

Dissolved Before It Surfaces

A Qualitative Study of How the MBB Firms Discursively Navigate Institutional Complexity Between High Performance and Wellbeing in Employer Branding

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Abstract:

This thesis examines how McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group, and Bain & Company discursively navigate institutional complexity between the competing logics of high performance and wellbeing in their employer branding. While these firms consistently rank among the most attractive employers for graduates, they operate under structural conditions where performance demands and wellbeing expectations are difficult to align. Drawing on qualitative text analysis and thematic coding of career-facing content from their corporate websites, the study identifies key mechanisms through which this discursive navigation unfolds - including strategic ambiguity, selective visibility, and the construction of an ideal candidate. It further shows how wellbeing emphasis functions as legitimacy work, and suggests that the persistence of tension may itself serve a strategic positioning purpose. Theoretically, the study challenges an underlying assumption in institutional complexity research: competing logics must first become visible before organizations respond. In response to this problematization, it introduces the concept of a pre-recognition logic, in which a tension can be dissolved before it becomes visible. It further contributes to employer branding research by showing how the multidimensionality of wellbeing constitutes both a resource and constraint for discursive navigation. The findings carry practical implications for prospective candidates, the MBB firms, and the broader field of elite professional services.

Keywords: *Institutional Complexity, Employer Branding, Wellbeing, High Performance, Management Consulting, Discourse*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Year after year, McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group, and Bain & Company, collectively known as the MBB firms, rank among the most attractive employers for graduates from leading Nordic universities (Universum, 2025). As the most prestigious firms in management consulting, their communicative practices do not merely reflect existing industry norms: rather, as institutional norm-setters, they actively shape how the profession is understood as a career path (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Yet, this attractiveness coexists with a challenging reality: management consulting is structurally characterized by long hours, intense workloads, and expectations of constant availability that sustain high-performance. These are not marginal features of the profession but core conditions - normalized and often celebrated as markers of elite status and ambition. The personal costs are well established: stress, burnout, and the internalization of organizational demands as personal ambition are recurring features of working life in these environments (Lupu & Empson, 2015; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016).

At the same time, wellbeing has become an increasingly central concern in contemporary working life, reflected in expanding academic attention and growing societal focus. Research conceptualizes wellbeing as multidimensional, encompassing dimensions that are unequally familiar beyond academic contexts, where more recently theorized dimensions remain less socially embedded and are therefore less likely to be acknowledged as legitimate wellbeing resources.

In light of this, MBB firms place emphasis on wellbeing in their employer branding, highlighting various forms of support and practices intended to signal care for employee wellbeing. However, the conditions associated with high performance are the same conditions most closely associated with risk to wellbeing. This introduces a tension between performance demands and expectations of care and sustainability. When such competing demands must be addressed simultaneously, organizations can be said to face institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011). This gives

rise to a question that this study addresses by examining how such complexity is navigated discursively in employer branding.

1.2 Problematization

Scholars have documented the personal costs of high-performance work in elite professional service firms (Lupu & Empson, 2015; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016), established wellbeing as a multidimensional concept shaped by psychological, physical, and social dimensions of flourishing (Diener et al., 2018; Oishi et al., 2020), and shown that organizations strategically foreground certain attributes while leaving others unaddressed in their employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018). Within institutional complexity theory, a rich understanding of how organizations navigate competing logics has developed. The most widely recognized responses include decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), selective coupling and reconciling (Pache & Santos, 2013), and rhetorical legitimation (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Together, these literatures provide a rich foundation. Furthermore, we identify an assumption that unites them: competing logics must, at some level, surface as a visible tension before organizations respond. This assumption is not explicitly stated in the literature, but it is embedded in the logic of the responses themselves.

Drawing on Sandberg & Alvesson's (2011) concept of problematization as an approach that goes beyond gap-spotting to challenge the assumptions underlying existing theory, this study questions whether this assumption always holds. It asks whether such a tension is allowed to appear as a tension in the first place, and whether organizations may discursively navigate the tension to prevent it from surfacing at all.

The issue is particularly important considering who encounters this communication and what is at stake. Each year, thousands of high-achieving graduates make consequential career decisions partly based on employer branding. How firms choose to present themselves - what they foreground, and what they omit - may thus carry implications for how these decisions are made. As institutional norm-setters, MBB firms do not only recruit talent, they actively shape how an entire profession is understood as a career path. Understanding how they navigate competing demands discursively therefore carries implications beyond the three firms themselves.

1.3 Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this study is to enhance understanding of how institutional complexity is navigated discursively in management consulting employer branding, and to explore whether the tension between competing logics is always managed in response to a visible tension or if it can be dissolved before it surfaces. To this end, the study draws on qualitative text analysis of career-facing content from the corporate websites of all MBB firms. The research question is stated as follows:

How do MBB firms discursively navigate institutional complexity between the competing logics of high performance and wellbeing in their employer branding?

1.4 Contribution

This study aims to make two theoretical contributions. First, to advance institutional complexity research by identifying and problematizing an underlying assumption shared across existing frameworks - decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), selective coupling and reconciling (Pache & Santos, 2013), and rhetorical legitimation (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) - that the tension must become visible before organizations respond. The analysis aims to explore whether the tension can be dissolved upstream of recognition, a mechanism existing frameworks have not addressed.

Second, to contribute to employer branding research by showing how multidimensionality of wellbeing - and the unequal social recognition of its dimensions - functions as a resource and constraint for discursive navigation, and thereby extend existing research of strategic selectivity in organizational self-presentation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018).

Beyond these theoretical contributions, the findings aim to contribute with practical implications for prospective candidates, MBB firms, and the broader field of elite professional services.

1.5 Delimitations

First, the analysis is limited to the MBB firms - McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group, and Bain & Company. As the most prestigious firms in management consulting, they

function as institutional norm-setters whose communicative practices shape broader industry standards (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Universum, 2025). Their position makes them analytically powerful cases. That said, the study aims for theoretical rather than statistical generalization, and the findings should be interpreted as suggestive rather than universally applicable.

Second, the analysis draws exclusively on publicly available career-facing pages from each firm's global corporate website. As the MBB firms operate globally and do not differentiate such communication at a national level, the study is solely based on global .com material. This channel was selected because it represents a direct and unmediated form of organizational self-presentation to prospective talent, making it a particularly relevant site for examining what is communicated and how (Hoffman & Cowan, 2008; Young & Foot, 2005). It is also worth noting that the study is conducted from a Swedish perspective, as both researchers are situated within a Swedish academic and cultural context where wellbeing and norms around work and employee protection are strongly emphasized. This positioning inevitably shapes the analytical lens, influencing how the material is interpreted.

Moreover, no claims are made about the lived experience of the material studied. Understanding the relationship between espoused values and practical experiences requires methods such as interviews or ethnography, which fall outside the scope of this study given time and access constraints. The focus is therefore on what the discourse does at the level of text and meaning.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter develops the theoretical framework guiding the analysis of how MBB firms discursively navigate the tension between competing logics in their employer branding. It draws on four bodies of literature: employer branding as a communicative practice (2.1), the high-performance dynamics of management consulting (2.2), the multidimensional nature of wellbeing (2.3), and institutional complexity theory (2.4). The first three sections establish the conceptual foundation, while institutional complexity provides the overarching analytical lens. The chapter concludes with a unified analytical framework specifying the analytical approach through which the empirical material is analyzed (2.5).

2.1 Employer Branding

Employer branding is a concept that has been defined in different ways in the literature, reflecting varying emphases on its communicative, strategic, and identity-related dimensions. Ambler and Barrow (1996), widely acknowledged as having introduced the concept, defined employer branding as “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company” (p. 187), emphasizing the employer brand as a value proposition. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) later built on this, shifting focus from the content of the offer to the strategic process of constructing a distinctive organizational identity in the labor market, conceptualizing employer branding as “the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors” (p. 502). Together, these definitions point toward an understanding of employer branding not as a neutral description of what an organization offers, but as a constructive practice that actively shapes how that offer is understood and valued.

Organizations construct and legitimize their employer image through carefully crafted messages distributed across formal and informal channels - from corporate websites and recruitment materials, to social media platforms and word-of-mouth communication (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Hein et al., 2024; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). What is communicated through these channels is not a neutral reflection of organizational reality but a strategically curated representation that foregrounds certain attributes while leaving others unaddressed. This selectivity is most visible in the employer value proposition, that is the set of employment attributes an organization promotes as part of its offering (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018). These attributes - whether transactional, such as salary and benefits, or relational, such as work-life balance and career development (Deepa & Baral, 2021) - are deliberately selected to appeal to targeted talent segments rather than to comprehensively represent working conditions. Of particular relevance to this study, career-facing sections of corporate websites represent the organization’s most direct form of self-presentation to prospective talent, unmediated by external voices or platform algorithms (Hoffman & Cowan, 2008; Young & Foot, 2005). This makes them a consequential site for examining what is communicated, how it is framed, and what is systematically absent.

2.2 High Performance

2.2.1 The High Performance Ideal in Management Consulting

Management consulting is a knowledge-intensive profession involving complex, non-standardized tasks that require expert knowledge and professional judgment (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). As a project-based profession built on client relationships, consulting work is structurally characterized by externally set deadlines and client-driven performance expectations. This makes long hours, high-pressure deadlines, expectations of constant availability and overwork, not exceptional features of the work, but normalized ones (Lupu & Empson, 2015; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). Such expectations are not limited to individual organizations but are embedded in broader industry norms, making sustained high performance a defining characteristic of the profession as a whole (Alvesson & Einola, 2018).

Within such high performance contexts, employees are described as “special people”, reflecting an elite professional identity focused on performance (Meriläinen et al., 2004). This identity is actively reinforced through organizational practices, making high achievement appear not only desirable but expected. Critically, this professional ideal does not operate merely as an external standard but is actively internalized. Highly driven individuals are drawn to these environments and come to identify with their norms, self-regulating their behavior to fit prevailing expectations (Lupu & Empson, 2015; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). High performance thus operates not only as something employees achieve but as a normative ideal that simultaneously structures organizational practice and shapes individual behavior and identity (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006).

