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## **In search of consensus**

### **The role of accounting in the definition and reproduction of dominant interests**

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This paper examines the role of consensus in the reproduction of dominant interests. Consensus building is often considered a central value for rational decision making and management. However, more than a democratic confrontation of vantage points, the quest for consensus constitutes a way to deny asymmetries in positions of power, i.e., to discourage conflict and resistance in order to promote dominating interests (and to silence others) as if they were collective. Our main argument is that accounting and consensus play central roles in processes of definition and the reproduction of dominant interests. Precisely, we argue that accounting acts to promote some stakes and strategies (and silence others), as if they were collective and disinterested, which makes them more powerful in debates that deny struggles and asymmetries in positions of power, as well as increases legitimacy by creating an illusion of participation. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of symbolic domination helps clarify how powerful actors secure influence and consolidate positions while avoiding contestation. A field study documents the intersection of two fields of knowledge, marketing and accounting, that compete to monopolize the definition of value and the ability to speak for the organisation. Accounting produces symbolic violence to legitimise the reproduction of asymmetrical positions of power by shaping what is consensual and what is not.

**Keywords:** consensus, symbolic domination, brand valuation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of consensus has gained considerable popularity in both organisations and conceptualisations of managerial work, and the idea that consensus building should be a central value for management is a powerful and appealing one. To assert that management is about decision-making that results from the confrontation of different viewpoints, which leads to a collegial choice, associates such management with all appearances of rationality. A confrontation to build consensual positions also forms the basis for most theories of democratic political systems (Brown, 2009). Conversely, presenting a position as the result of a consensus effort provides a powerful rhetoric when trying to convince that “there is no alternative,” as illustrated by the notion of “Washington consensus.” Rational, democratic, and irresistible, the concept of consensus offers a solid basis for a powerful discourse. How could anyone be against consensus, or “general agreement,” about a set of ideas deemed to be shared by everyone?

Critical studies challenge this view, because it denies asymmetries in power positions (Cooper and Hopper, 1987, 2007). The positive value of consensus loses strength with the recognition that compromises always favour one side over another. From this perspective, “consensus” is the result of a compromise reached when certain groups impose their interests on others. Dominant groups set the rules of the game, such that other groups participate in the pursuit of dominant interests, possibly unknowingly or in the belief that they are pursuing their own interests. The quest for consensus thus relates to processes of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 1976, 1980) and the manufacture of consent (Burawoy, 1979) within organisations and society.

The discourse of consensus denies positional conflicts but also affects the power struggles among organisational groups. By delegitimizing any decision perceived as too obviously interested, consensus requires that to be legitimate, a choice must appear disinterested and oriented toward organisational rather than individual goals. Dominant groups can then exploit the vague notions of organisational goals to further their interests while maintaining an illusion of consensus. Indeed, the notion that managers are rational decision makers rests on the idea that everyone works toward shared objectives, not against one another.

Studies examining the introduction of budgets in hospitals (Preston et al., 1992), business planning in museums (Oakes et al., 1998), new funding mechanisms in education (Neu, 2006) and comprehensive auditing in national parks (Everett, 2003) all highlight accounting and control technologies as elements of ideological projects that favour the

interests of some at the expense of others but simultaneously create rhetorics of disinterestedness and feelings of collegiality. Accounting devices can change organisational and institutional logics by introducing new categories of appreciation and perception that appear neutral and technical, even as they influence the processes for constructing legitimate language and meaning and thus organisational members' understanding of their work and attributions. Accounting also presents financial matters as shared and collective, relegating other languages to more specific and specialised usages. In this sense, accounting devices change the distribution of power, even as their interested nature remains largely unseen. In turn, actors who lose power are unlikely (or less likely) to engage in overt conflict and resistance. Accounting thus manufactures consent within organisations (Ezzamel et al., 2008) by concealing the interests of dominant actors behind a discourse of consensus.

Prior literature has increased understanding of how some actors use accounting to change dominant logics and practices and exert their domination without triggering much resistance. Yet accounting also can be implicated in the reproduction of previous practices and power asymmetries. Although power, domination and interest are important themes, the issue of power position reproduction has not received sufficient attention. Studying the links between accounting and the manufacture of consensus might improve understanding of the mechanisms that powerful actors use to secure their influence and consolidate their positions.

This reproduction relates to the notion that powerful actors use accounting to portray their strategies as consensual and disqualify others' as interested, which indicates the exertion of symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1980). With this study, we examine processes of social reproduction in an empirical setting to document the symbolic violence of accounting and critically assess the power-related effects of consensus. In particular, we describe the mechanisms by which accounting produces consensus, reproduces positional asymmetries and secures the domination of specific interests. To address these issues, we analyse a case in which two populations appear powerful, but one uses accounting to undermine the symbolic resources of the other. This does not trigger any conflict or resistance from the population losing symbolic power though. By examining how one powerful actor can use accounting to monopolise power positions in its organisation, we contribute to research into how accounting influences the definition of what is valuable or not and designates the main stakes to be pursued.

Empirically, we study the consequences of intersections between two fields of knowledge by considering the introduction of a financial measure of value created through

marketing operations. We thus illustrate how accounting and marketing compete to define the concept of value. We also argue that discourses of consensus produce durable asymmetries in positions of power by discouraging open conflict and resistance. Finally, we highlight the processes by which powerful actors relate accounting devices to commonsense discourses to define what organisational goals and interests are or should be, to legitimise the reproduction of patterns of domination.

In the next section, we review literature on the symbolic power of accounting to highlight how accounting might influence individual subjectivity and representations, as well as create or change domination patterns within organisations and fields. We then present a case study in which two fields of knowledge intersect and actors claim that their daily work consists of making decisions through consensus, after having confronted different viewpoints. The analysis aims to clarify the links among accounting, consensus and symbolic violence to contribute to a better understanding of social reproduction mechanisms.

