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## Social entrepreneurship as an agent in the intermediation of social innovation in companies

*Empreendedorismo social como agente na intermediação da inovação social em empresas*

*El emprendimiento social como agente en la intermediación de la innovación social en las empresas*

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### ABSTRACT

Organizations play a fundamental role in mitigating social inequality, with emphasis on social enterprises. Thus, the objective is to analyze how a social enterprise acts as an intermediary to promote social innovations in companies. A case study was held in a local social enterprise located in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, and which develops projects of social impact for other organizations. The data stems from participant observation, interviews and access to secondary data. The results indicate that social innovation is generated from the interaction between client companies and the final benefited public, through the intermediation promoted by the analyzed company, when conducting the process of creating and implementing social projects.

**Keywords:** social entrepreneurship; social innovation; social impact business; interaction between companies; social projects.

### RESUMO

As organizações têm papel fundamental na mitigação da desigualdade social, com destaque para empresas sociais. Assim, o objetivo foi analisar de que maneira um empreendimento social pode atuar como um agente intermediário ao desenvolver projetos para empresas convencionais que desejam promover a inovação social. Foi realizado um estudo de caso em um empreendimento social localizado na cidade de Porto Alegre/RS, que desenvolve projetos de impacto social para outras organizações. Os dados foram provenientes de observação participante, entrevistas, sites e vídeos. Os resultados indicam que a inovação social é gerada a partir da interação entre as empresas clientes e o público beneficiado, por meio da intermediação promovida pela empresa analisada, ao conduzir o processo de criação e implementação dos projetos sociais.

**Palavras-chave:** empreendedorismo social; inovação social; negócios de impacto social; interação entre empresas; projetos sociais.

### RESUMEN

Las empresas sociales juegan un papel fundamental en la mitigación de la desigualdad social. Así, el objetivo fue analizar cómo una empresa social puede actuar como intermediaria en el desarrollo de proyectos para empresas convencionales que deseen impulsar la innovación social. Se realizó un estudio de caso en una empresa social ubicada en Porto Alegre/RS, Brasil, que desarrolla proyectos con impacto social para otras organizaciones. Los datos provienen de la observación participante, entrevistas, sitios web y videos. La innovación social se genera a partir de la interacción entre las empresas clientes y el público final beneficiado, a través de la intermediación promovida por la empresa analizada, a la hora de realizar el proceso de creación e implementación de proyectos sociales.

**Palabras clave:** el emprendimiento social; innovación social; negocio de impacto social; interacción entre empresas; proyecto social.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The reality experienced by 54 million Brazilians demonstrates that a significant portion of the population lives below the poverty line, with less than R\$ 406.00 per month, according to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*, IBGE, 2019). In addition to poverty, other problems are present in the daily lives of the population, which demand more targeted responses. Among these, the unemployment rate takes center stage as a serious issue that impacts a large number of Brazilians. According to the IBGE (2020), in the 4th quarter of 2019, the unemployment rate was 10.6%, or 11.6 million people, with the Northeast region having the highest rate, 13.6%. Given the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, this number has increased (Agência Brasil, 2020).

In addition to issues related to social inequalities, it is possible to witness the negative effects on environmental issues in Brazil. Such issues should be highlighted and the intrinsic relationships between the two terms considered, which we can classify using the terminology “socio environmental”. According to the Institute of Applied Economic Research (Instituto de Pesquisa Economica Aplicada, IPEA, 2017), only 13% of solid waste generated in Brazil is sent to recycling centers. In the city of São Paulo alone, 3.7 million tons of household waste are generated per year (CEMPRE, 2017).

The data presented highlights a reality that needs to be changed, pertaining to our way of living in society, also considering the ways in which natural resources are consumed. The economic dynamics that have been established in our contemporary society are in need of changes, specifically in the reformulation of business models and management. The goal is to generate favorable alternatives for the development of society, but without the depletion of natural resources or violation of human rights, as our focus shifts to three indispensable and indivisible pillars of business, focused on the economy, society and the environment (UN, 2020).

Entrepreneurship plays a central role in this notion of change, in the sense that it expands our playing field, where businesses not only meet their financial needs, but also those of a social and environmental nature (Ássimos, 2019). In this perspective, social innovation emerges as an alternative for the future that aims to bring improvements to all (Bignetti, 2011), a new means of solving social problems, a reformulation in the traditional way of thinking (André & Abreu, 2006).

Organizations that are already conceived are considering aspects of social innovation in their practices; others, who wish to take into account such aspects, go through a process of adaptation. However, the challenge is to identify how we can restructure, in order to meet social and environmental demands, and not operate with a sole

focus on profit. The focus on economic growth (Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013) often pushes social and environmental goals aside, to the background, which, in turn, can generate issues for society and/or the environment (Rosolen, Tiscoki & Comini, 2014).