2.2.2 The Autonomy Paradox and the Prestige of Overwork

Paradoxically, professionals in these environments often perceive their overwork as self-chosen, describing it as a matter of personal ambition and autonomy rather than organizational pressure. This is what Lupu and Empson (2015) term the ‘autonomy paradox’. This paradox is in large part explained by the process of internalization. That is; over time, organizational demands cease to feel like external pressure and are instead experienced as expressions of personal ambition (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Lupu & Empson, 2015).

This internalization is reinforced by the significant social and professional value that demanding work patterns carry. Within high-performance culture, long hours, and persistent drive have become established markers of elite status and dedication. Professionals who visibly embody these behaviors derive pride from enduring extreme conditions, actively embracing an image of themselves as “work warriors”. Compliance with organizational demands leads to promotion and recognition, making success within these environments feel deeply rewarding and, for many, addictive (Lupu & Empson, 2015). The result is a professional environment in which demanding conditions are simultaneously celebrated and naturalized.

2.2.3 The Costs of High-Performance Work

This normalization does not, however, eliminate the personal costs. The very behaviors that signal commitment and ambition, such as long hours, constant availability, and sustained overwork, are simultaneously those most strongly associated with stress, burnout, and deteriorating health (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). Employees in these environments frequently report sustained overwork to the point of physical and psychological breakdown, with demanding conditions becoming so deeply normalized that they are no longer experienced as excessive, but simply as an unavoidable condition of professional life (Lupu & Empson, 2015). In management consulting specifically, these costs are compounded by the structural features of the business model - when client demands are non-negotiable and billable hours define success, the conditions for sustained stress are structurally embedded rather than incidental (Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016).

2.3 Wellbeing

2.3.1 The Contested Nature of Wellbeing

The preceding section outlines the demands and costs of high-performance work in management consulting. The question that follows is what wellbeing means in this context and what it requires. Despite its growing attention in both research and society at large, there is no single agreed-upon definition. Instead, wellbeing encompasses several dimensions reflecting different understandings of what constitutes a good life (Diener et al., 2018). This multidimensionality is not only theoretically important - it has direct practical implications, as it allows organizations to

have considerable room to choose how they present it, emphasizing certain dimensions while downplaying others. Notably, these dimensions differ in how widely recognized they are beyond academic research. While some align with common, everyday understandings of wellbeing, others are more recent theoretical concepts that most people would not readily identify as wellbeing resources (Oishi et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Three Dimensions of Wellbeing

Wellbeing research has long distinguished between two broad orientations toward the good life. Hedonic wellbeing centers on happiness, characterized by pleasantness, comfort, and stability. Eudaimonic wellbeing focuses on meaning, defined by purpose, devotion, service, and personal growth (Oishi et al., 2020). These dimensions are conceptually related but empirically separable: a meaningful life may involve sacrifice and difficulty, while a comfortable life may lack depth or challenge.

Oishi and colleagues propose a third distinct dimension: psychological richness, defined by variety, novelty, complexity, and perspective-changing experiences (Oishi et al., 2020). Unlike happiness and meaning, psychological richness does not require comfort or stability - it may entail discomfort, risk, and cognitive demand as constitutive features rather than costs. As a relatively recent theoretical construct, psychological richness is less embedded in everyday understandings of wellbeing than hedonic or eudaimonic dimensions, which map more closely onto common notions of happiness and a meaningful life.

Critically, these three dimensions overlap but do not always align. In high-performance professional environments specifically, these distinctions carry practical weight. Demanding work may be simultaneously rich, meaningful and depleting, and treating these dimensions as interchangeable risks obscuring trade-offs that are consequential for how wellbeing is understood and evaluated.

2.3.3 Basic Psychological Needs at Work

These broad orientations toward the good life say little about what wellbeing requires at the level of everyday psychological experience. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) addresses this by proposing that wellbeing depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs:

autonomy - the desire to act with choice and ownership over one's actions; competence - the need to feel effective and capable, fulfilled through opportunities for challenge and growth; and relatedness - the need to experience connection with others and a sense of belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While SDT itself is not new, research has more recently established that these needs function as reliable predictors of wellbeing outcomes specifically, including happiness, life satisfaction, and meaning in life, while their absence is linked to depressive symptoms and diminished flourishing (Martela et al., 2023).

For work environments, this means wellbeing depends not only on formal benefits, such as salary, standard benefits, and other stated perks, but on whether the work conditions support these three fundamental needs.

2.3.4 Physical Wellbeing

Alongside these psychological dimensions sits physical wellbeing, perhaps the most immediately recognizable dimension in everyday understanding. It has embodied aspects that are directly and measurably shaped by structural work conditions, particularly sensitive to the demands of high-performance environments. Physical activity suggests a clear and consistent relationship with happiness, where greater volumes of regular activity are associated with higher levels of wellbeing independently of demographic and other factors. Crucially, it is total volume rather than intensity that drives this effect (Richards et al., 2015). Sleep further reinforces this relationship, as sleep quality predicts life satisfaction through a cognitive mechanism, with poor sleep fostering a scarcity mindset that limits the ability to experience and interpret positive aspects of life (Shin & Kim, 2018).

Against this background, both dimensions are directly sensitive to the structural conditions of management consulting. Client-driven deadlines and sustained overwork are precisely the conditions most likely to compress the space that physical wellbeing requires. This implies that the demanding work can be both a source of genuine meaning and a cause of deprivation from the embodied aspects that flourishing depends on.

2.3.5 Prosocial Wellbeing

A further dimension of particular relevance to the context of high-performance professional work is the flourishing that derives from contributing to others. Research shows that prosocial acts - directing time, effort, or resources toward others or the world - generate sustained increases in psychological wellbeing in ways that self-focused behavior does not (Nelson et al., 2016).

However, these benefits are not unconditional. They are stronger when the act is voluntary, when individuals feel genuinely connected to those they help, and when the impact is concrete and visible (Aknin et al., 2019). In commercial professional service contexts, where work is driven by client objectives and billable structures, the link between individual effort and broader social impact is often indirect. As a result, these conditions are not always present.

2.3.6 Wellbeing as a Strategic Concept

Together, these dimensions establish that wellbeing is a multidimensional condition shaped by the interplay of psychological, physical, and social factors (Diener et al., 2018). Crucially, these dimensions are distinct and do not always pull in the same direction. A demanding professional environment may, for instance, support eudaimonic wellbeing, psychological richness, and the needs for competence and relatedness, while simultaneously threatening hedonic wellbeing, physical recovery, and the autonomy that genuine flourishing requires. Which dimensions are emphasized in communication is therefore not neutral, it shapes what aspects of wellbeing become visible and how it is ultimately understood.

2.4 Institutional Complexity

2.4.1 Institutional Logics and Institutional Complexity

Central to understanding how organizations navigate competing ideals is the concept of institutional logics (Lounsbury & Boxenbaum, 2014). These are the sets of material practices and symbolic constructions that organize social life, shaping taken-for-granted meanings, and guiding how actors understand and act within institutions (Friedland & Alford, 1991). They function as organizing principles that structure behavior, define legitimate action, and shape how organizational reality should be interpreted (Thornton et al., 2012). Importantly, institutional

logics are not a fixed or exhaustive set of categories, they are historically contingent and context-specific, emerging from and varying across different organizational fields (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012).

Early institutional theory mainly focused on how dominant logics produce isomorphism, that is the tendency of organizations within a field to become similar as a result of shared institutional pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Later research challenged this by demonstrating that fields can be characterized by multiple logics that are historically influenced, potentially overlapping, and at times in conflict. This can be seen, for example, in tensions between market and professional logics in professional service firms (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2005). When such logics become incompatible, organizations are said to experience institutional complexity. The challenge is not simply that multiple logics coexist, but that they may impose competing and at times incompatible demands, making it difficult for organizations to satisfy all expectations simultaneously while still maintaining legitimacy (Greenwood et al., 2011).

2.4.2 Organizational Responses to Institutional Complexity

Research has identified several strategies for managing institutional complexity. Three stand out as the most established ones. Firstly, decoupling refers to the separation between formal structures and actual organizational practices, whereby organizations maintain structures that signal legitimacy, while their day-to-day activities may diverge from these formal representations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Secondly, selective coupling, where organizations draw strategically on elements from different logics rather than fully committing to one. Lastly, reconciling is a strategy that combines competing logics into hybrid arrangements (Pache & Santos, 2013).

In contrast to these structural approaches, a parallel stream of research has identified rhetorical strategies as a distinct means of managing institutional complexity. Rather than changing structures or practices, organizations may use language and discourse to legitimate their position in relation to competing logics. However, the research within this sub-field remains limited. That said, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) provides the most established research, claiming that the rhetorical management operates through two key mechanisms: institutional vocabularies - the strategic use of identifying words and phrases to articulate a particular logic - and theorizations

of change, through which actors contest a proposed innovation or change by connecting it to broader cultural templates or scenarios of change. Rhetorical strategies are thus deployed to defend or contest a position in response to it having been challenged. That said, rhetorical strategies operate at the level of meaning, in difference to structural strategies that operate at the level of organizational practice.

Extending this further, a growing body of research argues that language does not merely respond to institutional complexity but actively constitutes it. From this perspective, competing logics are not simply managed through discourse, they are constructed and naturalized (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). What all these responses share - whether structural, rhetorical, or discursive - is an underlying assumption that the tension between competing logics becomes visible before organizations respond to it.

2.4.3 Two Competing Logics in Management Consulting

While most institutional complexity research draws on broad and well-established logic combinations, such as market- and professional logics, there exist no set configuration of institutional logics. Against this background, the tension between high performance and wellbeing reflects a structured, but underexplored, set of competing institutional demands. These may not be established logics in the classical sense, but constitute a distinct set of expectations and legitimacy claims whose coexistence creates the condition of institutional complexity.

The performance logic is deeply embedded within the field of management consulting. As established in the preceding section, consulting work is structurally characterized by client-driven demands, sustained high performance, and the internalization of organizational pressure as personal ambition (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Lupu & Empson, 2015; Meriläinen et al., 2004). At the same time, wellbeing has emerged as an increasingly important organizational concern, encompassing psychological, physical, and social dimensions of flourishing. The logic is driven by shifting employee expectations and broader cultural norms around sustainable work (Diener et al., 2018; Panneerselvam & Balaraman, 2022).