## **2. ACCOUNTING, SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE AND THE REPRODUCTION OF DOMINANT INTERESTS**

In highlighting the links among accounting, the discourse of consensus and symbolic violence processes, we show that accounting articulates categories of perception and appreciation to enable production of both a shared definition of reality (consensus) and a system of classifications and judgments about what is valued or not. Often perceived as neutral or collegial, this system of distinctions actually favours the interests of some at the expense of others, often without triggering conflict or resistance. In line with prior research (Everett, 2003; Neu, 2006; Neu et al., 2006; Oakes et al., 1998), we use Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisation of symbolic violence to understand and theorise about this hidden power.

Literature on accounting and symbolic violence combine to suggest that accounting, as a system of classification, exerts symbolic violence by establishing a language that favours dominant representations, a set of distinctions that create power asymmetries and devices perceived as objective. Several authors thus argue that accounting controls work subtly, through language and the construction and use of knowledge. Oakes et al. (1998) show that the introduction of business planning within museums in Alberta instilled a more commercial vision of their mission and a shift to large-scale production. As the authors put it, business planning "provides and sanctions legitimate forms of discourse and language and thus serves as a mechanism of knowledge that produces new understandings of the organization" (Oakes et al., 1998, p. 258). By promoting new vocabularies and assigning specific empirical content

to abstract concepts, museum managers monopolised the “legitimate right to name” things and events. These struggles over definitions are not neutral; changing positions of power relate to strategies to enforce “authoritative definitions” of contested concepts (Everett, 2003). Significant concepts then become “sites of struggle” in the battle to monopolise the legitimate right to name, and accounting vocabularies encourage changes in interpretive schemes, discourses and practices (Hopwood, 1987; Neu, 2006; Oakes et al., 1998).

Language and symbolic systems are instruments of not only knowledge and communication but also domination. They articulate taken-for-granted and immediate categories of perception that contribute to the conservation and reproduction of social order by building an arbitrary consensus, such as associating oriented definitions of reality with appearances of objective necessity (Bourdieu, 1980; see also Everett, 2002, p. 58). Thus powerful actors use accounting to create and specify meaningful categories and enforce their own logic as consensual and universal, such that they monopolise the access to legitimate instruments of expression.

Changing categories of perception and schemes of interpretation further means altering the principles of appreciation (Bourdieu, 1972, 1979, 1980). By specifying what can be documented and what can be ignored, accounting constructs “the seeable” and “the sayable” (Oakes et al., 1998) and separates what is important from what is not. As a symbolic system, accounting is thus a technology of distinction that defines the criteria for establishing value and judgement.

Changing these criteria means changing the valuations of the positions within a setting (Oakes et al., 1998), because they frame the rules of the game by designating the objectives that members must pursue to gain legitimacy, prestige or power (Bourdieu, 1980). Symbolic power relates to the ability to define legitimate classifications and enforce specific evaluation criteria (Everett, 2002; Oakes et al., 1998), such that various actors support “competing hierarchies of classification, in which power structures are defined by struggles over criteria of legitimacy” (Suddaby et al., 2007, p. 345).

Actors also seek to define the types of capital most valued by organisations or fields. In each setting, specific criteria designate the resources necessary to reach prestigious positions. The distinction of types of capital influences actors’ strategies and possibilities by focusing their feel for the game (*illusio*) on specific stakes and interests (Bourdieu, 1977). One group can dominate an organisation or field, not only by appropriating all its resources but also by designating legitimate distinction criteria and defining stakes in such a way that all strategies

are consistent with the pursuit of specific interests. This dominance offers means to ensure that one's own resources are those that lead to prestige and power. In other words, dominant groups specify the forms of legitimacy and prestige and thus monopolise the means of symbolic capital creation and accumulation (Bourdieu, 1976, 1980, 1992). For example, by setting specific distinction criteria and translating other forms of capital into monetary values, accounting exerts symbolic power and redefines domination patterns, so dominant groups can use accounting to “establish monopoly over the mechanisms of the field's reproduction and the type of power effective in it” (Everett, 2002, p. 60).

This conceptualisation of symbolic domination reveals what Bourdieu calls the reproduction of elites (or more generally, of dominant interests) and thus the stability of asymmetries in power positions (see also Malsch et al., 2011). By defining one “species” of capital as the most valued type, a group can influence the structures of capital distribution and enforce its own resources as the most important, rewarding or legitimate. Dominating groups can define what may be converted into symbolic capital and designate the distinction criteria that suit their own interests, which guarantees the reproduction of the *status quo* and a consolidation of domination patterns. Cooper et al. (2005, p. 376) call it “the power to name capital.” This symbolic domination ensures its own reproduction, regardless of individual intentionality or reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1980), by transforming specific private interests (of dominant groups) into “collective interests” that get perceived as “universal” (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980, 1994) and consensual. Principles claiming universal validity in turn serve as symbolic weapons in the struggles to define legitimate interests (Bourdieu, 1977; Neu et al., 2001).

Whittle and Mueller (2011) show for example that stakes and accounts gain legitimacy when perceived as “out-there” or beyond self-interest. Power and violence become symbolic and legitimate when they appear disinterested (Bourdieu, 1972, 1976). In turn, it is possible to defend a position by presenting others, not oneself, as interested, because then others' assertions “can be discredited and discounted by referring to the other person's *personal stake and agenda* (e.g. as biased, with a vested interest, etc.)” (Whittle and Mueller, 2011, p. 420). What appears to represent the consensus gains power and legitimacy; that which is deemed outside the consensus becomes interested and more easily criticised. Accounting participates in the definition of what gets designated interested versus consensual. By introducing new vocabularies and associating various notions with specific monetary definitions and measures, it redefines the stakes to be valued and the interests to be pursued; accordingly, it designates what can be turned into symbolic capital and how, such that it participates in the creation or

consolidation of elites and their reproduction. Accounting thereby constitutes both a stake and an instrument in a constant struggle for symbolic domination.