Considering this challenge, there are social enterprises that focus on acting as intermediary agents between businesses and the community, in the development of social innovation projects on demand. In this sense, this research analyzes the actions of Smile Flame, as an example of this intermediation, due to its relevance in the design of transition processes towards a more social configuration that companies with conventional operations decide to adopt.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following question: How can a social enterprise be an intermediary agent in the implementation of social innovations by conventional companies? The objective of this research was to analyze how a social enterprise can act as an intermediary agent when developing projects for conventional companies that want to promote social innovation. Such companies are based on practices considered conventional and did not have, as a fundamental goal, plans to meet social demands stemming from structural inequalities.

Therefore, a qualitative research approach was utilized, and a case study analysis was conducted at a social business located in the city of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul. The information gathered was analyzed using content analysis (Bardin, 2016) with a focus on triangulation of data from participant observation, interviews and secondary data (reports, company website and videos).

The academic contribution of this research is seen from the importance scholars have given to the theme of social innovation. A search in the ScienceDirect database using the keyword “social innovation”, considering titles and abstracts, resulted in 193 empirical articles between the years 2015 and 2020 (until the month of May). The numbers indicate a growing process, noting that by May 2020 virtually the same number of publications as the entire year of 2019 were published. Added to this is the interest of the Brazilian market and society, taking as an example the various associations, organizations and accelerators that foster and encourage entrepreneurship and social innovation, such as: Artemisia, Ashoka, Social Good Brasil, Yunus Social Business, Institute of Corporate Citizenship (Instituto de Cidadania Empresarial, ICE), Impact Hub and Instituto Quintessa. In this scenario, the case studied in this research demonstrates the importance, potential and way in which businesses can act as intermediaries to promote and implement social innovations.

This article is structured through the introduction, which contextualizes the theme and the issue of interest. Subsequently, the theoretical approaches used, Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation, are highlighted.

The section presenting the methodological procedures is followed by the section on analysis and discussion of results and, in closing, the final considerations.

## 2 SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Society has engaged in profound reflections on conceptualizing what can really be characterized as development. Faced with this challenge, entrepreneurial initiatives arise, which are means of fostering development. For Carmona, Martens and Freitas (2018), the action of entrepreneurship is vast, permeating in different extensions, such as individual, collective, intrapreneurs or social entrepreneurs.

With a perspective focused on social entrepreneurship, Ássimos (2019) emphasizes that taking a social entrepreneurial approach signifies a response to demands of social, environmental and political origin, while taking into account innovation and management. At its origin, social entrepreneurship has, as a mission to contribute to society, and can be a means for social innovations to occur (Baggio, Queiroz & Cunha, 2019; Bezerra-de-Sousa & Teixeira, 2019). The subject of social entrepreneurship goes beyond discussions about corporate social responsibility, which focuses on the search for sustainable actions to meet commitments with stakeholders (Scharf, Moura & Bianchi, 2019). Another relevant point is related to the influence that these organizations have in sparking social change, due to the fact that they generate jobs, create products or services and intervene in the culture of a given location, serving as an inspiring "template" for other traditional organizations (Barbalho & Uchoa, 2019; Brunelli & Cavazote, 2019).

These are initiatives dedicated to, among other aspects, placing low-income populations as producers or consumers, by offering products or services that can be sold directly to this population or even sold to other economic classes or companies, but produced by those with low-income (Petrini, Scherer & Back, 2016). Associated with this, Baggio, Queiroz and Cunha (2019), in their study of the analysis of characteristics for social entrepreneurship in suburbs, point out that, due to the fact that entrepreneurs are inserted in the community, they fully understand the problems, solutions and advances contained therein, that is, greater dialogue between all those involved is set, and not only a "colonization" of ideas is coming from abroad. Still on this perspective, Butkevicienė (2009) addresses the implementation of these ideas through a bottom-up perspective, that is, created from within the community for the community.

Regarding to the challenges surrounding leadership in social entrepreneurship, Brunelli and Cavazote (2019) contend that, from a Brazilian perspective, the identified challenges are: financial sustainability; growth; people management; self-awareness and self-care; and

succession. Financial sustainability is also highlighted by Caciatori, Cherobim and Teixeira (2019) and Lumpkin *et al.* (2013). There is a consensus among scholars that this element in particular deserves attention, considering that an organization will hardly be able to maintain itself if it does not take proper care of its finances.

Another aspect that deserves special attention is the outcomes for enterprises that act with a focus on social demands. By doing so, they meet one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are part of an action plan, created in 2015, for people, the planet and prosperity (UN, 2020). The SDGs emerged based on the 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were established in 2000, and helped, mainly, to fight poverty, with goals to be met at the end of 2015. In 2015, a new evaluation and measurement was made, from this event, the current 17 Sustainable Development Goals were created, which seek, above all, to forward and expand the work already in motion, based on establishment of the previous MDGs.