These two logics are, in important respects, in tension with each other. The conditions that define high performance in consulting, such as demanding client work, long hours, and constant availability, are the same conditions that threaten employee wellbeing and basic psychological

needs. As a result, firms cannot fully satisfy both simultaneously, reflecting institutional complexity in this context (Greenwood et al., 2011).

2.4.4 Employer Branding as the Arena for Managing Institutional Complexity

Within this framework, employer branding becomes a central arena in which the tension between high performance and wellbeing logic is managed rhetorically. As employer branding involves communicating and shaping an attractive organizational identity, it becomes especially important under conditions of institutional complexity, where firms must address competing logics while also presenting a coherent and appealing employer identity to prospective talent (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In consulting, employer branding tends to emphasize an image of exceptional performance, elitism, and distinction (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). At the same time, organizations are increasingly expected to communicate wellbeing-oriented values (Panneerselvam & Balaraman, 2022), creating a communicative tension that is difficult to resolve without one logic undermining the other.

Taken together, the multidimensional character of wellbeing gives organizations particular flexibility in navigating this tension. Rather than choosing between logics, firms can selectively foreground dimensions of wellbeing that align with high-performance work while downplaying aspects that do not. The autonomy paradox reinforces this further, as employees may experience intense work as self-chosen and rewarding (Lupu & Empson, 2015). In sum, this creates space for rhetorical strategies in which language does not merely describe organizational reality but actively shapes how the relationship between competing demands is understood.

2.5 Analytical Framework

To examine how MBB firms discursively navigate the tension between high performance and wellbeing in their employer branding, this study develops an analytical framework based on the preceding theoretical review. The framework brings together three complementary perspectives.

At the broadest level, institutional complexity theory provides the overarching lens. As established, consulting firms operate in an environment shaped by two competing logics, a performance logic and a wellbeing logic, that cannot be fully satisfied simultaneously (Greenwood et al., 2011). The framework further adopts a discourse-oriented perspective,

treating organizational texts not as neutral descriptions but as communicative acts through which particular understandings of work, performance, and wellbeing are constructed (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). From this view, competing logics are not only responded to through communication but can also be shaped, naturalized, or potentially dissolved. More specifically, the analysis is guided by a rhetorically oriented reading of employer branding communication, focusing on how career-facing texts frame and make sense of the tension between the two competing logics, including what is emphasized and what is systematically absent.

Together, this layered approach - institutional complexity as framework, discourse as perspective, and rhetoric as analytical orientation - enables the study to examine how MBB firms discursively communicate the tension in their employer branding.

3. Methodology

To examine how MBB firms discursively navigate the tension between high performance and wellbeing, this study analyzed publicly available career-facing content from the corporate websites of McKinsey & Company (hereafter McKinsey), Boston Consulting Group (hereafter BCG), and Bain & Company (hereafter Bain). The study adopts a qualitative text analysis grounded in a constructivist ontology, an interpretivist epistemology, and an abductive research logic. This chapter outlines the methodological approach, beginning with the research stance (3.1) and abductive logics (3.2), followed by data collection and sample selection (3.3), the analytical approach detailing the qualitative text analysis and coding process (3.4), and finally a reflection on research quality (3.5).

3.1 Research Stance: Constructivism and Interpretivism

This study is grounded in constructivist ontology, which views concepts such as wellbeing and high performance as socially constructed through language and institutional context rather than as fixed or objective (Bell, 2019, pp. 27-29). Accordingly, the career-facing texts are treated not as transparent accounts of organizational life but as communicative practices through which particular understandings of work and wellbeing are constructed and legitimized.

Epistemologically, the study adopted an interpretive stance, where knowledge was generated

through close, theoretically informed readings of the material under study, rather than through hypothesis testing or measurement (Bell, 2019, pp. 30-31).

3.2 Abductive Research Logic

The study further followed an abductive research logic, moving iteratively between empirical material and theory, where emerging insights informed and shaped the theoretical interpretation, and the theoretical framework in turn guided the analysis (Bell, 2019, pp. 23-24). This approach is particularly well suited to this study, as it supports the development of new theoretical insights rather than solely confirming existing propositions. It also aligns with the problematization approach of Sandberg and Alvesson (2011), which involves questioning assumptions underlying existing theory rather than filling predefined research gaps.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Sample Selection and Justification

The empirical material was drawn from three management consulting firms: McKinsey, BCG, and Bain. These firms are consistently ranked among the most prestigious and attractive employers in the industry (Universum, 2025), and function as institutional norm-setters whose communicative practices not only reflect existing industry but actively shape how management consulting is understood as an employer (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The sample was thus constructed through criterion sampling, with firms selected based on their theoretical relevance to the research question rather than statistical representativeness (Bell, 2019, p. 390).

All three firms operate within the same market segment, compete for the same talent pool, and are subject to comparable institutional pressures. This institutional homogeneity means the firms can be treated collectively as representatives of a shared field rather than as separate cases to be compared, which in turn supports theoretical generalization. The aim is therefore not to make firm-specific claims, but to generate insights into how institutional complexity is rhetorically managed in management consulting more broadly (Bell, 2019, p. 374).

3.3.2 Data Sources and Collection

The study drew on publicly available career-facing content from the corporate websites of each company studied. Organizational websites represented a particularly relevant source for this study, as Hoffman & Cowan (2008) argue, they allow organizations to speak for themselves without external mediation, making them a direct and unfiltered expression of organizational self-presentation. They also constitute a central channel through which organizations communicate their employer identity to prospective talent (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Young & Foot, 2005).

Specifically, data were collected from sections with headings such as ‘Careers’, ‘Life at [Firm]’, ‘About Us’, ‘Our Culture’, ‘Our People’, ‘Diversity, Equity & Inclusion’, and ‘Wellbeing & Benefits’. As globally operating firms, McKinsey, BCG, and Bain maintain official corporate websites as a central channel for employer branding communication. While country-specific entry points exist, these consistently direct visitors to the same global career content, indicating that this communication is not produced or differentiated at a national level. The analysis therefore drew exclusively from global .com material.

Social media channels were considered but ultimately excluded, as their content largely mirrored the material published on corporate websites. The websites were therefore considered a more comprehensive and analytically appropriate source. Interviews were not pursued either, as the study focuses on organizational communication at an institutional level.

Data collection was conducted in two phases: an initial collection between 4 and 6 March 2026, followed by a supplementary collection on 30-31 March 2026, undertaken to capture additional material identified as relevant during the analytical process. This iterative approach reflects the emergent logic of qualitative research, in which the dataset is refined in response to ongoing analytical development (Bell, 2019, p. 23).

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Qualitative Text Analysis and Thematic Approach

This thesis adopted a qualitative text analysis as its analytical method, informed by a discourse-oriented perspective (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). A qualitative text analysis was particularly appropriate given the nature of the research question - examining how competing logics are discursively navigated in organizational texts requires close, interpretive engagement with language rather than quantification of surface-level patterns.

Thematic coding served as the primary tool for organizing and interpreting the material, enabling the identification and interpretation of thematically coherent and analytically valuable patterns across the dataset, without reducing the material to predefined categories (Bell, 2019). Crucially, the analytical interest here lay not only in *what* the texts communicate, but in *how* they do so - how language frames the relationship between wellbeing and high performance, what is foregrounded, and what is systematically left unaddressed.

3.4.2 Role of Nvivo

NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), was used to support data management, systematic coding, and the organization of material across the full dataset. Prior to the substantive analysis, a pilot coding session was conducted to familiarize the researchers with NVivo and test its functionality. NVivo was used specifically for organizing and storing codes, facilitating the comparison of coded material across firms, and supporting the progressive refinement of the thematic structure. It is important to emphasize that NVivo functioned as a facilitative tool rather than an analytical method in itself (Mortelmans, 2025). Thus, all interpretive decisions were made by the researchers, and the rigor of the analysis depends on their theoretical and interpretive judgment rather than on the software.

3.4.3 Theoretical Grounding as Sensitizing Concepts

Prior to coding, both researchers engaged in extensive reading of the theoretical literature, which informed the analysis as sensitizing concepts - that is, a background perspective that guided the researchers' attention to certain patterns in the material without determining in advance what

would be identified (Bell, 2019, p. 361). This is consistent with the study's abductive approach, in which theoretical knowledge informs without predetermining the analytical process.

3.4.4 Open Coding Phase

The coding process began with a close reading of all collected material to develop an informed familiarity with the data. Following this, a systematic line-by-line coding was conducted using thematic coding as the primary analytical tool, approached openly and without a predetermined coding scheme - allowing patterns and sub-themes to emerge from the material itself. Given the focus of the research question, the initial coding naturally gravitated toward two broad orientations: content addressed wellbeing and content addressed high performance. These categories were not predetermined in detail but emerged as broad orientations. A third category, labelled 'Other', captured material that could not be assigned to either but appeared analytically relevant. As the coding progressed, these categories were gradually refined into more specific sub-themes, such as growth, flexibility, and community, that emerged inductively from the data.

Coding was conducted collaboratively, with both researchers independently coding portions of the material before comparing and discussing their understandings in regular meetings. Any differences were resolved through joint re-reading and discussion, ensuring that the final coding structure reflected a shared and carefully considered interpretation.

3.4.5 Interpretive Phase

In the interpretive phase, the coded material was revisited through the framework of institutional complexity, with particular attention to how competing logics of high performance and wellbeing are discursively constructed and rendered in employer branding texts. At this stage, the theoretical framework became more central, guiding the researchers in identifying how the patterns identified during the inductive phase related to broader institutional dynamics. This iterative movement between data and theory, consistent with the abductive logic described in Section 3.2, led to a reorganization of the coding structure, through which the initial categories and sub-themes were consolidated and reinterpreted into five analytical themes. These themes were not simply descriptive summaries but analytically developed constructs that capture how institutional complexity is discursively managed across the dataset.

Once the thematic structure had taken shape, each theme was named and defined to capture not merely what the texts communicate but how they function discursively in relation to the competing logics. The findings are presented in a structured narrative form, supported by selected quotes from the empirical material, and are intended to guide the reader through the analysis in a way that is both coherent and grounded in the organizational texts.