The main consequence of symbolic domination is to produce an unequal distribution of capital while legitimising this production (Everett, 2003). Violence, power and domination are not recognised as such when they are enclosed and institutionalised within symbolic systems (Bourdieu, 1977), so they contribute to a tacit reproduction of relations of domination (Golsorkhi and Huault, 2006; Malsch et al., 2011). Accounting participates in such masking of power issues (*rappports de force*) behind knowledge issues (*rappports de sens*) since, as other systems of classification, it is perceived as purely scientific, apolitical and technical (Oakes et al., 1998). The conversion of conflicting relations into forms of symbolic violence transforms arbitrary asymmetries into legitimate relations of authority and shifts *de facto* differences into officially recognised distinctions (Bourdieu, 1976), while silencing alternative voices within consensus. Powerful actors can use symbolic violence to gain dominance but still claim neutrality (Everett, 2003). This symbolic violence then produces asymmetrical consensus by supporting both positional power and a feeling of collegiality.

Symbolic power thus is enacted with the complicity of those who cannot see that they are exercising or being subjected to it (Bourdieu, 1976, 1977, 1980; Everett, 2002; Oakes et al., 1998). Bourdieu explains misrecognition with the notion that people embody social structures within dispositions that narrow what people feel they can or should do or believe. The notions of *habitus* and practical knowledge explain why people do not always perceive distinction and reproduction phenomena and why some practices and representations support dominant interests without constituting any (conscious) obedience to rules (Bourdieu, 1980).

Accounting can influence the production of consensual *habitus* through two distinct, reinforcing phenomena. First, *habitus* can be more or less adjusted to the logic of an organisation or field, which influences one's ability to accumulate symbolic capital. Second, *habitus* encourages the perception of practices that will be positively sanctioned by others as reasonable and best adjusted to the logic of a setting. Both phenomena explain why groups that lose influence do not resist change. The discourse of consensus, by disqualifying struggles as irrelevant and unreasonable, produces *habitus* that discourages dominated groups from resisting the reproduction of dominant interests. By designating consensual stakes and legitimate instruments for use in symbolic struggles, accounting shapes the perceptions of what is reasonable, or not, so that the dominant groups' *habitus* appears better suited for capital accumulation than others'.



In summary, symbolic domination legitimises arbitrary relations and positions of power by producing violence made invisible because it is euphemised. Accounting then redefines legitimate forms of capital and shapes *habitus*. Of course, even if accounting produces consensus, practices do not converge towards a unique configuration following an inevitable process of universalisation. Therefore, we analyse the articulation of accounting, consensus and symbolic domination in a specific setting to understand the processes of social reproduction. Specifically, we study how one group uses accounting to appropriate the mechanisms of symbolic domination, change the structures of capital distribution and sources of symbolic capital accumulation and reproduce the conditions for its domination, masked by a discourse of consensus.

### **3. EMPIRICAL STUDY**

This research entails a qualitative field study carried out at an international consumer goods company, the Globalmarket Group.<sup>1</sup> The case material was collected through a series of interviews related to the application of international accounting standards. We set out initially to determine whether modifications in the accounting framework had repercussions for management tools and operational management in place. In particular, did international accounting regulations have repercussions for the management of intangibles? We opted to focus on brands as a specific set of intangibles that emerged as strategic, then set out to find a company that managed a broad range of brands, some but not all of which were being capitalised. Globalmarket emerged as a particularly appropriate choice in this respect.

We interviewed members of various functions in the organisation, including management accounting and marketing, who worked in different entities in the French division of the group, as well as members from each business unit and headquarters. We asked broad questions about their daily work, the kind of measurements they used and their work relations with people inside and outside their department or team. All participants spontaneously mentioned “brands,” not products; we also asked questions about their perception of what constitutes “brand value.” The financial value of brands quickly emerged as an important subject, with various understandings of how to define and measure it. The topics in later interviews shifted from accounting standards to “monitoring the financial value of brands.” We also interviewed four designated brand valuation experts (an external auditor and three members of consulting firms specialising in brand valuation).

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<sup>1</sup> To respect the anonymity of the participants, all names and company identifiers have been changed.

We thus conducted 46 semi-structured interviews between 2004 and 2007, which each lasted from 45 to 120 minutes. All interviews were fully recorded and transcribed; they produced a volume of approximately 650 pages with 59 hours of interviews. Certain informants were interviewed more than once, which allowed us to document changes taking place in the organisation, as well as clarify issues that emerged as the field study progressed. Obtaining convergent discourses from the same person, interviewed several years apart by different researchers asking questions about different issues, also strengthened our confidence in the empirical findings.

Our data analysis is informed by Bourdieu's conceptualisation of symbolic violence. We thus identify what is valued or not within the company, then trace the antecedents and consequences of the introduction of a new "brand value" measurement to understand the links among the discourse of consensus, symbolic violence processes and accounting.

### **3.1. A GROUP ORGANISED AROUND ITS BRANDS**

Globalmarket is an international group specialising in consumer goods. To sell products in 170 countries around the world, it employs 163,000 staff worldwide and more than 4,000 employees in France (where the study took place). In 2009, its overall turnover amounted to €39.8 billion. Its primary strategy focuses on brands with leading positions in their markets and aims to strengthen these positions through major marketing investments. Globalmarket France consists of three divisions, following broad product line categories, each of which encompasses multiple "business units." A single business unit relates to one brand or a set of brands that belong to the same product category. Business units in turn comprise business teams that gather representatives from marketing, sales, finance and logistics functions.

Within Globalmarket, one particularly legitimate version of capital thus is associated with the "brand" concept, which influences the firm's internal structure, external communication and strategy formulation. Thus the brand concept shapes the perceptions of employees of their business—all the persons interviewed described the company as a set of brands. This focus offers a link to a discourse of consensus too. The persons interviewed, regardless of their professional background, asserted that they were working toward a common objective: brand building. Although this theme was not included in our questions, most interviewees also mentioned that Globalmarket was oriented toward a "culture of consensus," as made particularly visible by the "business teams" organisation. Through marketing actions—whether strategic innovative creations, commercialisation or everyday customer relationship management—brands grow stronger, which leads to the accumulation

of symbolic capital. However, Globalmarket's structure does not put a powerful marketing and sales division at the forefront. On the contrary, its structure depends on hybrid entities in which a "brand manager," in charge of the commercial success of a given brand, and the "category manager," responsible for relations with retailers, interact with "business partners," that is representatives of financial management divisions.<sup>2</sup> Choices thus occur through interactions and discussions among representatives with various areas of expertise. They offer a material representation of the symbolism of rational decision making that results from a confrontation of different viewpoints, leading to a collegial choice.