Considering the multiplicity of social issues that the SDGs signal as necessary answers by all nations and sectors, it is understood that organizations that undertake socially have a look beyond the interests of the organization itself, seeking to positively reach the communities and the environment where are inserted, thus characterizing an innovation in management models. Social innovation can be seen in this process as a way to open up more entrepreneurial perspectives.

## 3 SOCIAL INNOVATION

The term innovate is relatively broad and, in general, denotes the seeking of alternatives for solving problems. Within the field of innovation, there is the practical and conceptual possibility of thinking about social innovation. The term social innovation is in a continuous process of construction and, based on this effort, an increase in the number of publications related to this theme is found (Zarelli *et al.*, 2019). Still, gaps need to be filled by scholars, mainly because social organizations are not only linked to economic-financial return, but rather seek to create social values, such as generosity, strengthening of affective ties, inclusion, among others (Barbosa *et al.*, 2019).

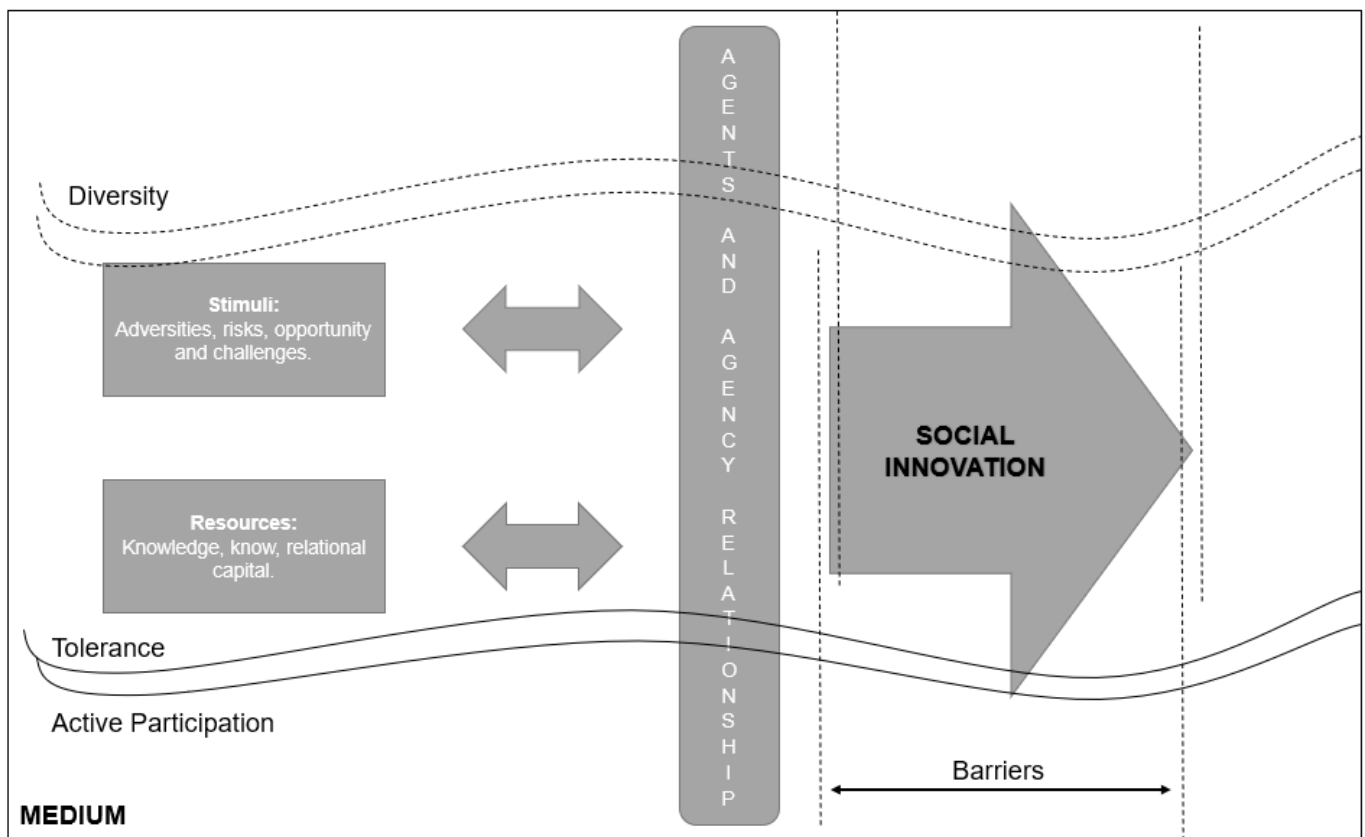
As highlighted by Monteiro (2019), social innovation is connected to the figure of the social entrepreneur, because they lead the creative process that becomes the catalyst of desired change. For the scholars André and Abreu (2006), social innovation is a new means for solving problems that are socially understood, therefore, it is recognized as a reconfiguration in the traditional way of thinking. Following this same perspective, Andion *et al.* (2017) characterizes social innovation as a disruption of the status quo. Another important point, which is mentioned by Bignetti (2011), is that social innovation emerges as an alternative path in building a more equitable future.