3.5 Methodological Reflection

The quality of this study was assessed using Tracy's (2010) eight "big-tent" criteria for qualitative research, including worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence. This framework was chosen over more traditional alternatives because it is flexible across different qualitative approaches and focused on what good research should achieve rather than adherence to specific methods. This made it especially appropriate for a discourse-oriented text analysis.

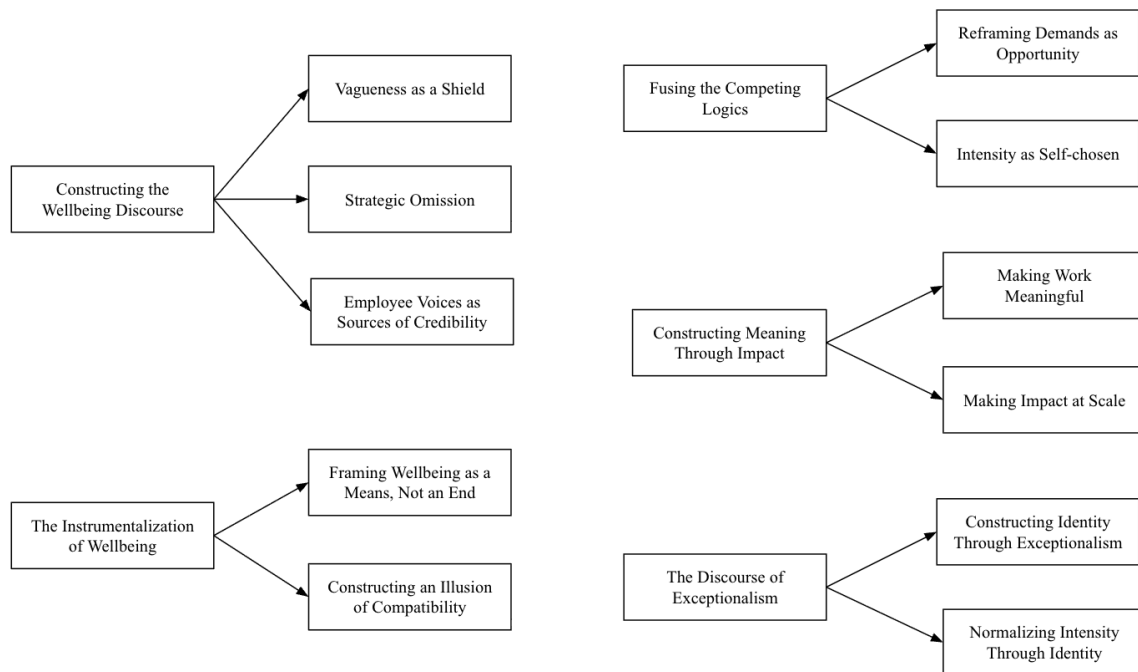
In terms of worthy topic, the study addressed a timely and theoretically significant issue: how competing institutional logics of wellbeing and high performance were rhetorically navigated in management consulting employer branding, challenging an underlying assumption in existing institutional complexity literature. Rich rigor was ensured through a systematic and transparent analytical process that moved from open coding to theory-informed interpretation. Sincerity was addressed through researcher reflexivity, as both researchers acknowledged their familiarity with consulting culture and the associated risk of over-identification or predisposed critique, and sought to manage this by consistently grounding interpretations in the empirical material and discussing analytical decisions collaboratively (Tracy, 2010). Credibility was strengthened by having both researchers code the material independently before comparing and agreeing on interpretations, and by supporting all analytical claims with direct quotes from the empirical material. Resonance was sought through transparent description of the research context, material, and analytical process, allowing readers to assess the relevance of findings to comparable institutional settings. Beyond the immediate findings, the study contributed to theory by showing that institutional complexity in employer branding could be dissolved discursively before it surfaced as a visible tension, and contributed methodologically by illustrating the use of qualitative text analysis for this purpose. Ethical considerations were addressed through the use

of publicly available data, with no personal information collected. Finally, meaningful coherence was ensured by aligning the research question, theoretical framework, methodology, analysis, and conclusions (Tracy, 2010).

4. Findings & Analysis

This section presents the findings and analysis of the employer branding material published on the corporate websites of McKinsey, Bain, and BCG, examining how these firms discursively navigate the tension between competing logics of high performance and wellbeing. Five themes are identified, each capturing a distinct aspect of how the discourse operates: the rhetorical construction of the wellbeing discourse (4.1), the instrumentalization of wellbeing as a means to performance (4.2), the fusing of the competing logics (4.3), the construction of meaning through impact (4.4), and the discourse of exceptionalism (4.5).

Figure 1: Overview of Themes and Sub-themes Identified



4.1 Constructing the Wellbeing Discourse

The first theme concerns how the wellbeing discourse is constructed - focusing on the rhetorical means through which claims are made to appear credible. Across all three firms, vague,

emotionally resonant language signals care without committing to specific enactments of it. Strategic omissions ensure that information regarding the conditions most likely to complicate those offerings remain outside the frame. The use of employee voices functions strategically as credibility-enhancement, lending the discourse an authenticity that organizational claims alone could not achieve. Together, these elements ensure that the wellbeing discourse feels substantiated before the reader even begins to question it.

4.1.1 Vagueness as a Shield

A recurring pattern across the firms is the use of language that is emotionally resonant but rarely translated into concrete commitments. Terms such as “supportive”, “wellbeing”, and “balance” appear frequently across the material, yet are seldom defined or substantiated. This pattern is particularly visible in the content regarding benefits and employee care:

“You’ll find our workplace uniquely supportive in a number of ways.” (Bain)

“Your health and wellbeing become our priority when you join.” (BCG)

“We make it our priority to understand and support the whole individual in all the ways you need - wellbeing, finances, lifestyle, learning, and more.” (Bain)

“Comprehensive well-being support and expert medical opinions.” (McKinsey)

“We invest in every BCGer with our employee benefits package, crafted to support financial wellbeing, physical wellbeing, mental health, and work-life balance.” (BCG)

These statements share a structure that signals genuine organizational concern while stopping short of specifying what that concern looks like in practice. The language is expansive but none of it clarifies what these commitments actually entail, or under what conditions they apply. BCG’s promise that wellbeing becomes “our priority” and Bain’s pledge to support “the whole individual in all the ways you need” are particularly illustrative: extensive claims, but which lack substance. This vagueness is not incidental; it functions as a shield, allowing firms to signal care and commitment while avoiding the accountability that specificity would entail. The formulations are broad enough to encompass almost anything, and therefore, they are difficult to hold against the firm. The discourse strategically operates at the level of values and intention rather than concrete practices. A reader comes away with a strong impression of organizational concern while still learning very little about what working there actually involves.

4.1.2 Strategic Omission

Where vagueness regards language that is present but intentionally imprecise, omission works through what is not said at all. Across all material, actual working hours, workload expectations, and right-to-disconnect policies are largely absent. These are precisely the factors needed to assess whether wellbeing claims reflect the actual working conditions. This is particularly visible in the benefits sections of the corporate websites, where employee care is described as follows:

“In addition to competitive pay, we provide a comprehensive, top-tier benefits package that reflects our commitment to the wellness of our colleagues and their families.” (McKinsey)

“We offer over 1,000 benefits across 54 countries.” (BCG)

“Beyond the express benefits, there are countless intangible reasons Bain tops the lists of best places to work.” (Bain)

Rather than specifying what is included, the firms characterize their offerings through claims of quality and scale - “top-tier”, “1,000 benefits”, and “countless reasons” - that appear impressive but provide very little concrete information. A candidate reading these descriptions learns that the firm offers comprehensive benefits, but not what those mean for how many hours they will work, what is expected of them on a daily basis, or whether any meaningful boundary between work and personal life is protected in practice. While employees are presented with extensive offerings, some conditions that directly affect wellbeing remain largely outside the frame. As outlined in the theoretical section, management consulting is defined by external client deadlines, project-based work, billable hour pressures, and demands for constant availability (Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). By ensuring these structural realities remain outside the discourse, wellbeing is presented as something the firm can guarantee. This pattern of omission resonates with previous research on employer branding establishing that organizations strategically foreground certain attributes while leaving others unaddressed (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018). The omissions are selective and consequential: what is left out is precisely what could complicate the picture.

4.1.3 Employee Voices as Sources of Credibility

Throughout all material, extensive use of employee voices is made to communicate workplace values, presenting individual testimonials alongside names, roles, and images/videos. This is

strategically significant because audiences tend to process and trust information differently depending on its source (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Rather than relying on the firm as an impersonal sender, the firms let individual employees tell their stories - making the message feel more relatable, tangible, and believable - creating a form of transferred credibility. This is particularly effective for communicating softer values such as support, wellbeing, and belonging. When these are articulated through embodied narratives they become more emotionally resonant:

“It’s so refreshing to know that there’s one place - in my career - that I can bring my whole self to work and know I’ll be accepted.” (McKinsey)

“What truly sets Bain apart is the people. My colleagues are much more than coworkers; they’ve become close friends and family.” (Bain)

“BCG’s flexibility has made a big difference for me. Whether it’s planning a wedding, being there for my family, or working from a specific location, the organization finds ways to support you. That flexibility makes you feel seen as a whole person, not just as a consultant.” (BCG)

“There’s ample support for you to be your vulnerable human self and you don’t have to put up a front.” (McKinsey)

“In 2023, that adaptability became especially important when I was diagnosed with breast cancer just before the birth of my second child. I took an extended leave to focus on treatment and recovery and felt fully supported to step away and return when I was ready. When I came back, my team was thoughtful about how I ramped up and where I plugged back in, which made it possible to re-engage fully with the work.” (BCG)

Hearing reflections from someone positioned as a peer or future colleague often appear more authentic and less strategically motivated than direct employer claims. Therefore, they can naturalize the primacy of performance by embedding it within personal narratives that are not recognized as organizational messaging. While these testimonials are likely genuine, they remain strategically curated as part of the recruitment material. Beyond building credibility for softer values, the use of employee voices also shapes how the relationship between high performance and wellbeing is understood. The demands of high performance are still present, but they are subtly reframed through the individual’s own words:

“Although it was initially challenging to juggle client management, learning content, and building my consulting toolkit simultaneously, I found the experience to be immensely rewarding.” (McKinsey)

“Thriving also means balance. I make time to pursue my passions outside of work and spend quality time with my family and friends.” (Bain)

“I went from focusing on one piece of the puzzle to seeing the full picture. Being a Project Leader feels a lot like being the CEO of a mini project - you balance client impact, team dynamics, and long-term strategy all at once. It’s a responsibility I’ve embraced and one that’s made me grow in ways I hadn’t imagined.” (BCG)

Early difficulty becomes reward rather than strain; balance becomes a personal choice rather than an organizational commitment; and demanding responsibility becomes a source of growth rather than pressure. Crucially, none of these narratives deny the difficulty - they reframe it. The tension between performance and wellbeing is not resolved, but it is made to feel manageable, even desirable, by embedding it within a personal story. Employee voices thus function as a credibility-enhancing communication strategy: making softer values emotionally resonant, while also helping to mitigate skepticism toward organizational messaging, and humanize demanding work conditions. The tension is dissolved within personal narratives and experiences before it can surface as a structural question about the conditions of the work itself, making the employee voice format particularly effective for discursively managing institutional complexity.

