

To Publish or to Monograph? Exploring Social Sciences Doctoral Students' Responses to Thesis by Publication in Hong Kong

Research Overview

This qualitative case study explores how Social Science doctoral students in Hong Kong respond to the Thesis by Publication (TBP) model. Three patterns emerge—instrumental adoption, hybrid strategies, and cautious hesitation—each reflecting distinct rationalities. Findings extend rational choice theory by conceptualizing “nested rationality,” revealing how institutional, disciplinary, and supervisory contexts shape doctoral decision-making.

Purpose

The Thesis by Publication (TBP) model has gained prominence under neoliberal academic pressures and intensifying publish-or-perish expectations (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Olssen, 2015; Ball, 2016). Doctoral education increasingly aligns with research evaluation regimes and academic labor markets, making publication output a key indicator of scholarly competence (Asongu & Nwachukwu, 2017; Merga et al., 2019). While TBP is well established in Science, Engineering, and Medical fields (Paltridge & Starfield, 2023), its diffusion into the Social Sciences remains uneven and contested (Niven & Grant, 2012; Jump, 2015; Rigby & Jones, 2020). Existing studies focus predominantly on Anglophone contexts, leaving limited understanding of non-Anglophone regions. Hong Kong offers a valuable hybrid academic environment, shaped by Western neoliberal governance and Confucian traditions (Jung, 2018; Chan et al., 2017), along with cross-border influences from Mainland China. This study investigates how Social Science doctoral students in Hong Kong respond to TBP and examines the factors shaping their choices. Using rational choice theory (RCT), specifically Weber's distinctions among instrumental, value, and bounded rationality (Weber, 1930; Coleman, 1992; Becker, 1993), the research moves beyond singular rationality assumptions to capture career calculations, normative commitments, and cognitive constraints in doctoral decision-making.

Methods

A qualitative case study design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 doctoral students from four Social Science disciplines—Education, Psychology, Social Work, and Sociology—at a research-intensive Hong Kong university where TBP is an optional pathway. Participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity in disciplinary background, research methodology, and doctoral progression stage. Data analysis combined inductive thematic coding with deductive interpretation informed by RCT, enabling

identification of empirically grounded response patterns while situating them within a coherent theoretical framework.

Results/Discussion

Findings reveal three distinct response patterns. First, some students readily adopted TBP, driven by instrumental rationality. Academic job market expectations, early publication requirements, and efficiency considerations made TBP strategically optimal, reinforced by supervisor recommendations and departmental normalization. Second, other students pursued a hybrid strategy combining monograph writing with active publishing, reflecting a balance between instrumental and value rationality. While recognizing publications' importance for employability, they valued the monograph's capacity for theoretical depth, methodological coherence, and sustained scholarly engagement—preferences often shaped by research design and academic norms influenced by Mainland China. Third, some students exhibited bounded rationality, adopting a cautious wait-and-see approach. They weighed TBP's benefits against concerns over coherence, evaluation standards, and long-term consequences under conditions of limited information and cognitive constraints. Across all three groups, participants emphasized the centrality of publications, underscoring the pervasive influence of a publication-dominant academic culture regardless of thesis format.

The study concludes that doctoral students' rational choices are not made in isolation but embedded within institutional structures, disciplinary cultures, and supervisory relationships—a dynamic conceptualized as nested rationality. This challenges individualistic accounts of doctoral decision-making and highlights the complex interplay between agency and structure in contemporary doctoral education (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Ball, 2016). By foregrounding lived experiences and decision-making logics, the study contributes to broader debates on doctoral education reform and deepens understanding of the evolving role of publication in Social Science doctoral training within non-Anglophone hybrid academic contexts.

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