *How do Norwegian consumers perceive the country-of-origin in the context of newly introduced Chinese EV brands?*
   → Aiming to target consumers' perception of COO and whether they are positive, negative, or shifting.
2. *What role does trust play in shaping willingness to consider or purchase Chinese EV brands?*
   → Connect with the concept of trust from the literature review.
3. *Which brand cues influence consumers to override COO-based skepticism?*
   → Intent to open the discussion of brand signals as trust-enablers, emphasized in Thesis Ch. 2.

Participant recruitment

- ***Purposive/ Convenience sampling*** contacting EV forums such as Norwegian EV newspapers (e.g. elibil24.no, and motor.no), and car suppliers such as Bilia to help me distribute the survey to their network.
- **Criteria:** Norwegian consumers (age 18+), ideally with some familiarity or exposure to EVs
- **Sample size:** ~20–40 responses (50 if feasible)

Survey

The survey will be conducted in Norwegian, but responses will be translated and coded in English for analysis purposes.

LINK TO ACTUAL SURVEY: https://nettskjema.no/a/518344

→ Questions will be given to the respondents in Norwegian (English translation below):

Qualitative Survey Layout

Hello!

I am writing my master's thesis in marketing at LUISS University, and I want to investigate how Norwegian consumers perceive electric car brands. This is a qualitative study, which means that the questions are open-ended and focus on your thoughts and experiences. Therefore, there are no right or wrong answers.

The survey takes about 10-15 minutes. All responses are anonymous and treated in an aggregate manner, in accordance with GDPR and ethical research guidelines.

Thank you very much for contributing!

Open-Ended Questions → (aligned with sub-RQs)

Theme 1: COO Perceptions → Headlines would not be included in the survey

1. *What does it mean to you where a car brand comes from?*
2. *Is country of origin something you pay attention to when considering car brands? Why / why not?*
3. *Which adjective would you associate with car brands from China?*
4. *What do you think when you hear that a car is manufactured or owned by a Chinese company*
5. *How would you compare Chinese car brands to brands from other countries in terms of quality, innovation, and design?*

Theme 2: Trust Formation

1. *What makes you trust a new or unfamiliar car brand?*
2. *What factors need to be in place for you to consider buying from a brand you don't already know?*
3. *Is there anything that would make you not trust a Chinese electric car brand?*
4. *Does the ownership or partnership with a well-known Western company increase your trust in a Chinese car brand? Why / why not?*

Theme 3: Brand Cues and Shifting Behavior

1. *What would make you consider a Chinese EV brand over a European, Japanese or American brand?*
2. *Do you know of any Chinese electric car brands?*
3. *Have you ever heard about one of these brands? (For example: NIO, XPeng, BYD, MG, Zeekr etc.)*
4. *What would you expect in terms of price, design, or technology from a Chinese EV brand to make it appealing?*
5. *Can you recall any advertisement, media coverage, or showroom experience that shaped your view of Chinese EVs?*

Insight-Generating Wrap-up Questions

1. *If you were to buy a new electric car tomorrow, what factors would be decisive in your choice?*
2. *Why would the factors you mentioned on the previous question be important to you?*

Demographic/Background Questions (For selection/contextual analysis)

1. *Which age group do you belong to?*

Under 18/ 18–29 / 30–44 / 45–59 / 60+

→ (Responses "under 18" will be excluded from the analysis because they do not fit with sample criteria)

2. *Which gender group do you belong to?*

Male / Female / Other / Prefer not to say

3. *Which county do you live in? (or) Have you lived in Norway for more than 5 years?*

→ (Respondents answering something else than "Norway" will be excluded from the analysis because they do not fit with sample criteria

4. *Which educational level have you obtained?*

Grunnskole eller videregående skole (Primary or Secondary School)/ Fagskole eller yrkesutdanning (Vocational School or Trade Education) / Universitet eller høyskole – bachelorgrad (Bachelor's degree) / Universitet eller høyskole – mastergrad eller høyere (Master's degree or above)

5. *Would you ever consider buying an eletric vehicle (EV)?*

Yes / No / I already own an EV

6. *What is your yearly household income level?*

Under 400 000 kr / 400 000 – 799 999 kr / 800 000 – 1 199 999 kr / 1 200 000 kr or above / Do not wish to disclose

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Note. The order of the questions will be rearranged in the actual survey in order not to disclose information to the participants that could affect their responses.