4.2 The Instrumentalization of Wellbeing

A recurring pattern across all three firms is that wellbeing is rarely presented as something that matters in its own right. Instead, it is consistently framed as a condition for performance - something the firm supports because it produces more focused and resilient employees. The distinction may seem subtle, but it carries real analytical weight. The firms do not deny the importance of wellbeing - they affirm it repeatedly. However, it is consistently affirmed on performance grounds, and it is this rationale that reveals where the ultimate priority lies.

4.2.1 Framing Wellbeing as a Means, Not an End

The value of wellbeing is consistently explained through its contribution to performance. In each case, the employee’s health and happiness matters, but the reason given for why, is productivity:

“We find that when people feel supported, they bring greater focus, creativity, and resilience to their work.” (BCG)

“When you’re supported emotionally, physically, and professionally, it creates an environment where you can achieve all that you expect of yourself.” (Bain)

“Performance at this level calls for more than standard benefits. We provide the support you need to be at your best.” (McKinsey)

This logic is explicitly visible in BCG’s framing of mental health support. Under the subheading “Mental Health: Support Builds Strength”, the firm states:

“Recognizing that psychological wellbeing is essential to resilience and performance, BCG UP works to ensure BCGers have access to the resources they need to support their mental health.” (BCG)

This reveals an underlying purpose: mental health support exists as something that supports performance - to make employees better able to endure pressure, not to reduce the pressure itself. It should be noted, however, that the instrumentalization pattern is not total. Occasional moments of expressed intrinsic care do appear in the material, suggesting that strategic and genuine motivations may coexist. Yet, the dominant rhetorical logic is instrumental. This does not necessarily mean that the firms do not care about their employees, simply that the language used consistently frames that care in terms of what it enables rather than what it is worth in itself.

It is also worth acknowledging that performance-based rationales do not necessarily reflect a straightforward deprioritization of wellbeing logic - they may also function as a way of making that care appear more credible. Within a profit-driven context, rational legitimization may function as a more persuasive form of commitment because it aligns wellbeing with the firm’s structural objective. An MBB firm that justifies wellbeing commitments by pointing to its contribution to focus, resilience, and performance makes a claim that is consistent with its core business logic and therefore harder to reject compared to one justified purely on humanistic grounds, which is easy to dismiss as rhetorical goodwill. Whether this makes the commitment more or less genuine is a question the discourse itself cannot answer. What it does suggest, however, is that instrumental framing and intrinsic care are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the dominant rhetorical logic remains instrumental regardless of underlying motivation. Wellbeing is made legible through the language of performance, and that choice of vocabulary is analytically significant in itself.

4.2.2 Constructing an Illusion of Compatibility

The instrumentalization of wellbeing also functions by rendering the tension between the competing logics invisible. Rather than acknowledging wellbeing and high performance as

potentially competing logics, they are presented as naturally aligned, without any acknowledgment that they might occasionally work against each other. Repetition and framing create an illusion of inherent compatibility. This pattern is visible across all three firms, each presenting potentially competing ideals as naturally compatible:

“We ensure our teams are balanced, energized, and successful.” (Bain)

“We’ll support your growth through flexible work options, mental health resources, and an inclusive culture - ensuring your career at BCG is both ambitious and sustainable.” (BCG)

“When colleagues join our firm, we offer them an opportunity for accelerated growth where they will learn more at a faster rate, develop the skills to lead, and experience the benefits of a collaborative environment, all built on the foundation of meritocracy. In parallel, we offer world-class benefits, well-being support, and meaningful relationships.” (McKinsey)

By presenting the compatibility of performance and wellbeing as self-evident, the firms appear to remove the question of whether they actually coexist from legitimate inquiry entirely. The compatibility claim is not made through argumentation or justification - it is not defended, qualified, or explained. Instead, it is achieved through discursive alignment: Bain simply asserts that teams are simultaneously “balanced” and “successful”, BCG places “ambitious” and “sustainable” side by side as though they are naturally co-occurring, and McKinsey frames accelerated growth and world-class wellbeing support as parallel offerings of equal standing. The result is a form of “deproblematization”: Candidates are not invited to weigh these priorities against each other, because the framing insists there is nothing to weigh. The absence of any acknowledged tension between these ideals is the rhetorical move itself.

Yet, as established in the theoretical framework, the structural conditions of management consulting make long hours and sustained high pressure a defining feature of the profession rather than an exception (Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). At the same time, sleep quality and regular physical activity are among the most reliable empirical predictors of flourishing, and among the conditions most sensitive to sustained overwork (Richards et al., 2015; Shin & Kim, 2018). This indicates that the structural demands of the work may quietly undermine the wellbeing the discourse promises, a contradiction the compatibility narrative leaves unacknowledged. The promise of a career that is both ambitious and sustainable is not

necessarily false - but the framing forecloses that question before it can be meaningfully examined, which is precisely the discursive work the compatibility illusion performs.

4.3 Fusing the Competing Logics

While the first theme establishes how the discourse is constructed to appear credible, and the second how tension is prevented from becoming visible through the instrumentalization of wellbeing, this theme shows how the tension is dissolved entirely. Rather than managing two potentially competing demands, the discourse fuses them - redefining wellbeing in terms that make high performance not just compatible with it, but constitutive of it. The result is not a balance between two logics but the disappearance of one into the other.

4.3.1 Reframing Demands as Opportunity

What are effectively performance expectations are consistently framed as opportunities rather than demands. What sits on the demand side of the employment relationship, such as high responsibility, intense workload, and sustained high performance, is moved onto the supply side and presented as yet another generous offering alongside benefits such as salary, mentorship, and development opportunities. To begin with, the language of empowerment frames what is essentially a demanding expectation as a gift:

“You’ll be empowered to run case teams on your own, as you see fit.” (Bain)

“Early careers at BCG are fast-paced, intellectually stimulating, and full of opportunities to grow.”
(BCG)

“Each project is a crash course in real-world leadership and problem solving. You’ll gain the skills, confidence, and opportunities that will shape the rest of your career.” (McKinsey)

Intensity is framed as stimulation rather than pressure and responsibility is framed as empowerment rather than expectation. “Fast-paced”, for instance, carries associations of both stress and excitement - yet in this context it signals primarily the latter. “A crash course” is similarly telling: the phrase acknowledges intensity, but the framing immediately redirects attention from what the experience costs to what it provides. This framing draws heavily on eudaimonic wellbeing (Oishi et al., 2020). By anchoring wellbeing in challenge and transformation, the firms present a high-performance environment not merely as compatible with

wellbeing but as its very foundation. SDT further strengthens the psychological force of this narrative: responsibility speaks to the need for autonomy, while the emphasis on skill development and elite credentialing speaks to the need for competence - both among the strongest and most consistent predictors of wellbeing and meaning (Martela et al., 2023). The framing maps onto genuine sources of psychological flourishing. Under this logic, working hard does not compete with basic psychological needs - it satisfies them. As a result, there is no tension to manage because the two logics have been discursively fused into one another.

Moreover, the framing of demands as benefits is particularly prominent in how all three firms describe what working for them will do for the employee's future, as illustrated:

"Credential for life - A McKinsey tenure opens doors because it is recognized globally as proof you can solve complex problems, influence senior leaders, and deliver impact." (McKinsey)

"Nothing creates opportunity like a management consultant job at Bain." (Bain)

"No matter which path you choose at BCG, you will find yourself with more skills, greater experience, and better opportunities than when you joined." (BCG)

"Leadership factory - McKinsey alumni have founded dozens of unicorns and lead more Fortune 500 companies than any other source. For C-suite or entrepreneurial ambitions, you're in the right place." (McKinsey)

While McKinsey's framing is the most explicit, all three firms present themselves not simply as employers but as pathways to personal and professional greatness. The underlying transaction of the employment relationship - you work for us, and we compensate you - is dissolved into a narrative of personal transformation and career capital. This narrative is not without foundation: working at an MBB firm generates substantial professional credentials and widely recognized opportunities given their prestigiousness in the field, and as established earlier, responsibility and challenging experiences can genuinely satisfy basic psychological needs (Martela et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The analytical point for this section is therefore not that the narrative is false, but that it is presented as entirely one-sided. The demands of the work are consistently positioned not as things being asked of the employee, but as things being done for them. Yet, the structural conditions of consulting work suggest that the same demands may simultaneously be experienced as a cost - a possibility that the framing forecloses, leaving no discursive space for the idea that there is a trade-off to be considered.

4.3.2 Intensity as Self-chosen

By consistently presenting the demands of consulting work as transformative and desirable, the discourse offers only a single way of understanding what it means to work in these environments - one in which intensity is opportunity, pressure is excitement, and responsibility is fulfilling. In doing so, the discourse reproduces what Lupu and Empson (2015) describe as the autonomy paradox: the tendency for professionals in high-performance environments to experience their overwork as self-chosen and describe demanding conditions as expressions of personal ambition rather than organizational pressure. This is evident in the employer branding material:

“At McKinsey, you’ll be in the room when the stakes are highest, working on CEOs’ make-or-break problems.” (McKinsey)

“You’ll be given more responsibility and entrusted to lead portions of the case.” (Bain)

“Personally, I occasionally work on the weekend during a busy period, but teams are not asked to stretch for something that is unreasonable. It’s almost always because we become so invested in the outcomes of our work that we want to make sure every ‘i’ is dotted and every ‘t’ is crossed.” (BCG)

By narrating intense work as something employees choose because they care rather than something the organization requires, the discourse establishes that intensity is something employees choose deliberately (Lupu & Empson, 2015). The BCG quote is particularly telling because it appears to reflect genuine internalization of exactly this kind - the employee is not defending the firm but narrating their own experience. Importantly, this internalization is self-reinforcing: when passionate overwork becomes the dominant way of narrating demanding conditions, it establishes an informal norm against which others measure themselves (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). The structural limits of autonomy are thus not only left unexamined - they are made difficult to recognize at all.