Additionally, the authors argue that social innovation occurs through driving agents. There is a consensus on the points brought up in the works by Barki *et al.* (2015), André and Abreu (2006), Bignetti (2011) and Bonfim, Parisotto and Miranda (2019), Velázquez and Bielous (2019), that social innovation arises from gaps in governments, and the final product results from societal pressures.

The need for different actors to create innovation is evident, that is, social innovation arises through a participatory model, where governments, companies, investors, universities, communities and NGOs demonstrate engagement to solve problems of a social and environmental order, even if the intensity of participation

varies according to the type of social innovation being carried out (Segatto, Silva & Justen, 2019), based on an active participation of the beneficiary population and the understanding of their needs (Velázquez & Bielous, 2019).

From the university's point of view, it is understood that social innovation allows communities to mobilize themselves to solve social problems, considering that they empower organizations and communities from different dynamics that seek to strengthen autonomy and empowerment (Torlig & Resende, 2019). André and Abreu (2006) present the means to understand how social innovation and its aspects originate (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Creative and innovative means.  
Source: André and Abreu (2006, p. 133).

The first dimension addressed by André and Abreu (2006) are resources, such as knowledge, one of the essential dimensions for the development of social innovation. Another resource mentioned by Barendsen and Gardner (2004) and Cefai (2014) is lived experience, that is, everything that is felt and experienced has an influence on the development of solutions. In this same context, Andion *et al.* (2017), add that social innovation does not arise from scratch, or in a vacuum, but rather, in the senses and patterns built from public problems.

The second dimension is stimuli. Where Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan (2010) address adversities or risks, such as climate change, social inequality or a global epidemic of chronic illnesses. Due to this focus, social innovation actions are diverse, but work on a small scale

given the fact that the issues they address have been at the margins for decades (Bignetti, 2011). Additionally, Torlig and Resende (2019) highlight the social challenges faced in improving people's quality of life. One can argue that these challenges are related to the adversities encountered. Addressing this issue is fundamental, given its relevance in society and the impact it has on communities.

In a next dimension, André and Abreu (2006) highlight nature, that is, what will be the focus of the proposed change, or what barriers it seeks to overcome. They also mention which domain it fits into (technological, ethical, economic, social, etc.). Lastly, the remaining dimension is the relationship as agents (of transformation), composed of public or private institutions and the third sector. In this regard, Bignetti (2011) mentions social movements, NGOs or solidarity economic initiatives.

Additionally, André and Abreu (2006) indicate the environment as being a mediator for social innovation to occur. They characterize this environment through three main pillars, namely: cultural diversity, tolerance and active participation of all. Another aspect that deserves attention but is not presented by André and Abreu (2006), but referenced by Bignetti (2011), deals with the constant interaction between all involved, and how this interaction allows the development of social innovation.

In this regard, it is highlighted that social interactions promote the exchange of experience, stimulating knowledge. These interactions allow for greater engagement in projects among all the involved parties; it is classified as an important intangible and non-technological aspect, fundamental for the models of business. The entire process of collaboration between actors involved, and this collaboration, combined with social interactions, generates an environment of great reliability (Correia, Batista & Motta, 2019; Velázquez & Bielous, 2019).

It is important to note, according to Barbosa *et al.* (2019), that organizations that seek to develop social innovation face challenges similar to any other type of organization, such as financial feasibility, structure and service improvements. In addition to these challenges, there are still those linked exclusively to social innovation, such as the search for new partnerships and the maintenance of existing ones.

Costa *et al.* (2014) emphasize that social innovation provides a better quality of work, as it builds a spirit that is enhanced by the pleasure of performing the activity. The authors highlight some aspects related to this quality, namely: feeling of positive contribution to society and commitment to the enterprise, as observed in the case analyzed in this study. The following are the methodological approaches used in the research.

#### 4 METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research question presented, a case study was carried out in a social enterprise to verify the intermediation process of social innovation with conventional companies. For this study, a qualitative approach was adopted, as it allowed research to be conducted without intervening in the holistic characteristics of the social enterprise, such as social events, administrative or organizational processes, (Yin, 2001).

The research can be understood as descriptive (Triviños, 1987), in terms of its objectives, as it sought to understand how the analyzed case acts in the intermediation of interest. For this analysis, it was necessary to describe the processes that allowed for this intermediation to take place. The case analyzed was Smile Flame, a company located in the city of Porto Alegre/RS.