B. Interview Materials

B.1 Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: Expert Interview with [redacted] (Editor-in-Chief in [redacted])

Research Objective:

To explore how the editor-in-chief of a key automotive publication in Norway interprets the shifts in consumer trust, COO perceptions, and market trends related to new Chinese EV brands in the Norwegian market.

Interview

The in-depth interview will be conducted in Norwegian, but the response will be transcribed and translated in English for analysis purposes.

→ Questions will be given in Norwegian (English translation below):

1. Introduction

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this interview. I am currently writing my master's thesis in marketing at LUISS University in Rome, and my research explores how consumers perceive newly introduced car brands in the Norwegian electric vehicle market. As a qualified expert in the Norwegian car market and the public discourse, your reflections will provide invaluable context and insight into the topic of interest. The interview is **semi-structured**, meaning I have prepared themes and questions, but I will allow for flexibility depending on where the conversation leads.

This will take approximately 30–45 minutes. Your responses will be anonymized if requested, and the data will be used solely for academic purposes and treated in an aggregate manner, in accordance with GDPR and ethical research guidelines. Do I have your permission to record the interview for transcription purposes?

2. Background / Warm-Up Questions

1. *Could you briefly describe your role at Motor and how long you have been working with the automotive sector in Norway?*
2. *How would you describe Motor's typical readers?*
3. *What kind of influence do you think your publication has on public trust and perceptions in the car market?*

3. Perceptions of Chinese Car Brands in Norway

1. *How would you characterize the current Norwegian EV market?*
2. *Do you think the perception of "where a car brand comes from" matters to Norwegian car buyers?*
3. *Based on your experience and observations, how would you describe Norwegian consumers' attitudes toward Chinese car brands today?*
4. *In your opinion, which factors have helped these brands (e.g., BYD, XPeng, NIO, MG, Zeekr) gain visibility and market share in Norway?*

4. Trust and Brand Legitimacy

1. *In your view, what helps new and unfamiliar car brands establish trust with Norwegian consumers?*
2. *Are there any particular brand cues (design, pricing, dealership strategy, media coverage) that you believe play a key role in reducing skepticism?*
3. *Have you observed any cases where partnerships with European or Western brands (e.g., MG's British heritage and Polestar's Swedish heritage) have influenced trust in Chinese EVs?*

5. The Role of Media and Narrative Framing

1. *From a journalistic and editorial perspective, how do you approach covering new Chinese EV brands? Are there any specific challenges or strategies involved?*
2. *Do you think media framing can influence or shift consumer perceptions regarding COO and trust?*
3. *Has Motor received any reader feedback or comments that reflect changing attitudes (positive or negative) toward Chinese EV brands?*

6. Future Outlook

1. *Looking ahead, do you believe Chinese brands will become accepted in the Norwegian market to the same extent as Japanese or Korean brands? Why or why not?*

2. *Do you foresee any particular threats or opportunities for legacy brands as these new entrants grow their presence?*

7. Closing

1. *Is there anything else you would like to share that you believe is important for understanding consumer behavior and trust toward Chinese EVs in Norway?*

B.2 Interview Transcript (English Translation)

00:00:02

Speaker 1: The main trend is that cars are becoming electrified, digitalized, and Chinese. That's the main direction of development. If you read the article I wrote, you'll see the main explanation is that they have been strategically planning and building their industry through smart, forward-looking industrial policy for many years. That's exactly what they are reaping the benefits of now. Their development pace is so much faster than others that I don't know how long other automotive industries can survive. It might just vanish as a major industry in other countries, because [China] produces cars that people love at half the price.

00:01:04

Speaker 2: Yes, it's getting exciting now.

00:01:08

Speaker 1: Regarding adoption in Norway. It's really just a question of how price affects the uptake of benefits. Many say, "No, I'll never buy a Chinese car. Remember the Uyghurs. I can't support that policy." But when they come with their wallet and realize an Audi costs NOK 700,000 and they can get a Chinese car for NOK 500,000, I'm not sure they're still thinking about the Uyghurs.

00:01:52

Speaker 2: Yes, exactly.