Although the Globalmarket Group is structured around a brand concept, the financial viewpoint is never excluded from operational decision making. An accountant is embedded in each business team, with influence recognised by the brand managers, as Laurent's statement reveals:

In our firm, management accounting is omnipresent because of all the business monitoring, because every month we redo our sales forecasts for the year to be sure that we are in line with our forecasts, and our expenditure forecasts, because if for one reason or another we are no longer in line with our sales forecasts, it means that we'll have lower turnover and therefore lower profit margins and so, if we want to deliver profits, we have to cut our investments and it is management accounting that supervises this, through reporting, so that in the end the shareholders are happy. (Laurent, brand manager)

This quote indicates how a brand manager, whose role is to bring products to market and manage marketing plans, spontaneously uses a financial vocabulary. His discourse reveals his focus on product profit margins, not only his brand's turnover or market share. He equally considers his goal to be to "make shareholders happy," not just making customers or consumers happy. The managers interviewed all similarly emphasized the importance of management accountants in the business teams, which exemplified the attention they draw to the accountant's standpoint. Both accountants and operational managers highlight the presence of a strong financial culture.

Integrated into operational teams, management accountants increase their colleagues' awareness and mastery of accounting notions and principles. This shared language favours a sense of common perceptions and appreciations. However, even if operational managers know finance as well as accountants command marketing concepts, we should not conclude that this scenario constitutes a form of symmetry. Integrated into business teams, accountants

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<sup>2</sup> In the remainder of this article, we use the general term "accountants" to refer to CFOs, internal auditors, accounting directors and management accountants.

have acquired familiarity with operational issues to come to grips with them. In contrast, managers use accounting language because it is imposed on them as a tool for evaluation and the sole legitimate way to justify a decision or account for results. Accountants use accounting to define others' stakes and appreciation; the reverse is not true. This "proximity to business activity" enables accountants to not only understand marketing matters but also offer their own viewpoint on such matters:

Today, a management accountant must be capable of discussing the specifics of an advert, what it should really achieve, its impact on sales, etc. (...) In fact, a good accountant is someone who knows the trade better than his audience. That is to say that there are people in this firm today who are in total command of all the concepts of marketing. So they have credibility. (...) So clearly, he should in fact orientate decision making that marketing and sales will have to do. (...) And he actually intervenes in all aspects, from promotions to sales policy to marketing investments, not forgetting supply chain policies from time to time. (...) it's up to you to orientate the leader's decisions. (Fabienne, management accountant)

Management accountants maintain close contact with marketing and sales representatives, which means remaining in physical proximity (i.e., through the organisation of office space) and conceptual proximity, through shared concerns, a common language and similar data. Although most accountants describe the interactions as positive, constructive and consensual, they also use this situation to influence others' decisions. This accountant's view illustrates the hidden, symbolic power of pedagogical work. Understanding the concerns of marketing is a necessary constraint for helping other members in the organisation. It is also the opportunity for management accountants to "present their arguments" to influence decision making, or even to make decisions themselves before seeking validation from higher management. The discourse of consensus masks asymmetrical positions of power in the company. The legitimacy of the accounting viewpoint relates to an "out-there-ness" strategy (Whittle and Mueller, 2011):

Globalmarket sets five-year plans for its shareholders. Obviously, they are broken down into goals afterwards. Once the financial goals have been understood, and they are, above all, goals of growth and profitability for the shareholder, we know what growth rate and what level of profitability is expected of us in the coming years. Afterwards, we say: "OK, here is where we are today, this is where we need to be, do we have to make choices to achieve our goals?" (Monique, management accountant of a business unit)

We all have the same role. We are here to help increase the share price and the dividend payout. I mean, it's very stratospheric as goals go, okay, but we all have the same mission. We don't work for anything else. And in the same way, we all have an interest in the company making lots of money. (Bernard, divisional Director of Management Accounting)

Because the firm is listed on the stock market, managers commit to shareholders. These plans are applied as goals, and the opinion of shareholders is taken into account in daily decision making. The shareholders thus appear central, which justifies putting the accountant's view at the fore. Bernard commits a significant slippage in the preceding quote, which is evocative of symbolic violence being exercised, when he suggests as patently obvious the relationship between a willingness to "grow the share price" and the fact that "the company is making lots of money," which assimilates "the company" with its shareholders. Management accountants consider that the ultimate purpose of all members of the Group is to grow the share price of their firm. The "common interest" is presented here not as brand building but as share price growing. Marketing matters are relegated as mere means to achieve it.

In summary, Globalmarket is strongly influenced by a discourse of consensus, according to which "rational" decisions result from a confrontation of diverging viewpoints. However, this description of collegial choices masks position asymmetries, in which certain actors, such as accountants and marketing managers, exert more influence over decisions than do others. Accountants appear to be gaining ascendancy over all other groups, to the point of being dominant in the company, as is visible in the changing vocabulary and stakes that increasingly are structured around accounting categories. We thus witness how accountants undertake pedagogical work to exert symbolic violence, redefine legitimate capital and take dominant positions within their organisation. We move on to analyse how, by introducing a specific accounting technology—a financial definition of brands—accountants have managed to secure and reproduce their new dominant position.

### **3.2. FROM A MARKETING TO A FINANCIAL DEFINITION OF BRANDS**

Accountants at Globalmarket progressively redefine symbolic capital in their own terms, which modifies the accumulation strategies and positions most valued in the company. Here we focus not on how they attempt to change the situation but on how they succeed in reproducing their dominant position. This effort relates to the introduction of a new managerial accounting device: the financial valuation of brands.