4.4 Constructing Meaning Through Impact

In contrast to the previous themes that reframe what the work entails, this theme operates at a different level, focusing on emphasizing the meaning of work. Across all three firms, the organization is presented not merely as a high-performing commercial entity but as a force driving positive impact in the world. Belonging to such an organization, the discourse implies, is

itself a source of meaning and wellbeing. The tension between performance and wellbeing is thus not resolved but moralized: the demands are not just acceptable, but worthy of bearing.

4.4.1 Making Work Meaningful

All three firms place strong emphasis on the idea that the work is not just professionally rewarding but offers the opportunity to contribute to making a positive impact:

“Our purpose: To help create positive, enduring change in the world.” (McKinsey)

“We’re driven by serving others and working alongside our clients and colleagues to solve some of the world’s toughest problems: from using artificial intelligence to helping support survivors of human-trafficking, to building a global tech platform to enable the distribution of emergency COVID-19 medical supplies.” (McKinsey)

“We help you see the world differently, discover opportunities you may never have imagined and achieve results that bridge what is with what can be.” (Bain)

“Working at BCG means helping to solve some of the world’s biggest problems - projects that involve trusting our instincts and thriving on acts of the imagination.” (BCG)

“At Bain, we strive to create a world where all people can live and thrive in healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities.” (Bain)

“We continue to amplify our societal impact, delivering positive outcomes in climate, education, and beyond.” (BCG)

The discourse invites the employees to identify with the firm’s moral character as a whole. This shifts the logic from “I make impact” to “I belong to an organization that makes impact”. The prosocial meaning offering is thus made structurally available to all employees regardless of what specific project they happen to be working on, bypassing the uneven distribution of directly impactful work within large commercial firms. Diversity and inclusion work reinforces this further, offering employees a supplementary and more direct source of prosocial experience through affinity groups, communities, and mentorships. Crucially, this remains available even if client work would be experienced as detached from any broader social purpose.

“We foster a supportive environment through a variety of networks dedicated to our people. These networks provide mentorship, build community, and cultivate a sense of belonging, empowering individuals to grow and reach their full potential.” (McKinsey)

“Our eight affinity groups and many office-led communities of support foster deep connections through social events, meaningful dialogues, and global opportunities.” (Bain)

“Being part of Pride@BCG has been life-changing. It’s made me feel celebrated and valued simply for who I am, which still feels unreal at times. Coming from an environment where being LGBTQ+ is often frowned upon, being able to walk into the office each day feeling safe and at ease is truly invaluable.” (BCG)

“These communities allow Bainies to connect over shared experiences and identities, often creating life-long relationships and support networks.” (Bain)

“Bring your perspective to a place where diverse backgrounds and teamwork fuel growth, better outcomes, and lasting connections. You’ll find vibrant communities and networks that offer support and belonging to help you thrive.” (McKinsey)

“We cultivate spaces that inspire, empower, and connect members and allies, fostering a culture of belonging.” (BCG)

While these initiatives exist and the experiences described are likely authentic - and may indeed be perceived as central and significant by those involved - the prominence they receive on corporate websites warrants analytical attention. Each firm has dedicated separate pages to these kinds of social sustainability commitments - yet, the time most MBB consultants spend on affinity groups, community building, and D&I work represents a relatively small share of their working lives, relative to the commercial client work that constitutes the core of consulting practice. This does not diminish the value of these experiences for those involved, but it does raise a question about proportionality: by foregrounding them so prominently, the firms frame them as central to the role - allowing a meaningful, nonetheless limited source of prosocial experience to shape the perception of work as a whole.

Beyond the issue with proportionality, the prosocial meaning offer rests on conditions that commercial consulting work cannot reliably guarantee. As the theoretical framework established, the wellbeing benefits of prosocial contribution depend on the act feeling voluntary, the impact being concrete and visible, and a genuine sense of connection to those being helped (Aknin et al., 2019). That said, the prosocial pathway to flourishing is real, but it depends on structural conditions that are not automatically guaranteed simply by framing the work as meaningful or impactful. What the employer branding material risks accomplishing is therefore not simply presenting the firm favorably, but obscuring a potential gap between espoused values and lived experience that candidates are not positioned to examine until they are already inside.

Taken together, the material examined in this section constructs a narrative in which working at the firm is itself a source of meaning and purpose. This connects directly to the eudaimonic dimension of wellbeing: by presenting the firm's work as genuinely impactful, the discourse invites prospective, as well as existing, employees to find meaning in working at the firm, and in turn, extract the wellbeing benefits that follows from that sense of purpose (Oishi et al., 2020). This narrative serves a dual purpose: beyond providing employees with a sense of purpose that makes the demands of the work feel meaningful, it also constructs the firm's moral identity and sustains its legitimacy as a responsible institution (Greenwood et al., 2011). These two functions are mutually reinforcing - external moral legitimacy lends the internal meaning-offer greater credibility, and employees who genuinely experience their work as impactful are more likely to reproduce that narrative outward. The competing logics are thus discursively rendered mutually reinforcing at the level of meaning.

4.4.2 Making Impact at Scale

The impact discourse extends further. The promise is not simply that the work will matter, but that it will matter at a significant scale - to millions of people, across industries, governments, and societies. This is often strategically communicated through the voice of employees, strengthening the credibility of the message, as earlier discussed in section 4.1.3.

"McKinsey offers a platform to affect the change I want to see in the world by helping design and implement transformation projects that touch the lives of millions." (McKinsey)

"Working at BCG means helping to solve some of the world's biggest problems - projects that involve trusting our instincts and thriving on acts of the imagination." (BCG)

"Our mission is to partner with the most innovative and high-impact organizations to develop and scale transformative solutions to the world's most important challenges." (Bain)

"Joining McKinsey means playing a role in some of the most important matters of our time - and contributing to our collective success." (McKinsey)

"At BCG, we partner with leading companies, organizations, and governments to drive lasting impact." (BCG)

"At Bain, our commitment to impact extends far beyond client work. Our employees actively contribute their time and expertise to sustainable impact - whether by strengthening nonprofits through volunteer consulting, gaining hands-on experience in social impact externships, or giving back to their local communities." (Bain)

The scale at which impact is framed does additional discursive work in relation to the demands of the work itself, further reinforcing the sense of meaning. If the problems being solved are among the world's most important, the demands appear not just acceptable but appropriate given the significance of the work. The demands are not made more bearable, they are reframed to feel worthy of bearing - dissolving the tension not by addressing working conditions but by elevating the significance of the work itself. This resonates somewhat with rhetorical legitimation (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), but operates at an earlier stage - rather than defending demanding conditions once questioned, the discourse preempts the challenge.

This framing also recruits the psychological richness dimension. The conditions of consulting work are presented not merely as intense but as extraordinarily varied and perspective-broadening, with opportunities to work across industries, at the intersection of business, government, and society, and engaging with global challenges. It is this variety and complexity of experience that, by the logic of psychological richness theory, constitutes a genuinely good life (Oishi et al., 2020).

4.5 The Discourse of Exceptionalism

Lastly, the discourse works to appeal to a certain audience, constructing an ideal candidate for whom the tension between high performance and wellbeing simply does not arise. Through consistent language of exceptionalism and identity, intensity is framed not as a cost to be managed but as a natural condition of flourishing, rendering the institutional complexity not invisible, but irrelevant for the intended audience.

4.5.1 *Constructing Identity Through Exceptionalism*

Across all three firms, a consistent narrative constructs employees not merely as talented or qualified, but as categorically exceptional - belonging to a rare and elite group of human beings:

"We look for the world's very best." (McKinsey)

"We hire people with unparalleled talents, abilities, and potential." (Bain)

"We look for exceptional people." (McKinsey)

“At BCG, you’ll work with exceptional people.” (BCG)

“It feels different to work with us because our people are unlike any other.” (Bain)

“We seek out people and clients who challenge themselves to be exceptional - and champion that spirit in others.” (Bain)

“You’ll also find a world-class benefits package designed for exceptional people.” (McKinsey)

The language is striking in how far it reaches beyond professional competence: McKinsey look for “the world’s very best”, Bain seek candidates with “unparalleled talents, abilities, and potential”, and the benefits package itself is described as designed for “exceptional people” - as if even the perks are tailored to a certain kind of person. The phrase “our people are unlike any other” is perhaps the most telling: it does not describe what employees *do* but what they *are*. The language of this discourse speaks directly to deeper senses of identity, self-worth, and recognition, which activates genuine wellbeing resources. Being told that one is among the world’s best draws on SDT’s need for competence - the fundamental psychological need to feel capable and recognized as such. Thus, these formulations carry real psychological weight: competence satisfaction is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of wellbeing, happiness and meaning in life (Martela et al., 2023). Equal emphasis falls on belonging to a community of equally exceptional peers. Exceptionalism is framed as a shared condition rather than an individual distinction. The appeal is not just that you will be acknowledged as exceptional, but that you will be surrounded by others who are too:

“Apply your skills alongside uniquely talented people in an environment where you’ll be supported along the way.” (Bain)

“At BCG, you’ll join a community of resourceful, diverse, and driven professionals who work collaboratively to achieve excellence.” (BCG)

“McKinsey alumni are unusually likely to become CEOs.” (McKinsey)

Through this, the discourse simultaneously activates the SDT need for relatedness, creating a particular kind of social offer: a group selective enough to confer status and large enough to provide genuine community (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This way, belonging is constructed through exclusivity rather than despite it and the high-performance culture itself becomes a source of social wellbeing. The relatedness offered is therefore qualitatively distinct from ordinary collegiality.