00:01:52

Speaker 1: But just being honest and saying that you've worked in the auto industry, and that interest in cars is kind of an interesting case here. It's an example of a car chain that was quite strong in the West in terms of China, but hesitated a lot. When they were the first to try bringing their brand to Norway, it wasn't very well thought through. They had a try with something called [redacted], which is a brand from one of the nine state-owned car manufacturers in China, called [redacted].

They didn't have the right models for Norway, they didn't really have cars, nor a clear idea of how to proceed, and they lacked good contacts in China. So it became a bit half-hearted. They got off to a rough

start or didn't bring the cars in. The experience is a good example to reconsider how quickly China's entry into Norway is happening now that they are starting to build and raise funds. So XPeng is a better example. MG, perhaps. MG is probably the example that shows how a relatively poor car in the car world, but low-priced, manages to gain a foothold in Norway. It was actually one of Norway's ten best-selling cars last year, the MG4, and that's purely because of the price point.

00:03:16

Speaker 2: I was wondering if we could just start a bit from the beginning. We kind of jumped right into it. But yes, I was thinking more generally, how long have you worked in automotive journalism? You said earlier that you didn't originally come from a car background.

00:03:36

Speaker 1: Since 2017.

00:03:39

Speaker 2: Right.

00:03:39

Speaker 1: Of course. I started working for [redacted] for ten years, and then I was at [redacted] for twenty years. After that, I ran a small communications firm, and since 2017 I've been working here, in this organization.

00:03:51

Speaker 2: And how would you describe the typical [redacted] reader?

00:03:58

Speaker 1: The typical [redacted] reader is a fairly average Norwegian car owner. [redacted] print magazine is the largest print magazine in Scandinavia, with 630,000 readers. It's published four times a year. That's more than 10% of the Norwegian population, so it really reflects a broad segment. These are not hardcore car enthusiasts, they don't need help figuring out what to buy. It's mostly people who need a car in daily life and want it to be as hassle-free, affordable, and safe as possible. So it's quite close to the core of the general car-buying public in Norway.

Car buyers vary depending on the brand. New car buyers are usually between 40 and 65 years old, with some variation depending on the brand. Some brands skew younger, while buyers of Japanese petrol cars are generally older. I'd estimate that the average new car buyer is about 56 or 57 years old. And remember, about two to three times as many used cars are sold as new ones. That group includes everyone

from students buying their first car, to families getting a second car, or people who just want something that gets them from A to B.

The [redacted] membership base is probably closer to the new car buyer demographic than the general population. As for our website, I don't know the exact age composition, because Google Analytics doesn't give as detailed data as a membership archive, but I'd guess it's roughly the same.

00:06:28

Speaker 2: Do you think what you write in [redacted] has an influence on how car buyers in Norway form their opinions?

00:06:42

Speaker 1: For many people who don't know much about cars, EVs are a new thing, and they have a lot of questions. The people who are entering the EV market today have the same questions that buyers had five years ago: how long does the battery last, how much range do I need, how do I charge the car, and so on. Once you've owned an EV for a while and you've had some experiences, you know the answers to those questions. Then you behave like a regular car buyer, choosing based on what you like and whether the car meets your needs in daily life.

00:07:29

Speaker 2: Do you think the origin of the car, the country it's from, matters to Norwegian buyers?

00:07:37

Speaker 1: I think it has mattered, partly due to skepticism. If we start in the West, American cars have had a very loyal customer base, often tied to the "Amcar" culture and American car heritage. That subculture is still alive, but it's not dominant. Today, the large volume of American-branded cars sold are mostly Teslas. Although many Teslas sold in Norway are manufactured in China or Germany, Tesla isn't really seen as an American brand anymore.

In Europe, you have the big brands from the VW group. The Norwegian market is very much dominated by German brands like Volkswagen, Audi, Mercedes, and BMW. That's partly because VW is seen as reliable and the others offer luxury and performance. Then you have Volvo, which still has a loyal following in Norway.

You see fewer French, Italian, and Spanish cars here. Those are more common in Southern Europe, where they make lots of small cars. That's logical given the narrow streets and limited parking space in cities like Rome. You don't need a four-wheel drive to go into the mountains like many Norwegians do, so buying patterns are different.