Brands once were perceived solely as a marketing issue, yet the introduction of "brand valuation" devices, based on accounting numbers, endowed them with a different meaning. Two main factors helped shift the emphasis to the financial value of brands: mergers and acquisitions and the application of International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS). In this description, we note how group members became aware of the financial value of its brands.

Starting in 2000, the company launched a plan to reduce its brands, by both selling off brands and engaging in several brand acquisitions. The very high sales prices for these brands increased the emphasis on their valuation. The brand, its value and the relevant measure therefore became an area of significant concern for management accountants.

The method of calculation used must appear objective, because it needs to be accepted (i.e., recognised) by both buyer and seller, as well as by the accountants charged with recording it on the balance sheet. Again, objectivity (or appearances of disinterestedness) was fabricated through an “out-there-ness” strategy that relied on three tacit phenomena. First, the accountants hired the services of a consulting company. By using externally fabricated tools, accountants could claim they had no stake in the methodology chosen, which increased the legitimacy of their calculations. Second, the reputation of the consulting company exerted symbolic violence, because its production, as a leading brand valuation company, was particularly difficult to criticise. Third, the bodies produced thick, dense reports (sometimes containing analyses running 100 pages or more), based on calculations that appeared particularly complex at first glance. By synthesising these calculations and analyses into a single figure, the consulting companies produced a valuation for the brands that precluded—or at least complicated—any questions about the methods used to determine that value.

These three factors (external neutrality, reputation, and strategy) made the calculation of brand value more obscure and harder to contradict, even as it appeared more legitimate because it was perceived as technical and neutral. That is, the arbitrary conditions of the construction of these devices were associated with appearances of objectivity.

The attention paid to the brands’ financial values, as well as the introduction by external consulting companies of a measurement method that appeared reliable, led management accountants to question the previous notion of value:

I think that [the financial valuation of brands] will have the advantage of bringing to light those brands that really create value, the true levers of growth in the coming years and will perhaps also allow us to better arbitrate our means and how best to deploy them. (Pierre, management accountant)

All that [the IFRS] is something very interesting, and also a fairly heavy task to manage I have to admit, but which will enable us in the end to better position our brands within the company and, as such, perhaps to better assess the strategic priority we can give them. (Mathias, management accountant)

The two extracts illustrate how international accounting regulation, which stipulates accounting for brands as distinct from goodwill, emerges as a new opportunity for management accountants. The financial valuation of brands is presented as a “strategy-

oriented” device. It also centres on shareholder concerns rather than customer ones: Indeed, when Pierre mentioned brands “that really create value,” he was referring to shareholder value. The inscription of a brand on the balance sheet therefore increased its visibility among shareholders and their interest in “brand value.”

Since the imposition of the international accounting standards, accountants also have had to construct “business plans” for each brand acquisition. This task testifies to their capacity to rely on strategic considerations. To obtain the data required to draft these documents, accountants must increase their interactions with other members of the organisation, especially those from marketing departments. This situation creates an opportunity to encourage managers to take financial arguments into account in their choices:

It’s interesting to see how marketing is excited to see how the business plan will be assessed. Marketing asks for financial information and fully understands that it is able to enhance or undermine a brand. [This] is one of the issues that will force accountants and marketers to work more closely together. (Gilles, divisional Director of Management Accounting)

The approach is sound; the approach is good, now. (...) You will involve people from marketing and people from accounting more and more often in this type of exercise. For me, it’s an improvement. In fact, it’s something good insofar as, from an organisational viewpoint, it will probably force people in marketing to take the financial aspect into greater account. From that viewpoint, I find this very interesting. (Karl, internal auditor)

The notion of brand financial value forces brand managers and management accountants to interact and compare their points of view, which implies consensus building. However, because it is framed through accounting categories, this consensus is not neutral; accountants act as referees of the alternative viewpoints. The discussion aims to construct a financial definition of brands, with little room for debate as accountants aim to teach managers how to understand their work in financial terms. This pedagogical work conceals the desire to influence the representations of managers—that is, “to force people in marketing to take the financial aspect into greater account.” Those who are most accustomed to accounting numbers thus are best suited to ensure their arguments are heard and dominate. Accounting becomes a “shared” language, and management accountants oversee various brands, as well as the members of the different functions:

I have a more complete set of data than operational managers. Because someone in marketing must deal with marketing in a highly specialised way, but won’t necessarily have input from other departments. (...) What is required of me is to have a more global view of things. So, to understand input from marketing, but also to understand input from sales, to understand input from the whole supply chain, input from Europe when they give us

guidelines on strategic orientations, etc., and on that basis to build a global project for the company. (Mathias, divisional Director of Management Accounting)<sup>3</sup>

When we've paid a very, very high price for brands and, in parallel, we have business plans essentially based on innovation and marketing, it's still interesting to check (...), once I've listened to people from marketing, to check that it is also consistent with the respective business plans. So, it's important to focus on brand valuation even if it isn't an easy exercise. (Gilles, divisional Director of Management Accounting)

As is notable in Gilles's statement, constructing a "business plan" for a brand enables the accountant to go beyond the arguments put forward by marketing and reach a strategic vision. This tool brings together indicators provided by marketing and translates them into financial data, through the mediation of management accountants. For Gilles, such projections appear inseparable from the task of "valuation," which he defines as measuring the financial value of brands. Fabienne in turn believes that management accountants have become arbiters, whose influence can be justified by their neutrality:

In the decision-making bodies, there are few people who are neutral. Let's say that there are two large bodies that have, in quotation marks, a vocation to be relatively neutral; they are (...) market research and accounting. Why? Because we don't have preconceived opinions about promotional policy, etc. What we see is materiality and how it is transformed on the ground, how it is transformed into money, into value creation, etc. So often, we are called to question certain decisions, (...) to discuss promotional policies, marketing investments, etc. (Fabienne, management accountant)

Bolstered by this supposed neutrality, management accountants impose financial definitions of brands as a purely objective exercise removed from operational strategies. Brand managers may be inclined to defend their brand, as well as any associated promotional budgets, at the expense of other brands, but accountants claim to be the only disinterested agents in the company. They thus position themselves as judges of what is consensual or not. Their resulting position enables them to introduce potentially controversial devices (e.g., financial value of brands) without suffering criticism; the interested nature of their devices is misrecognised, because they are perceived as technical and neutral. The financial value of brands thus redefines how symbolic capital can be accumulated and distributed and changes power positions, stakes and access. Accountants become dominant, and maybe even hegemonic, by strengthening their position while also undermining their main competitors'.