Smile Flame is an organization created with the aim of generating a positive impact through the development and execution of fun and relaxed social projects with the beneficiaries (Smile Flame, 2020). These projects take on different objectives and compositions, according to the objective, alignment, and purpose of the contracting companies.

The focus of the analysis is centered on the methodological work of the social enterprise, which transformed itself into an agent for promoting social innovation for other companies. Therefore, the research subjects were one of the founders of the enterprise and its team, the self-appointed “dreamers”. They are the creators and executors of all projects, including individual ones and those contracted and developed in conjunction with partnering companies.

For data collection, taking into account triangulation of information, first, participant observation was carried out in two editions of the course called Smile Academy, with a more exploratory focus in the research, which took place in October and December 2019. The purpose of the course is to develop people’s skills so they are able to share and inform companies on Smile Flame’s purpose and work methodology and through this, secure prospective clients and open doors for new social projects. Smile Academy has hosted three courses, all in 2019, and each one had an average of 20 participants. The fourth edition took place through an online format, in 2020, due to the physical distance necessary given the Covid-19 pandemic.

Then, three semi-structured interviews were carried out with key actors in the organization to understand how it works, how projects are developed and strengthen the applied methodology. The participants interviewed were: (E1) co-founder; (E2) member responsible for the production of projects; and (E3) member responsible for the administrative/financial sector. All interviews took place in April/2020, with an average duration of one hour and were fully transcribed. In addition, secondary data was collected from access to reports that addressed the projects and, also, the company’s website, associated with the materials made available during the courses.

For data analysis, content analysis was conducted (Bardin, 2016). Thus, the data was classified and separated into categories and subcategories of analysis that were deductively elaborated, based on the theoretical framework, associating the literature on social entrepreneurship, social innovation, as well as the model by André and Abreu (2006). Through data triangulation, we sought to verify how these categories are presented in the actions carried out by Smile Flame as an intermediary and how they contribute to the promotion of social innovation. Table 1 presents the categorization and the respective authors that support it.

**Table 1**

Categories, subcategories, description and authors

Category	Subcategory	Description	Authors
<b>Resources</b>	Knowledge	Recognized as fundamental in the development of social innovation. The objective is to facilitate the sharing and transfer of best practices.	André and Abreu (2006); OCDE (2019).
	Relational Capital	Characterized by trust ties, interpersonal cooperation or other important forces, which can be supported by “proximities” of a social and cultural nature.	André and Abreu (2006); Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan (2010); Cefai (2014).
<b>Stimuli</b>	Adversities	Considered to be climate change, social inequality or a global pandemic of illness, that is, the issues social innovation seeks to solve.	Barendsen and Gardner (2004); André and Abreu (2006); Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan (2010); Cefai (2014).
	Opportunities	The means by which social innovation takes advantage of opportunities.	André and Abreu (2006).
<b>Bottom-up Approach</b>	Community	Approach created from within the community, for the community.	Butkevičienė (2009); Baggio, Queiroz and Cunha (2019); Velázquez and Bielous (2019).
<b>Influence</b>	Social transformation	Organizations have significant influence and can be catalysts for social change, since they generate jobs, create products or services and influence culture in a particular area. Social innovation can be theorized as a territorialized system.	Brunelli and Cavazote (2019); Monteiro (2019).
<b>Social Benefit</b>	Increase of income	Place people, who are socially vulnerable, into the value chain	Petrini, Scherer and Back (2016).
<b>Stakeholders</b>	Collaboration	The collaboration among diverse social actors, such as organizations, society, government and NGOs, and the innovation these collaborations produce.	André and Abreu (2006); Bignetti (2011); Morais Neto, Pereira and Moritz (2012); Segatto, Silva and Justen (2019).

Source: Research data.

## 5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This section seeks to understand the origin of the organization, the intermediation methodology applied between the organization and the public, in addition to the necessary adaptations throughout the projects and, finally, the direction towards social innovation in social projects developed in conventional companies. Categories and subcategories of analysis are highlighted in bold throughout the text.

### 5.1 The Social Enterprise

Smile Flame emerged as an organization whose goals was to create a positive impact on people through happiness. At first, there seems to be a distance from the business world, but social entrepreneurship has, at the origin of its mission, a focus and service towards society (Baggio, Queiroz & Cunha, 2019). Since the positive impact can be generated in different ways, according to the specifics of each social reality.