Then in the East, Japan has had a strong presence for a long time with brands like Toyota and Nissan. These brands have a very loyal customer base in Norway. But they've fallen behind somewhat, mostly because they haven't kept up with EV development, except for Nissan. At the same time, South Korea has entered the market with Hyundai and Kia, which are very popular.

Then you have China. China has been the largest car manufacturer in the world for at least 15 years, but until recently they focused on their domestic market. Up until 2018 or so, their cars weren't good enough to compete in strong markets like Norway. They sold a lot in Africa, South America, Southeast Asia, and Russia. But over the last three or four years, Chinese manufacturers have started producing cars that are just as good as European ones, and at better prices. That's what makes them increasingly relevant.

00:10:47

Speaker 2: If you were to say something general about how you think Norwegian consumers view these new Chinese brands, what would you say?

00:10:59

Speaker 1: I haven't really found a good answer to that. I tried asking people who I thought might know. Those who know a lot about Norwegian consumer behavior, they know a little about cars. It's like this: Chinese car buyers have a different view of luxury and premium than we do in Europe. They are extremely focused on digital and advanced digital technology. They love things that make sounds and big gaming-style screens, and they use their cars as living spaces to a much greater extent.

For us, a car is just a means of transport. No one would think of spending an afternoon in a car unless they had to. In China, it's different, it can be an office, a place where the family watches movies, or where you play games. So modern technology is extremely important to them. That's a key factor.

For example, one of the brands, NIO, has a store right on Karl Johan in Oslo. If you go inside one of their cars, you'll find this little dashboard figure, almost like a doll, that monitors how you drive and responds to commands. It's a very Chinese example of modern digital technology. You'd never find something like that in a Volvo. It's unthinkable. They like things that make sounds, look fancy, and are digital. Globally, that's a strong selling point. In Norway, not necessarily.

00:13:12

Speaker 2: No.

00:13:13

Speaker 1: But still, they're growing. The cars are getting fundamentally better and better. And a Chinese premium car is several hundred thousand kroner cheaper than a comparable European car. It doesn't

drive worse. It doesn't have less range. It doesn't have less power. So the real question is: how long will people keep pretending money doesn't matter? Because the Chinese brands definitely have that price advantage.

00:13:50

Speaker 2: As a marketer, I've become a bit focused on brand trust. When I see XPeng cars driving around Oslo, I wonder what is it, do you think, that helps these new brands build trust so quickly?

00:14:19

Speaker 1: That's spot on. The brands that succeed in Norway are either big enough to build a full service network on their own, so that buyers feel confident the company won't go bankrupt and that they'll get their car repaired if anything goes wrong, or they choose strong local partners. BYD is a good example. It's become such a large company that it's very unlikely to go bankrupt, and they'll take care of everything. On top of that, they've partnered with a Norwegian distributor that has a lot of credibility and is known for selling Suzukis and other rather unexciting Japanese cars, but with a well-established workshop and parts infrastructure in Norway. So from that perspective, it's a very safe purchase.

Then you have other brands like Polestar, which are Chinese-owned to varying degrees and manufactured in China, but they are under the same umbrella as Volvo and share Volvo's service infrastructure. That makes them feel like a safe purchase too, maybe because people know they can rely on Volvo's service network. Even though some Volvos are made and sold in China, Norwegians still see them as Swedish and trustworthy.

But that's not guaranteed to last, Volvo faces tough competition. So the idea of what counts as "safe" is a bit unclear. I think people now have a more short-term mindset when buying a car. Still, they're thinking: where can I get service if something goes wrong?

Then you've got brands like XPeng and NIO, which are startups with fewer local partners. What happens if they go bankrupt? They probably will, either go under or get bought out. That's almost certain. But the brand might live on under new ownership. Still, for NIO, their technology is very specialized. They offer battery swapping, which requires special stations. No one else does that. So if they disappear, it could make their cars practically useless.

Others, like XPeng, are more standard and could likely survive a buyout and continue to function.

00:17:32

Speaker 2: Right.

00:17:33

Speaker 1: I think a lot of people consider these questions. What if something breaks down? There have been several Chinese brands introduced in Norway that claimed their cars didn't need servicing; they would just run forever. But that's naïve. Of course cars need service, and that's a legitimate reason for skepticism.