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<sup>3</sup> Mathias was interviewed on two occasions. Between interviews, he was promoted from being a management accountant of a business unit to a divisional Director of Management Accounting.



The accountants also work to secure their position by giving the financial valuation of brands a global, recurring character. The recurrent and routine nature of the exercise stems from the implementation of “impairment tests,” imposed by international accounting standards. Various members of the organisation must collaborate to ensure an annual follow-up on the value recorded on the balance sheet:

If, in 2007, we want to launch a new product under Brand A, on a new market segment, then we’re going to see with the marketers the volumes that we are likely to make, the stores in which we’ll be selling and then it’s up to us to make a turnover as a result. That’s a slightly broader way of seeing our daily work (...). So an impairment test has a slightly longer-term horizon, with broader scope, but that’s basically what it is. (...) To do this, it’s work that requires us to have real exchanges with marketing teams and sales teams in particular. (Pierre, management accountant)

Each year, these impairment tests ensure recurrent interactions of the different functions, organised around financial definitions of brand value. Accountants and marketers also interact to draw up business plans, which is the first step of valuation. Our interviewees present such interactions as a natural and rational way to combine specialised skills and thus create a global image for their organisation. No one considered the evolution as evidence of changing relations. However, impairment tests and business plans force managers and accountants to use the metrics of financial brand value: Accountants collect information necessary for its construction, and managers recurrently use new related categories. These processes place management accountants in a central position. According to the IFRS, only the acquired brands should be recorded as assets on the balance sheet,<sup>4</sup> though management accounting does not have to comply with the regulation. Satisfied with the new devices, the accountants could lobby for a broader application of the financial definition of brand value:

There are the brands that are in the balance sheet and there are those that actually aren’t. This doesn’t stop us from having the same type of reasoning. (...) We can go far further than this rule by saying: “if we extend this rule to all brands in our business portfolio, this can allow us to have long-term strategic management and to be more efficient than if we hadn’t done the exercise.” (...) It’s a good opportunity to try to extend the exercise from brands that are on the balance sheet to those that are not, in order to get a global view of the value of the Globalmarket firm, and in the end to communicate about it. (Mathias, management accountant)

It’s interesting to do a valuation exercise, whether or not the brands are on the balance sheet. This exercise is intimately tied to the marketing plans. It’s interesting that marketing does not make these marketing plans for itself so

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<sup>4</sup> Within the group’s portfolio, some brands were acquired; others were created. International accounting standards specifically forbid recognising “internally generated” brands as assets.

that Globalmarket will be positively viewed on the financial markets, and that's a plus. (Gilles, divisional Director of Management Accounting)

In this sense, management accountants are interested in the valuation process and plead for its generalisation. Broadening its scope to encompass all brands in the portfolio, and therefore drawing up business plans systematically, enables them to globalise the financial definition of brand value. Among the various indicators of value created by other functions, one unique measurement is constructed to materialise the value of brands. The concept thereby translates specialised vocabularies into one consensual set of categories, shared representations and language.

Central to the accumulation of symbolic capital at Globalmarket is the increasing relation of the brand concept to a specific measurement that is based on accounting numbers. This link modifies its meaning and thus the definition of symbolic capital in the company. That which is consistent with accounting metrics becomes “general”; other vocabularies are deemed specialised or interested. Other calculations may be legitimate but still appear biased, whereas financial definitions of value are presented as the only neutral, objective measures that allow for arbitration among parties. Accounting thus colonises the previous (marketing) logic of practice, changing what is and is not valued and altering the stakes and strategies to follow. By enforcing accounting as the language for defining symbolic capital, accountants change how capital gets accumulated and appropriate for themselves the channels of capital distribution. Accountants' *habitus* thus becomes better suited to the accumulation of symbolic capital within the company than is the *habitus* of marketing and sales officers. In addition, their strategies are perceived as more “natural” and legitimate; they have exercised symbolic violence to secure their position and reproduce their domination.

### **3.3. PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGE**

Accountants present the financial measurement of brand value and its related devices as an opportunity to improve brand management. They enjoy stronger ties with managers, notably brand managers, as a positive outcome, but they do not consider the process related to issues of power and interest. Because our main argument states that this process undermines marketing definitions of capital, it is of interest to determine whether this change modifies how non-accounting managers view and deal with brands; how they perceive, or not, changes in their job; and how they feel about the new devices.

Most managers asserted that they have not been affected by this change. For example, brand managers claimed the changing accounting regulations were “mainly a bookkeeping issue” or that “accountants are better suited to talk about it.” When asked about how to value

brands, they talked about marketing measurements (e.g., market shares, brand personality, brand recognition, attachment to the brand, perceived quality). Sometimes, they specified that these elements influenced the financial value of brands; all of them believed the brands they managed has important financial value. Few could draw any link between these two spheres; they regarded the financial valuation of brands as part of the accountants' jurisdiction.

However, a few managers recognised some impact of shareholder value on their practices, even if they could not relate it to the financial definition of brand value. For example, a central measure used by brand managers is the amount of sales generated by a brand, a metric whose definition recently had been modified:

Q: Did IFRS standards change anything for you?

For us, it brought a huge change, because we changed our way of monitoring sales. Until now, we used to follow the NPS, which, basically, was, um, I don't remember exactly what it was, to be honest with you! But it was our main measurement. And now, due to IFRS, it has changed, so we don't use the NPS but turnover, the real one. (Dominique, brand manager)

Q: Did IFRS standards change anything for you?