By constructing the prospective employee as categorically exceptional before they have even entered the organization, the firms offer a powerful form of anticipatory competence validation, one tied not to specific achievements but to identity itself. Yet, in doing so, the discourse may activate competence and relatedness in a way that quietly undermines autonomy. Genuine autonomy requires the freedom to assess one's own experience honestly - including the freedom to recognize when conditions feel costly. The satisfaction of two basic psychological needs is thus achieved partly at the expense of the third, producing a form of wellbeing that is structurally incomplete and potentially fragile (Martela et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

4.5.2 Normalizing Intensity Through Identity

The exceptionalism discourse also performs a specific function in relation to performance demands. Rather than simply acknowledging that expectations are extraordinary, the firms normalize them as the natural context for exceptional people. Across all three firms, the ideal candidate is consistently described as intellectual, curious and dedicated - someone for whom demanding work is not a cost but a natural source of fulfillment.

"We look for individuals that are intellectual, curious, analytical, and creative, who love solving problems and are able to lead." (Bain)

"They share curiosity, drive, and a habit of pushing past 'good enough' - in the classroom and beyond." (McKinsey)

"We seek out people and clients who challenge themselves to be exceptional - and champion that spirit in others." (Bain)

"What does impact look like at McKinsey? Dedication and passion. Confidence and curiosity. Hard and soft skills. Creating impact takes distinctive, driven individuals - eager to tackle challenges and push boundaries." (McKinsey)

"Solving our clients' most complex challenges takes more than smart thinking - it demands creativity, resilience, and adaptability." (BCG)

"A career at BCG quickly teaches you how to walk into a new situation (a new client, project, or topic) and find your footing. You get comfortable operating in ambiguity and helping others look at a problem from a new angle." (BCG)

By constructing a personality type for whom complexity, analytical challenge, and intellectual stretch are natural sources of energy, the firms present intensity as the desirable environment for

exceptional people rather than a condition imposed upon them. The psychological richness dimension of wellbeing gives this framing genuine empirical support: variety, novelty, and cognitive stretch are reliable contributors to flourishing (Oishi et al., 2020). The rhetorical move here, however, is specific: it presents the capacity to thrive under demanding conditions as a matter of identity rather than performance - something the person fundamentally is, rather than something they do. From the organization's perspective, this attracts those who are likely to internalize demanding conditions as expressions of personal ambition rather than organizational pressure - reproducing the autonomy paradox described earlier (Lupu & Empson, 2015).

5. Discussion

5.1 General Discussion

This study set out to examine how MBB firms discursively navigate institutional complexity between the competing logics of high performance and wellbeing in their employer branding. Drawing on Sandberg and Alvesson's (2011) concept of problematization, the study questioned an underlying assumption in institutional complexity research: competing logics must become visible before organizations respond to them. The analysis confirms that this assumption does not always hold. As shown in the analysis, a broadly consistent pattern emerged across all three firms: the tension between competing logics is not always managed after it surfaces, but dissolved before it can. This points to a discursive mechanism that established organizational responses - decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), selective coupling and reconciling (Pache & Santos, 2013), and rhetorical legitimation (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) - do not fully account for: one that operates upstream of recognition, where tension could become visible, but does not.

Two interconnected mechanisms produce this effect. The first works through strategic ambiguity and selective visibility, managing what is foregrounded and what is omitted until compatibility appears natural (5.1.1). The second dissolves tension at the level of who is being addressed, targeting an audience for whom the tension does not arise (5.1.2). Analyzed at an abstract level, these mechanisms suggest that management of institutional complexity may be more sophisticated and consequential than existing research has theorized. The discussion further examines the strategic function and risks of wellbeing emphasis itself (5.1.3), before asking

whether the observed persistence of tension may be a strategic balancing act rather than a communicative shortcoming (5.1.4).

Taken together, the four sections suggest that the management of institutional complexity in employer branding is neither straightforwardly strategic nor simply communicative. The discourse does not merely present a version of organizational reality - it constructs it by speaking to a specific audience, shaping their professional identity, and ultimately determining how that reality will be experienced. The implications of this, both theoretical and practical, are explored in section 5.2.

5.1.1 Making Tension Disappear: Strategic Ambiguity and Selective Visibility

The first mechanism operates not by resolving the tension but by preventing it from becoming visible in the first place - a dynamic that existing frameworks in institutional complexity research are not designed to capture. The most widely established responses to competing logics tend to share the same underlying assumption: a tension must become visible before organizations respond to them (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Pache & Santos, 2013; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). The present analysis confirms that this assumption does not always hold, and reveals a dynamic operating at an earlier stage.

In particular, rhetorical legitimation operates through discursive work but does so in response to a contest that has already become visible. At the surface level, the use of vague language identified in section 4.1.1 of the analysis, as well as the illusion of compatibility identified in section 4.2.2, may resemble what Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) term institutional vocabularies. However, they differ in a fundamental respect. Rather than defending compatibility in response to a visible contest, the mechanisms we have observed operate to prevent the tension from becoming visible in the first place. Structural conditions that would complicate the wellbeing narrative are systematically left outside the frame and wellbeing is consistently presented as a condition for performance rather than something employees deserve in its own right. Wellbeing theory itself is also selectively deployed - emphasizing the dimensions most compatible with high-performance demands while downplaying the ones most threatened by the structural conditions of the work (Diener et al., 2018; Oishi et al., 2020). None of these moves are accidental; together they work to preempt the tension rather than address it.

This is consistent with Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000) argument that language does not merely respond to organizational reality but actively constitutes it. What the present analysis adds is that language can constitute not just a particular framing of tension but its disappearance altogether - shaping the discursive conditions under which certain questions can and cannot be asked. How much room exists for this kind of navigation depends, however, on the internal composition of the competing logic itself. Wellbeing's multidimensionality makes selective recruitment particularly available because the omitted dimensions do not register as omissions to the audience encountering them. This extends prior research on strategic selectivity in employer branding by showing how such selectivity is enabled by the internal complexity of the specific logic being deployed (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018).

5.1.2 Making Tension Irrelevant: Prosocial Meaning and Construction of the Ideal Candidate

The analysis also reveals a mechanism that operates, not at the level of what is visible or invisible in the communication, but at the level of who is being addressed - dissolving the tension by targeting an audience for whom it does not arise in the first place.

Two moves work together to produce this effect. The first operates through meaning: by anchoring flourishing in the firm's collective moral identity, all client work is folded into a unified narrative of societal impact. The second operates through identity: by portraying the ideal candidate as someone who thrives under pressure and experiences intensity as growth, the discourse functions as a self-selection mechanism, attracting those for whom high-performance demands feel like a natural condition of flourishing. The emphasis on excellence is thus better understood as a selection mechanism than as elitism per se. Rather than aiming for broad appeal, the discourse prioritizes resonance with a specific audience: high achievers for whom status, recognition, and performance-based validation are genuine sources of self-fulfillment. For this group, the language of exclusivity is not deterring - it is affirming, reinforcing identity and signaling that the organization is an arena suited to those who derive meaning from sustained high performance and purposeful impact, while making others self-select out. What connects these two moves is a shared emphasis on alignment with the firm's underlying values. It is this dual alignment that renders the tension between performance and wellbeing categorically irrelevant for the intended audience. The institutional complexity is not hidden - it simply does not arise.

Prior research has theorized the internalization of high-performance identity primarily as an internal organizational process occurring after entry, in which individuals come to identify with organizational norms and self-regulate accordingly, experiencing demanding conditions as expressions of personal ambition rather than institutional pressure (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Lupu & Empson, 2015). The present analysis suggests that the shaping of professional identity may begin earlier - initiated already when candidates first encounter employer branding material. Candidates drawn to both the exceptionalism narrative and the meaning offer begin constructing a professional identity that reflects these dual expectations as soon as they engage with the employer branding material - striving to be seen not only as high performers but as morally grounded individuals driven by purpose. Employer branding thus emerges not merely as a recruitment tool, but as a site where professional identity is actively shaped in advance of organizational entry. This carries consequences for the individual that extend well beyond recruitment, extending Alvesson and Robertson's (2006) research.

Once internalized, the exceptionalism frame places a hidden demand of invulnerability. When high performance is reframed as an expression of who one *is* rather than what they *do*, it becomes difficult to experience the pressure of the work as something worth questioning. For those who have been selected as among the world's best, struggling becomes evidence of not belonging - burning out or leaving feels like personal failure rather than a reasonable response to demanding conditions. The structural limits of autonomy are made, not merely invisible, but psychologically costly to recognize. In SDT terms, the satisfaction of competence and relatedness needs - activated through the exceptionalism discourse - is achieved partly at the expense of autonomy, the freedom to assess one's own experience honestly and to recognize when conditions are harmful (Martela et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The exceptionalism narrative thus resolves institutional complexity not by genuinely aligning wellbeing and high performance, but by constructing an identity for which acknowledging the tension between them feels like a form of self-betrayal.

5.1.3 Wellbeing Emphasis as Legitimacy Work and Its Risks

The emphasis on wellbeing in MBB employer branding serves a strategic function that extends beyond talent acquisition. It can be understood as legitimacy work with an institutional signal directed at an audience broader than prospective candidates alone.

All three firms carry a well-established public identity as high-performing and professionally prestigious organizations - associations so widely understood among prospective candidates that they require little active reinforcement. One interpretation could be that the growing emphasis on wellbeing in their employer branding is a form of legitimacy work (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005): an attempt to complement these performance associations by signaling care for employee health, balance, and personal wellbeing, and thereby align with broader societal expectations. This alignment sustains credibility not only with prospective employees but with clients, regulators, and the wider public, who together constitute the institutional environment within which organizational legitimacy is reproduced (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Yet, this strategy is structurally constrained due to varying social recognition of the different dimensions of wellbeing. Traditional aspects of wellbeing - sleep, physical activity, and balance - are widely recognized as wellbeing resources (Richards et al., 2015; Shin & Kim, 2018), whereas more recently theorized dimensions of wellbeing, such as psychological richness and eudaimonic wellbeing, are not yet as established (Oishi et al., 2020). This means that the dimensions most compatible with high-performance consulting work are also those least legible to the audience the legitimacy signal is directed at, while the conventional dimensions that would be immediately recognized as markers of employee care are those most undermined by the structural conditions of the profession. Firms are therefore caught between two risks: emphasizing traditional wellbeing risks accusations of hypocrisy given the structural realities of consulting work (Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016), while downplaying them risks signaling indifference to employee care. Organizations may therefore feel pressured to maintain references to traditional wellbeing narratives even when their actual value proposition rests more heavily on psychological richness and eudaimonic wellbeing - dimensions that are theoretically valid but less socially legible (Oishi et al., 2020). That said, the vagueness that characterizes wellbeing communication across all three firms should not necessarily be viewed as a rhetorical failure but a strategic response.