00:18:00

Speaker 2: Exactly. I've also reacted a bit to how the NIO café on Karl Johan might be a bit of a front, especially if you're unsure about the brand's future in Norway.

00:18:26

Speaker 1: I don't think people have been convinced by that.

00:18:28

Speaker 2: No? You don't think so?

00:18:30

Speaker 1: No. They're barely selling any cars.

00:18:32

Speaker 2: That's just it.

00:18:33

Speaker 1: They've adopted this strategy worldwide. These kinds of showrooms are popping up everywhere, even though they're paying sky-high rent. NIO Houses are found all over Europe and the world, but sales haven't taken off.

00:18:47

Speaker 2: So do you think, because I've read in the media that the idea behind the showrooms is to build the brand and create awareness, would you agree that's their main function?

00:19:18

Speaker 1: Yes. They clearly love showrooms. The Chinese are good at retail, they like going into shops. But I'm not sure it aligns with the Norwegian mindset. I don't know much about marketing or sales, but it doesn't seem to be hitting the mark. Polestar has closed their showroom in central Oslo. XPeng handed theirs over to Bilia, which is using it more like an office. Lotus has closed theirs. Lucid never even had

customers. Mercedes also closed their showroom. So many have realized that showrooms weren't quite as cool as everyone thought three years ago.

00:20:10

Speaker 2: So it's not really what works, then.

00:20:13

Speaker 1: Those who import BYD, like [redacted], who was mentioned in one of the articles, he's a strong supporter of the opposite approach: the traditional Norwegian sales method. He believes in physical dealerships where you can walk in, talk to someone, and be offered a cup of coffee.

00:20:28

Speaker 2: Right. But it's interesting, when introducing something so new, maybe one would resonate that it makes sense to do it in a different, slightly unconventional way at first.

00:20:43

Speaker 1: Yes. They've definitely attracted attention. A lot of people are now aware of China as a car-producing nation and have learned a lot about it. But it's not like those who own Chinese cars are any more dissatisfied than others. That's not the case. I think it's more about skepticism, a general suspicion of the unknown. It was exactly the same when Japan started exporting cars to Norway, and later South Korea. Especially Korea struggled with a poor reputation for quality. But the cars improved, and today they are top-class vehicles with strong brand what do you call it?

00:21:39

Speaker 2: Brand awareness and recognition.

00:21:42

Speaker 1: Yes, exactly. And many people learn fast.

00:21:50

Speaker 2: I was also thinking, from a journalistic perspective, when you're covering these new Chinese EV brands, have you encountered any particular challenges or strategies you've had to consider?

00:22:10

Speaker 1: Not really. The Chinese have a special relationship with Norway because we're a front-runner when it comes to EVs. They often come here to learn. We run a major EV test twice a year, with

around 25–30 cars tested simultaneously. We invite manufacturers and importers to observe, and there are always Chinese representatives. Some brands send big delegations, four or five people, just to follow their car, watch how Norwegians use EVs, and gather insight.

They're incredibly quick to act on feedback. They walk around with notepads and cameras, and six months later, all the issues we noticed are fixed. They are very fast learners, especially in product development and updates. They are responsive and curious.

00:23:36

Speaker 2: Curious about their customers in this market?

00:23:41

Speaker 1: About what customers think, what they want, and what they expect. I find that they respond impressively quickly compared to other manufacturers, where things tend to take longer. With the Chinese, everything moves twice as fast.

00:24:04

Speaker 2: Do you get the impression that they genuinely care about their customers in Norway?

00:24:14

Speaker 1: Yes, absolutely. They definitely want to show that. But as the saying goes, "a bad reputation lasts forever." If you make poor-quality cars, it's hard to shake that image. Still, I experience them as very serious, eager to learn, and curious.

00:24:54

Speaker 2: Have you received any feedback at [redacted] that indicates readers are changing their attitudes toward Chinese brands?

00:25:05

Speaker 1: That's a good question. A year ago, we got loads of emails saying it was all nonsense, that the cars were useless. Some were long, detailed messages covering everything from politics to how these brands "couldn't make proper cars." We even received some anonymous emails that ended with "sent from my iPhone." Okay, you won't buy a Chinese car, but your phone is built from components made in China. That kind of response was predictable.