For us, it's mainly an accounting issue. The impact was, I mean, we were talking about the turnover, (...) now we're going to look at a turnover figure from which we subtract any investment we make for the brand. (...) But at least it makes us ask the right questions (...). So before we used to do a lot of promotions to boost the sales. Well, promotion, even if it's important, it's 20% of the business, whereas, for the teams, it takes them more than half of their time. So at the end of the day, if promotion is costly and does not generate bottom line outcomes, we need to ask ourselves: "Is this a good promotion, is this the right investment I'm making?" So this standard leads us to ask the right questions.

Q: So, in the end, it looks like a good thing.

Yeah, I believe it's really healthy, because it allows us to look at all the brands with, at the bottom line, things that are really comparable. So it improves our performance monitoring. (Nathalie, key account manager)

Since 2005, turnover has been measured by subtracting promotional costs from sales, which previously appeared as a separate entry. Accountants not only monopolise the power to name what turnover is (i.e., "the real one"), but also influence brands' daily operational management. It is no longer beneficial to conduct promotions systematically; they can "destroy value" by reducing turnover, according to the new definition. Although they do not have a precise notion of what changes when they adopt a financial valuation of brands, the managers know their work is being influenced by international accounting regulations. They also consider this evolution "really healthy" and reproduce a consensus discourse: When persons from various fields of expertise ask "the right questions," it favours rational decision making and "improves performance monitoring." They are not conscious that changing the

definition of turnover gives accountants a new position of power, such that they can refuse brand managers' promotions and present them value destroyers, which previously was not possible. In Bourdieu's terms, these managers misrecognise the symbolic domination exerted by accountants. Accountants are not necessarily aware of this shift in positions of power, but their positions and dispositions are increasingly well suited to argue with managers and even make decisions related to other fields of knowledge.

In summary, resources, stakes, vocabulary and access to powerful positions in Globalmarket are tied to the brand concept, which is being appropriated by accounting as new measurements and devices change the definition of brand value. Accounting colonises the previous logic of practice through symbolic domination patterns: Managers who are losing capital and whose position is being devalued do not realise how the changes reduce their control over their own work, nor do they see that accountants increasingly influence their daily practice. Thus they participate in the process of undermining their own capital. As the definition of what constitutes symbolic capital and legitimate strategies changes, accountants' *habitus* becomes the one best suited to capital accumulation. Accountants then use accounting to introduce new categories and definitions—such as the financial measurement of brand value. Such arbitrary categories are perceived as objective, or even mandatory, and natural. Because the concepts around which the company is structured are tied to financial measurements, accounting increasingly appears as the only consensual language. Accountants then monopolise the legitimate right to name and exercise symbolic domination, without ever triggering conflict or resistance.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

This study has examined the links between accounting and the manufacture of consensus as a means to understand the processes by which accounting participates in the production and reproduction of specific interests. Specifically, accounting produces symbolic violence and is implicated in the mechanisms by which powerful actors consolidate their influence and secure their position.

At Globalmarket, most of the interviewees stressed that their organisation embraced a “culture of consensus.” This discourse pervades representations and shapes how organisational members account for their working practices. They see rationality as necessarily resulting from collegiality and believe that divergent opinions are complementary viewpoints to be compared, rather than structurally antagonistic positions. Parker (2002, p. 46) ironically synthesises this view as follows: “We sing the company song together and

the noise produced is harmony.” Fleming and Spicer (2007, p. 11) also note that a similar view pervades much academic literature:

Much mainstream organization theory views organizations as places where thousands of diligent souls work contentedly towards a universally accepted goal. If political squabbles appear, then this is the fault of a power-hungry manager, a few deviant subordinates or an organization that is in terminal decline. In this otherwise perfect world, good people in good organizations do not engage in politics. They just work towards the common good.

These authors view such a discourse as naïve, considering that “power and politics are endemic in organizations” and that “organizations have, in fact, become one of the most important sites of power and politics in contemporary societies” (Fleming and Spicer, 2007, p. 11). However, what is important is not whether the discourse of consensus is “true” or empirically accurate but rather if it is believed by managers and thus the effects of this belief.

Positive accounts of consensus also permeate accounting literature. For instance, Hall (2010, p. 306) sees consensus building as a crucial “function” of accounting: “Accounting information can play a key role in consensus building by constructing a common set of information to facilitate communication.” In contrast, we argue that the role of accounting exemplifies what Bourdieu (1977, 1980) calls symbolic violence. What is “common” is what supports the interest of dominant actors; the communicative properties of accounting reflect its subtle influence in silencing other, dominated voices (Oakes et al., 1998). Consensus thus results from compromises reached when certain groups manage to impose their interests on others, and the discourse of consensus serves to mask domination patterns, power strategies and the shaping of interests to manufacture consent within organisations and society.

The Globalmarket case illustrates this symbolic power of accounting. We described how accounting has appropriated the concept of “brands,” which previously had been marketing’s stake. The “power” of a brand used to reflect market research-based concepts, including market share or brand awareness. The financial valuation of brands changed that logic. The most powerful positions were taken up by those capable of identifying what “creates” or “destroys” value, not those responsible for value creation itself. By controlling the measurement of and accounting for value creation, as well as interpreting the “symbols” of brand value, accountants came to monopolise the ability to speak for brands. In Bourdieu’s words, accountants have appropriated most symbolic resources and also designated what constitutes symbolic capital.

Under the previous logic, the main objective was to build well-known brands, so symbolic capital was based on brand reputations. The most useful resource to accumulate

symbolic capital—i.e., the most legitimate cultural capital—was marketing knowledge. With the new logic, the main objective is to increase shareholder value, and symbolic capital stems from the financial value of brands. Thus, the most legitimate cultural capital refers to accounting skills and knowledge about valuation metrics and formulae, which are forms of capital primarily held by accountants.