The starting point for the conception of the company was a personal concern from its founder, who emphasizes that the meaning of achievement at work is misunderstood. According to his account, presented during a lecture, it was necessary to believe in something genuine, that would allow for a connection with a more impactful lifestyle (Mattos, 2017). In his words: “I always believed in the power of social impact, in the capacity we had to transform the world from creative ideas, by seeing the world in a different way” (E1). This perspective is associated with stimuli and is recognized as opportunity (André & Abreu, 2006) in the face of adversity

(Barendsen & Gardner, 2004; André & Abreu, 2006; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010; Cefai, 2014) which requires social change. It is, therefore, in alignment with the experience lived by the entrepreneur (Barendsen & Gardner, 2004; Cefai, 2014).

Another element that deserves to be highlighted is the perception that the dissemination of social projects usually brings a sensationalized look, aimed at “feeling sorry” for people. Thus, with the intention of changing this perspective, which usually generates engagement in people, the enterprise works with the development of social projects for clients who want to impact their audience or meet a specific need (Mattos, 2017). Participant observation allows us to conclude that this activity is based on three pillars: (i) disruptive: they understand that the union of opposing spaces generates innovation and, therefore, leads to collaboration between stakeholders (André & Abreu, 2006; Bignetti, 2011; Morais Neto, Pereira & Moritz, 2012; Segatto, Silva & Justen, 2019); (ii) positive: they understand that drawing attention to the problem is only the first step, the search for a solution is the main objective; and (iii) social impact: all the work done will only make sense if it is changing someone's life. In this case, we have the social benefit, which is also related to prospects for improving income (Petrini, Scherer & Back, 2016). Thus, it is understood that the organization is focused on creating a link between the customer and its audience, strengthened through the recognition of a social purpose, also aligned with the issue of stimuli, indicative of opportunity.

From the observation of the participants, it was found that among the products offered by the company, the

following stand out: (i) Quotas, where the company allocates an amount to finance one of Smile Flame's authorial projects (Table 2); (ii) On demand, the client hires the company to create a project, taking the steps: briefing with the client, creative sketching, creation and execution; and (iii) +1, where the company increases a product by R\$1.00 and after selling it, allocates the increased amount to a fund, utilized for the creation and execution of the social project. In this case, the execution is linked to the sale of the products, which may vary according to the amount collected. This indicates the presence of resources in the form of knowledge (André & Abreu, 2006; OECD, 2019) and relational capital (André & Abreu, 2006; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010; Cefai, 2014).

From this, we identify an approach that seeks to interrupt the traditional model of entrepreneurship, in line with the understanding of Comini (2016), from the perspective of social entrepreneurship. As a result of the development process of the enterprise, in 2014, three authorial projects were consolidated, described in Table 2.

**Table 2**

Company's copyright projects

Project	Description
Wheelchair Users Crazy Race ( <i>Corrida Maluca de Cadeirantes</i> )	Project with 16 children who are wheelchair users, where they participate in a "crazy race". Each child chooses who they would like to be, such as Spider-man and Daenerys Targaryen. This event is sponsored by other companies.
World's Boot ( <i>Bota do Mundo</i> )	A soccer tournament for differently abled children that facilitates the first soccer goal of their lives. The event takes place at a soccer stadium and in the past has counted with the participation of soccer idols such as Dunga, Neymar, and Tinga.
Skating in the Senior Home ( <i>Skate no Asilo</i> )	This project has grandparents and grandmothers who live in a Senior home, participate as judges for a skating competition, where skaters compete for the "golden cane". Among other benefits, this project allows senior citizens to relive their childhood, with songs from their generation playing during the event.

Source: Smile Flame (2020).

Such projects demonstrate a series of positive developments by the enterprise. Regarding the **influence**, in terms of **social transformation** (Brunelli & Cavazote, 2019; Monteiro, 2019), attention is drawn to the influence and reach these projects have. Brunelli and Cavazote (2019) highlight the interference that these actions cause in the benefited communities. Such statements are confirmed, for example, in the words of a mother whose son participated in the World's Boot project: "You created a second Christmas. These children wait as much, or more, for that day" (Draft, 2020).

**Collaboration** is evident in the process of creating and executing projects. E1 understands that the more partners the better, as there is an immersion and involvement of more people in a given subject, which allows for the necessary adaptations and adjustments. Given the

above, it is clear the importance of interaction between the stakeholders involved in the development of solutions, the active participation of all and cultural diversity, which are understood as mediators for the promotion of social innovation (André and Abreu, 2006; Bignetti, 2011). This active participation reflects the need for a bottom-up approach, in which the **community** is the active subject of this construction (Butkevicienė, 2009; Baggio, Queiroz & Cunha, 2019; Velázquez & Bielous, 2019).

In the same sense of community involvement and protagonism, the interviewee (E1) highlights that it is necessary to impact people in real life, and that there is no impact through "Power Point Presentations". This means providing opportunities for improvements in light of the real demands of the communities or places where the projects are carried out. Therefore, it is essential that there is an insertion and approximation with the beneficiaries, avoiding a mere "colonization" of ideas coming from abroad (Baggio, Queiroz & Cunha, 2019).

