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# The role of perceived social reality in the adoption of postmaterial values: The case of Hong Kong<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

While much research in the past four decades has demonstrated a turn toward postmaterial values in many developed countries in the world, there are continual debates regarding the factors behind such cultural changes. This study examines the role of certain cognitive factors in the adoption of postmaterial value orientations. Analysis of three surveys conducted between 2012 and 2016 in Hong Kong illustrate that postmaterial values are, at the individual level, tied to criticisms against social inequality and immobility. The relationship is stronger among better educated people and people with higher levels of news exposure. The analysis contributes to the broader literature on cultural change in modern societies by suggesting that social affluence is not a sufficient condition for the rise of postmaterial values. Instead, specific combinations of social conditions and a process of cognitive mobilization could initiate a postmaterial turn.

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## 1. Introduction

Inglehart's (1977, 1990) theory of postmaterialism has generated a large body of literature in the past decades. In his original formulation, Inglehart (1977) argued that people growing up in relatively affluent and secure social settings would exhibit a stronger post-material orientation, *i.e.*, an emphasis on values and goals that are non-material in nature. A large amount of cross-national evidence was presented to support the theory's key arguments (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart, 1990; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Cross-national studies have shown that the concept and measure of postmaterialism are useful for various purposes, such as explaining people's environmental

attitudes and consumer behaviors (Best & Mayerl, 2013; Pampel, 2014; Pisano & Lubell, 2017). However, there are also studies questioning specific aspects of the theory, such as whether higher levels of economic development necessarily lead to shifts toward postmaterial values (Brym, 2016; Hellevik, 1993), and whether formative experience or education is more important in shaping people's value orientations (Duch & Taylor, 1994a, 1994b).

This study adopts the premise that, while material affluence may facilitate a shift to postmaterialism, it is neither the only factor influencing people's value orientation nor a sufficient condition for a postmaterial turn. There can also be a cognitive basis of people's value orientation, *i.e.*, people may adopt certain values based on their perceptions of certain social situations and problems. In this sense, a shift toward postmaterial values may be a result of a process of cognitive mobilization under specific social conditions.

Empirically, this study focuses on Hong Kong, where the postmaterialism thesis has attracted much scholarly and public attention in the past decade (Lee & Tang, 2013; Wong & Wan, 2009). Interestingly, despite high levels of

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economic development for decades, there was a lack of clear evidence of a generational shift toward postmaterialism in Hong Kong until the most recent years. A possible way to explain the latter phenomenon is to articulate the postmaterial turn with cognitive mobilization and the rise of social criticisms in the city in the past 15 years. This article will demonstrate that, at the individual level, postmaterial values in Hong Kong are tied to criticisms against social inequality and immobility, and such relationships are moderated by education and news exposure. This study shall contribute to the study of postmaterialism by generating new evidence regarding the possible cognitive basis of postmaterial value orientation.

The next section briefly discusses certain debates in the literature of postmaterialism that are most pertinent to the present study. We then introduce the Hong Kong context in order to generate the specific hypotheses. The data and method are then introduced, followed by the analysis and discussions of the findings at the end.

## 2. The theory of postmaterialism and its critiques

Inglehart (1977) constructed the postmaterialism thesis through articulating together the scarcity hypothesis, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the socialization hypothesis. Maslow's hierarchy of needs posits that people typically aim at achieving basic needs such as survival and security before they turn to other psychological needs and self-actualization goals. The scarcity hypothesis posits that people tend to value what they do not have in abundance. Therefore, when the basic security needs are largely fulfilled, people would turn to more abstract and expressive values such as freedom, justice, and self-actualization. The socialization hypothesis further holds that people's values are largely formed during their formative years and would remain relatively stable throughout adulthood. Consequently, cultural change is driven mainly by generational replacement.

In many countries, younger people indeed exhibit a stronger orientation toward postmaterial values when compared with the older generations (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). But the thesis of postmaterialism was also subjected to numerous challenges, including the dimensionality of the concept of postmaterialism (e.g., Flanagan, 1987; Lakatos, 2015; Sacchi, 1998) and whether postmaterialism and materialism are two ends of one single continuum (DeGraaf & Evans, 1996; Moors, 2003). More directly pertinent to the present study, some scholars have argued that societal affluence does not necessarily generate a postmaterial turn in the youngest generation and the citizenry at large. After differentiating the notion of postmaterialism into its component dimensions, Lakatos' (2015) analysis of longitudinal data found a lack of a shift away from authoritarianism in Japan and a lack of a shift away from religiosity in Taiwan. Analyzing Norwegian surveys from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Hellevik (1993) found that young people did not become more "modern-idealistic" (i.e., postmaterial) over time. Instead, there were signs showing a movement by young people toward more modern but also more materialistic values. Hellevik (1993) opined that, in the 1980s, a threshold of economic and social development

had been crossed in Norway so that "rising prosperity will increase rather than decrease interest in and dependence on material goods and consumption" (p. 302).

The discrepancies between theory and reality also appeared in recent research on China. Brym (2016) showed that there was no conspicuous rise in postmaterialism in China in the past decades despite its continual economic development. Percent of people expressing postmaterial values in the World Values Survey actually declined from higher than 10% in the late 1980s to between 3% and 5% in the 2000s and early 2010s. Based on the cases of China and Russia, Brym (2016) suggested that 'five- to seven-year periods of rapid economic growth are often associated with the sharp declines in postmaterial values' (p. 198, emphasis original). This is in line with early research suggesting the rise of materialism in China in the midst of economic growth (Wei & Pan, 1999). In another study, Zhang, Brym, and Andersen (2017) offered further complicated findings on the relationship between various socio-economic factors and postmaterial values in China. At the provincial level, societal affluence is not associated with the strength of the population's postmaterial value orientation. At the individual level, while younger people were indeed more liberal and more postmaterial, urbanites were more liberal and yet more materialistic than rural residents. There were also no signs of influence of formative experience on postmaterialism and liberalism.

It is beyond the scope of this study to reconcile these mixed findings. However, it should be fair to suggest that formative security at most facilitates, but does not compel, the younger generation to become more postmaterial. Even with basic needs fulfilled, there is no guarantee that young people will turn to a full set of expressive values instead of even higher levels of materialistic satisfaction, luxury consumption, and/or only a limited set of non-material values. A shift toward postmaterialism, then, may require additional socio-cultural or socio-political conditions, such as a democratic system or the domination of postmaterialist political parties (Tranter & Western, 2009; Warwick, 1998). The latter factors can be relevant because they can produce an environment conducive for the cultivation of postmaterial values.

The assertion that the postmaterial turn requires a combination of material affluence and certain social-cultural conditions cannot be directly tested in this study. Nonetheless, it would be the argument underlying our analysis of the relationship between perceived social reality and postmaterial values in Hong Kong.

## 3. The belated postmaterial turn in Hong Kong

After the Second World War, Hong Kong developed largely as a refugee society as huge numbers of people fled the civil war and political chaos in mainland China and came to the city. Social and economic development might have been slow in the first 20 years after WWII, but after the urban riots in 1966 and 1967, the Hong Kong government started to take up the role of a social service provider (Ma, 2010; Tsang, 2004). Public services expanded, and the local economy took off since the early 1970s. By the 1980s, Hong Kong had become an international metropolitan. In other

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