But there are fewer of those now. We're getting fewer complaints. More people are saying and experiencing that these cars can actually be good. There are bad Chinese cars and good Chinese cars. But as more people realize that many of them are very good, we've seen a shift. I personally get fewer emails now.

I think they are gaining traction. But it probably depends on one thing—people need to feel safe. They already have plenty of questions about EVs, and if you add concerns about service, maintenance, or battery durability, they'll need more reassurance. From what I've seen, attitudes toward Chinese brands, and China in general are starting to shift.

00:27:00

Speaker 2: So you think these brands are a real threat to the more established Western brands in Norway?

00:27:05

Speaker 1: Definitely.

00:27:07

Speaker 2: Do you see any opportunities for the more established Western brands now that the Chinese presence is growing?

00:27:28

Speaker 1: Yes, it's possible. The thing is, China has built an entirely self-sufficient industrial structure. They have control over the entire supply chain: everything from raw materials to aluminum, steel, and all the components you need to build a car. They've created infrastructure and manufacturing they control directly, and that lets them keep prices down. Batteries, which are a key cost factor in EVs, China controls all the components for them. Their low prices come from scale alone.

The only thing China doesn't fully control is microprocessors. The global situation for processors is a bit more complex. You've got Taiwan, the Netherlands, Korea, Japan, the US, all of them make chips for China. So China doesn't produce all of them domestically, but it depends somewhat on global microprocessor supply. Taiwan is a particularly key nation there. A modern car contains about 2,000 microprocessors, so it's critical tech.

Still, microprocessors aren't as rare as, say, rare earth minerals, which are more limited and mined in areas China controls. European manufacturers don't have that. No European brand has its own vertically integrated supply chain like China's. And that's a big part of why China can produce new car models so quickly. In Europe, it might take 6–8 years for a car to break even. In China, it takes three years. That means they can constantly produce new models, responding to customer demand much faster.

I'm not sure Europe can ever catch up. That's why we see tariffs. Some Chinese brands face up to 50% tariffs in Europe and are still cheaper. In fact, Chinese automakers could export to the U.S. and still offer competitive prices, even with 145% tariffs.

So I think both the European and American auto industries are being protected somewhat for now, because people still want brands they know. That ties into national preferences. Americans love pickups, and they want them built in the U.S. But in two years, China could produce those pickups for half the price, and just as good.

I don't know. It's a difficult question, but I don't see any signs that China's position is weakening.

00:31:40

Speaker 2: No.

00:31:40

Speaker 1: Quite the opposite.

00:31:44

Speaker 2: That covers all the questions I had. Is there anything else you think is important to add about this topic?

00:31:52

Speaker 1: I really wonder what matters most to Norwegian car buyers, what factors truly tip the scale. I'm also very unsure how strongly political opinions influence decisions.

00:32:14

Speaker 2: Yes, that's exactly what I'm trying to explore in my thesis.

00:32:20

Speaker 1: Have you talked to anyone else? Any other good sources?

00:32:27

Speaker 2: That's been a bit tricky to get feedback from informants. Also, since I write my thesis in Italy, they're not necessarily very familiar with the Norwegian market. I have discussed with my supervisor that insights from the Norwegian consumer perspective are the most important, but we also agreed that it was great that I could also speak to you, because you have a bit of an insider view, while I'm more on the outside. So now I have several angles.

00:33:08

Speaker 1: Yes, of course. The consumer angle is really interesting. The EV share in April was 97% in Norway. That means there's practically nothing else being sold. That number is going to rise. But German brands are still doing okay. So there hasn't been a complete shift yet.

00:33:42

Speaker 2: No, I've just realized how fascinating this topic is. I wasn't super into cars before, during this process I've realized that this phenomenon is truly interesting. And your insights have been super helpful.

00:34:01

Speaker 1: A lot of people will need help selling cars, especially from China. If you've learned something useful, that could take you far.

00:34:08

Speaker 2: That's great.

00:34:10

Speaker 1: If you have more questions, just send me an email.

00:34:13

Speaker 2: Fantastic! Thanks again for taking the time to talk with me.

00:34:19

Speaker 1: My pleasure!

00:34:20

Speaker 2: Have a great day. Bye!