The need to rethink the purposes of client companies and projects is evidenced in the interviewee's interview (E2): "we work precisely in trying to find and connect this more human side of the companies". It is understood, therefore, the strengthening of a **relational capital** (André & Abreu, 2006; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010; Cefai, 2014) in the Smile Flame relationship, as an intermediary social enterprise, considering that the projects contracted by other organizations are designed to create a positive impact, allowing the fight against social problems, and having a look at profit as a consequence of every action taken (Petrini, Scherer & Back, 2016).

This brief characterization of the analyzed case highlights elements that make it an intermediary agent in the proposition of social innovations in companies that emerged to meet so-called conventional demands. This configuration is more evident in the methodology used for such intermediation.

## 5.2 Intermediation Methodology between the Social Enterprise and its Public

This section discusses the methodology applied by Smile Flame for the development of social projects. It is understood that such methodology, associated with the company's ability to connect the world of different audiences, can generate social innovation. All the evolution and adaptation of the methodology described here occurred in an organic way, the data collected show that this maturation occurred in a natural and gradual way.

Evolution is a word that marks Smile Flame, as the enterprise understands the need for constant adaptation of its business model and way of working. This is clear in E1's interview: "[...] we are changing our methodology all the time, applying it, addressing the feedback quickly, fixing it, changing it again [...] so, it happens all the time at Smile". This feature is associated with the subcategories **opportunities** and **collaboration**. The observation allowed

access to the methodology used. As it was being followed at the time of data collection, it starts with the application of an adapted Canvas (visual tool that helps in understanding the essence of the business, which was accessed during the participant observation) with the client company in order to get to know it (Table 3). The intention is to deeply understand your purpose (E2).

**Table 3**

Canvas

Elements	Description
Context	Current context of the organization;
Dreams	What dreams the companies has and wants to achieve. They would act as a "magic wand" which companies can utilize to create and transform whatever they like;
Fears	What keeps the client up at night in relation to the project;
Role in the World	Which social issue the company would like to address;
References	Which organization the company wishes to be similar to;
Objectives	The objectives for the company and for the project;
Target Audience	Who the company will have a relationship with, through experiences;
Language and Tone	Type of language utilized with the public, for example: fun tone, serious, sarcastic, humorous;
Metrics/Indicators	Which metrics are used to evaluate the success of the project, for example: growth of the number of followers.

Source: Research data.

Applied Canvas is related to creative and innovative means, brought by André and Abreu (2006), in Figure 1. Among the items worked, "dreams" can be associated with stimuli, since stimuli are understood as adversities, such as social inequalities. Therefore, overcoming this adversity is understood as achieving a dream. The item "means" refers to the context of the organization, it is possible to point out the relationship within Smile Flame and the relationship with the customer. This means is characterized by three pillars: cultural diversity, tolerance and the active participation of all.

The notion of **collaboration** highlighted in the presence of stakeholders in the processes (André & Abreu, 2006; Bignetti, 2011; Morais Neto, Pereira & Moritz, 2012; Segatto, Silva & Justen, 2019), once again remains explicit in the interviewee's interview (E1), when he reinforces the participation of everyone involved: "[...] we bring the whole team together to see what are the ways to generate help [...] we hold meetings daily to make a checkpoint". In addition to this tool, E3 shows that, after its application, we have the development or alignment of the purpose from a tool called Golden Circle, which aims to bring out a deep understanding of why companies do what they do, that is, its reason for existence. Finally, ideas are worked on from a brainstorming session in which members appointed by the contracting company participate, with the facilitation of the team involved. All these items generate materials that are sent to the customer for evaluation and approval.

An understanding of a pattern for this creative process with the client is identified, however, these processes end up having adaptations according to the objectives and type of product that the company wants to hire (E3). After the approval of this document by the client, the work of identifying the reality of those impacted is made, who were originally identified in Canvas, directly related to the **social transformation** (Brunelli & Cavazote, 2019; Monteiro, 2019) that is expected to generate. For this, **collaboration** is essential. The conversation with those affected emerges as a need to understand what their real need is, what they need or what can be delivered as a result of real and positive change (E1). This collaborative process is in line with the premise that social innovation arises through a participatory model, generating engagement to solve problems of a social and environmental order (Segatto, Silva & Justen, 2019).