In both cases, symbolic capital is needed to obtain economic capital. The budgets allocated to a brand (including the advertising and promotional budgets a brand manager is able to spend) increasingly reflect its financial value; previously, they were associated more with its market share or reputation. Beyond budgets, the proliferation of indicators and measures associated with business plans give accountants a broad array of levers to accumulate more capital. Most of the indicators are financial, calculated and monitored by accountants. If marketing managers hope to understand the impact of their choices on the financial value of the brand they manage, they must work closely with accountants. This development does not mean that all accountants increasingly command managerial choice—even if arguably it is likely—but rather that they can exert greater symbolic violence as their position becomes more central and their status more prestigious. Prestige derives from their ability to explain the value of brands managed by others; centrality relates to their language (i.e., accounting), which integrates and encompasses other, more specialised languages, such as that of marketing. Accountants thus have acquired a central position to accumulate symbolic capital by naming the capital (Everett, 2003; Oakes et al., 1998) and changing the distribution of symbolic resources. From this powerful position, they accumulate symbolic resources and take a dominant position, which they use to monopolise the ability to define what resources are symbolic.

The financial value of brands also redefines interests and stakes within the organisation. Thus shareholder value creation appears to provide a “collective” and “common” objective, and specific stakes then get presented as related to “universal” interests. This effect of universalisation legitimises choices made in the name of shareholders, even when they are controversial, by associating them with a veneer of disinterestedness. Consensus thus gets defined by what is in the interest of the shareholders, as translated by accountants, to the extent that the latter are more likely than others to be heard.

Yet in a surprising finding, we discover that marketing managers welcome the introduction of a financial definition of brand value, even though this new device threatens their capital, does not provide them with any new lever (they do not know how the numbers

are calculated) and can be used to exert increasing pressure on them (when the number goes up, they can only guess why; when the number goes down, they must account and take responsibility for it). They even lose the ability to speak for their brands. To build well-known brands is no longer the main objective but rather a means subordinate to the “common goal” of shareholder value creation. In a competition to define organisational goals (e.g., being able to attract and retain customers vs. giving the most money to shareholders), accounting monopolises the power to name “value.”

Although in this setting the balance of power has shifted, we find no conflict or attempts among those who are losing influence to resist change. Managers fail to contest the situation because they see it as legitimate and natural: They misrecognise accounting power and associate it with appearances of objective necessity. Euphemised violence makes domination patterns more difficult to contest. Accountants at Globalmarket not only reach a dominant position but also succeed in making the asymmetry durable. Thus the study of the symbolic power of accounting and consensus helps reveal some strategies of reproduction. Powerful actors use accounting to secure their established positions, and then rely on consensus to make it difficult to contest their domination, which is based on euphemised and censored violence, as well as on misrecognised mechanisms, even among those subjected to this domination.

Bourdieu’s conceptualisation helps explain why managers losing power do not resist change. Bourdieu (1980) suggests that agents interiorise “objective” chances (i.e., achievements they can expect from statistical distributions) in their *habitus*. As dispositions internalised in practice, *habitus* indicates what agents can “realistically” expect. We do not argue that managers outside accounting fail to resist change because they do not expect to influence outcomes; rather, they internalise the discourse of consensus, which makes any confrontational strategy appear illegitimate and unrealistic, as do open struggles for power or visibly interested tactics. Choices have to be deemed consensual, which discourages direct action, resistance and overt conflict.

The concept of *habitus* also helps explain the ascendancy of accountants over other managers. By introducing the financial value of brands, they designate stakes to pursue and legitimate strategies, which ensures that their *habitus* is best suited to accumulating capital. The devices we describe do not necessarily change managers’ *habitus*, but accountants’ *habitus* is better adjusted to the new situation than other managers’ *habitus*. The situation we describe is all the more stable because accountants themselves misrecognise the domination they exert. This non-reflexive character “naturalises” some practices, which therefore become

more difficult to criticise. This is how accountants can claim to be aiming at consensus building. In “good faith”, they state that their purpose is completely selfless and disinterested and that the tools they enforce are simply more efficient and rational than any others.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Our purpose has been to highlight and explore the links among accounting, consensus and symbolic violence. Rather than assuming that consensus building is or should be a central value for management purposes, we have studied how, in a context in which conflict, power and interests are denied and euphemised, presenting practices and strategies as disinterested and consensual enables actors to gain and secure dominant positions without triggering resistance. By exploring the role of accounting in the manufacture of consensus, we show how it can produce and reproduce asymmetrical positions of power and participate in the shaping of interests, so that compromises always favour one side over the others, with the consent of those who have most to lose in the process.

In our presented case, one powerful actor appropriates its main organisational competitor’s symbolic resources to secure its influence and consolidate its position. Defining as consensual that which supports its interest, this actor claims that everyone can express their ideas or that all specialised inputs are of equal interest, while arguing that its own language is more general and builds the “big picture.” The sense of discussion and confrontation persists, even as the dominant actor always has the final word.

We thus confirm previous studies arguing that changes can be more substantial when based on hidden and subtle mechanisms; the concept of consensus, like many other concepts (e.g., “choice,” “rationality” or “decision making”), produces euphemised forms of violence. Precisely, consensus produces both power (because defining what is consensual and what is not implies designating what legitimate resources, stakes and interests should be and silencing alternative voices by presenting them as interested) and consent (because contesting consensus implies engaging in politics and trying to advance interested strategies, detrimental to the common good). To relate rational management to consensus building while denying organisational position asymmetries is to delegitimize confrontations and struggles and conceal domination behind a feeling of shared interest and community. By producing consensus, accounting participates in the shaping and reproduction of dominant interests.

We accordingly have shown how powerful actors can use the symbolic violence of accounting to consolidate their influence and secure their dominant position. We also relate such strategies to a discourse of consensus that discourages open conflict and resistance.



Finally, we have highlighted the processes by which powerful actors relate accounting devices to commonsense discourses, shaping what organisational goals and interests are or should be so that they can legitimise the reproduction of asymmetrical positions of power.

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