This points to a broader observation about the limits of discursive navigation under institutional complexity. How much room firms have to navigate a tension depends not only on their strategic choices but on the social conditions that determine what can be credible communicated (Greenwood et al., 2011) - including the degree to which advances in wellbeing research have

been absorbed into broader societal understanding. If the less recognized dimensions of wellbeing would have been more widely established, the discursive space available for navigating institutional complexity would arguably be wider. In that case, firms could draw more openly on the aspects of wellbeing most compatible with high performance, without risking legitimacy loss.

5.1.4 The Persistence of Tension as Strategic Positioning

While the incomplete resolution of the tension between the competing logics risks appear as inconsistent, the persisting tension could be understood as a deliberate balancing act - one that serves the firms' positioning in ways that full resolution would undermine.

By refraining from fully resolving the tension or explicitly prioritizing one logic over the other, each firm retains flexibility in how it presents itself to different audiences and preserves the ability to draw on both logics simultaneously. At first glance, this resembles selective coupling (Pache & Santos, 2013); however, selective coupling operates at the level of organizational practice. What is observed here operates at the level of discourse - the firms do not structurally resolve the tension, but rhetorically maintain both logics in play simultaneously. Partial endorsement of the wellbeing logic aligns the firms with broader societal expectations, while the absence of a full commitment to the wellbeing logic allows each firm to preserve its core identity as an elite, high-performance organization. Prioritizing wellbeing to the same extent as performance would risk weakening the distinctiveness of this identity, particularly in an industry context where professional prestige remains closely tied to exceptional performance (Lupu & Empson, 2015; Meriläinen et al., 2004).

This invites a more fundamental question: whether it would even be desirable for these firms to strive for - or credibly signal - equal commitment to wellbeing and high performance. Extending the discussion on selective appeal in section 5.1.2, elite professional service firms and the candidates they target are engaged in an implicit process of mutual sorting. Here, performance orientation functions as a meaningful signal on both sides of the employment relationship. A candidate who prioritizes comfort and wellbeing above all else is, in all likelihood, not the profile such firms seek; likewise, these firms do not offer the environment in which that candidate would thrive. From this perspective, full commitment to wellbeing on par with

performance may be neither achievable nor desirable, given the nature of these firms and the implicit contract they offer prospective employees. The firms may therefore strategically maintain a degree of tension between the competing logics (Greenwood et al., 2011) to enable selective appeal to individuals drawn to high performance, and simultaneously make sure to be sufficiently aligned with contemporary wellbeing discourse. Accordingly, the firms' apparent inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to fully align competing logics should not be seen as a communicative shortcoming. Rather, it may be more accurately understood as a deliberate balancing act.

5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to institutional complexity research by identifying a discursive mechanism connecting directly to the assumption this study set out to problematize. Prior research has theorized how organizations respond to competing logics once the tension becomes visible - through decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), selective coupling and reconciling (Pache & Santos, 2013), and rhetorical legitimation (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). However, the analysis confirms that the dynamic may occur earlier. Rather than managing a visible tension between wellbeing and high performance, firms structure their communication in ways that prevent it from becoming visible in the first place - a pre-recognition logic in which tension is dissolved rather than managed. This, in turn, suggests that prior institutional complexity research captured neither the full timing nor the full range of ways in which organizations may respond to competing logics.

A further contribution concerns the multidimensionality of wellbeing and the possibility to selectively emphasize certain aspects of the logic being deployed. While employer branding research shows that organizations strategically foreground certain attributes (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018), this study develops this further by showing that the room available to selectively emphasize certain aspects of a logic is dependent on the internal structure of that logic itself. In this context, the different dimensions of wellbeing, and their unequal social recognition, function both as a resource and a constraint.

Beyond these theoretical contributions, the findings carry practical implications for both firms and prospective employees. For MBB firms and the broader field of elite professional services,

the findings highlight a trade-off between the appeal of ambitious wellbeing claims and the credibility risks they carry. The incomplete resolution of competing logics need not be understood as a communicative failure - maintaining productive tension between performance and wellbeing may serve the firms' dual positioning. However, the mechanisms identified raise concerns about transparency. Firms should consider whether their communication adequately equips candidates to make genuinely informed decisions, particularly when employer branding constructs ideal identities that make institutional pressure psychologically costly to recognize. For prospective candidates, the analysis suggests that employer branding in high-performance environments may obscure important tensions. This highlights the value of critically examining employer branding material, attending to what is omitted as much as to what is foregrounded, and distinguishing between wellbeing as a structural commitment in difference to merely a discursive resource.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

This thesis examined how MBB firms discursively navigate institutional complexity between competing logics of high performance and wellbeing in their employer branding. Through qualitative text analysis and thematic coding of career-facing content across the corporate websites of McKinsey, BCG, and Bain, the study identified five discursive themes through which this navigation unfolds: the construction of the wellbeing discourse, the instrumentalization of wellbeing, the fusion of competing logics, the construction of meaning through impact, and the discourse of exceptionalism.

In answer to the research question, the analysis reveals a broadly consistent pattern across all three firms: the tension between competing logics is not always managed after it surfaces, but often dissolved before it can - a dynamic the study theorizes as a pre-recognition logic. As developed in the discussion, strategic ambiguity and selective visibility prevent the tension from becoming visible. Additionally, the discourse constructs an ideal candidate for whom the tension does not arise in the first place. Beyond these mechanisms, the emphasis on wellbeing functions as legitimacy work, and the persisting tension may serve a strategic function for dual positioning.

The study makes two theoretical contributions. First, it advances institutional complexity research by identifying a pre-recognition logic. Second, it contributes to employer branding research by showing how the multidimensionality of wellbeing functions as both a resource and a constraint for discursive navigation. The findings also carry practical implications for firms seeking to communicate wellbeing commitment credibly and for prospective employees encountering employer branding material of this kind.

6.2 Limitations & Future Research

First, the analysis is limited to publicly available career-facing content on the corporate websites of the three firms. While this material constitutes a relevant site for examining employer branding communication, it reflects only one channel through which organizational identity is constructed and communicated. Other channels, such as social media, recruitment events, and internal communication, may involve different or more nuanced dynamics that fall outside the scope of this study.

A further limitation relates to researcher positionality. Both researchers have been previously exposed to the firms studied through career fairs, company events, and personal networks, which may have shaped the analytical lens. This risk is inherent to qualitative research more broadly, where interpretation is inseparable from the researcher's own perspective and prior experiences. Throughout the process, both researchers sought to manage this by consistently grounding interpretations in the empirical material and discussing analytical decisions collaboratively.

Furthermore, while the three MBB firms represent theoretically relevant cases as institutional norm-setters (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the study does not claim statistical generalizability. The findings are theoretically suggestive and the extent to which these mechanisms apply to the industry more broadly as well as to other high-performance environments should be explored further.

Additionally, the analysis is limited to the level of discourse. The potential gap between espoused values and lived experience remains beyond the scope of this study. Future research using interviews or ethnographic methods could examine how employees and candidates experience the conditions and tensions identified, in practice. Particular attention could be given to whether

wellbeing offerings are practically usable, or whether their uptake is constrained by informal norms.

Moreover, longitudinal studies could examine whether the discursive patterns identified in this study remain stable over time or evolve in response to organizational culture, regulatory pressures, or labor market expectations. Future research could further explore the conditions under which institutional tensions become visible, and how evolving societal understandings of wellbeing may affect what organizations can credibly communicate.

7. Appendix

7.1 Disclosure of AI-Tools Use

In accordance with the AI guidelines of the Stockholm School of Economics, this appendix outlines how AI tools were used in the writing of this thesis. Four questions are addressed:

(1) What AI tools have been used and how?

In this thesis, we used OpenAI's ChatGPT and Claude (Anthropic) as supportive tools during the writing and revision process. Its use was limited to language and style assistance, including improving clarity, refining sentence structure, and suggesting alternative formulations of ideas we had already developed.

The tools were also occasionally used to comment on draft sections and highlight unclear or inconsistent phrasing. All substantive content, analytical reasoning, and interpretations were developed independently by the authors. No AI tools were used in the collection, coding, or analysis of empirical material.

(2) In what ways have these tools contributed to increasing the quality of the thesis?

The use of AI tools contributed primarily to improving the clarity and readability of the thesis. By providing suggestions for language refinement, sentence structure, and flow, ChatGPT and Claude helped us express our arguments in a more precise and coherent manner.

The tools also assisted in identifying unclear phrasing, generating more concise alternative formulations where condensing the text was needed. Importantly, these contributions were limited to linguistic and stylistic improvements and did not affect the analytical content or interpretations, which remain entirely our own.

(3) What potential risks were found using AI and what measures were taken to reduce these risks?

The main risks identified were unintended shifts in meaning, overly generic language suggestions, and over-reliance on AI-generated phrasing. There was also a risk that the use of AI could affect the authors' voice and academic integrity.

To mitigate these risks, all AI-generated suggestions were treated as supportive input only. All text was carefully reviewed, edited, and rewritten by us to ensure accuracy, clarity, and alignment with our intended meaning. We avoided using AI for generating substantive content and limited its use to local language and style suggestions. This ensured that all arguments, structure, and interpretations remained entirely our own.

4) What are the insights gained from using AI tools in the thesis writing process?

The use of AI tools showed that their value lies primarily in supporting clarity and precision, rather than replacing analytical work. Formulating prompts and evaluating suggestions required us to be explicit about our own arguments, which in turn sharpened our writing. That said, human judgment remained central. All interpretations, theoretical connections, and analytical decisions relied on our own close reading and understanding of the material.

Overall, we found that AI works best as a complement rather than a shortcut. It can support routine tasks and improve language, but critical thinking, interpretation, and academic rigor must remain firmly in the hands of the researchers.

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