During the interview, E2 highlights that the process of identifying the reality of those affected has recently changed. The perception of specialists in the areas in which the social project is being developed was included. This stage arose from a need for a project on child violence, where those affected are children, that is, it would not be possible to interact and understand their realities in a deeper way. Thus, the approximation with specialists in the area proved to be extremely relevant, allowing for a deeper understanding of contexts and ideas (E2), often with a more neutral look. Such characteristics reveal an idea of creating something that really makes sense to the impacted one, and not just the delivery of a final product that may not be relevant. Through this perspective, there is a relationship with the bottom-up approach, with the active participation of beneficiaries (Butkevičienė, 2009; Velázquez & Bielous; 2019), that is, something created within the reality where the affected person lives. The above is anchored in the perspectives of **collaboration** (stakeholders), **adversity** (stimulation) and **social transformation** (influence).

Then, after understanding the reality of those affected and what actually makes sense to them, some hypotheses are developed and based on a creative sketch, ideas are generated to be presented to the client. The main focus in this presentation is that the project really makes sense for the client who is hiring (E1). At this time, the contractor himself still participates in the creation of the social project. Thus, once again a collaborative and relationship chain between Smile Flame, the contracting company and those affected is realized, which is directly linked to the process of social innovation (André & Abreu, 2006; Bignetti, 2011; Morais Neto, Pereira & Moritz, 2012).

For interviewees E1 and E2, after these steps we move to the design of the project and the entire strategy to execute can commence. This step is called "bringing the project to life", with elements ranging from communication to attracting strategic partners. Each project has characteristics aligned with its scope. For example, a project related to organ donation was successful in its



dissemination through Instagram and also had the support of influencers who went to the client company to talk about the topic (E2), as a result there was a greater engagement of employees in creating awareness.

Based on the example, we can see here the potential that the organization has to cause **social transformation** based on the employees' perception of the topic (Brunelli & Cavazote, 2019). Finally, the metrics to be used to measure whether the project was successful are discussed. From the interviews, it was observed that, in general, the methods used are based on spontaneous media feedback. But, it became evident that this is one of the most challenging elements for the company.

It is possible to say that the described methodology was consolidated over time. The organization demonstrates an understanding of the importance of collaborative work, strengthening ties of trust and cooperation with everyone involved in the projects (André & Abreu, 2006; Cefaï, 2014; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010). Considering that the interactions between those involved in the project can generate social innovation, the next subchapter seeks to highlight the social innovation present in projects already developed, both from the perspective of their results, as in the construction processes themselves.

### 5.3 Social Innovation and the Projects Developed

Imagine the following situation: grandpa and grandma live peacefully in a nursing home, and on a Sunday morning, they are invited to evaluate amazing skateboarding tricks during a competition, which takes place in the nursing home, all with the presence of DJs and spectators (Draft, 2020). This is the *Skate no Asilo* project, the first authorial project executed by Smile Flame. For E1, this project expresses the essence of the business: “[...] being able to bring this fun, light, relaxed, [approach] which is the strategy we do to generate engagement, generate a result of very high social impact in the end” (E1). It is a project with high **relational capital** and **collaboration**.

**Community** engagement from the event generated an increase in financial and input donations, and media coverage for the nursing home where the event took place (E1). This denotes the community's recognition of that initiative as being aligned with their needs (Butkevičienė, 2009; Baggio, Queiroz & Cunha, 2019; Velázquez & Bielous, 2019). These characteristics reveal a new way of seeking donations, considered by the enterprise as socially innovative, no longer working with the idea of "donating due to feeling sorry", the donations increase due to the ties that are created and the **collaboration** throughout the entire creation process and project execution. This new form is directly linked to an interruption of the traditional collection model (André & Abreu, 2006; Andion *et al.*, 2017; Bignetti, 2011), and is accompanied by feelings such as happiness, fun and relaxation. The interviews allow us to infer that the participating companies perceive in these socially

innovative elements the possibility of adopting or reconfiguring their relationships with social demands.

Another project that deserves to be highlighted in this analysis addresses child abuse and was under implementation at the time of data collection, showing itself as an **adversity**, which, although violent, was shown as a stimulus to think about an answer to this question. According to E1, the proposal involves a “secret mail” within the school, where children can ask questions without the need to expose themselves, just informing a code that is linked to their name. One of the goals is to encourage children to talk about the subject, also understand that their stage of life involves many approvals and uncertainties, and that this format allows them more freedom to question. So, this letter is analyzed by specialists and, if intervention is needed, there is a conversation with the child. This project clearly shows the intermediation performed by the social business and also the influence on a **social transformation** that involves issues of openness to communication and acceptance in these contexts and territories (Brunelli & Cavazote, 2019; Monteiro, 2019):

[...] we managed to unite a private company with some public bodies that take care of the referrals of children who were abused and we managed to connect these two ends with municipal school teachers, who are in contact with the children every day. [...], we were able to show how to understand signs when the child is going through something, how to work on this in the classroom, and also when this happens, where to refer these children, what are the next steps (E2).

Associated with the described methodology, it was from the application of Canvas that the idea of impacting the city where the contracting company is located emerged, considering its high rates of child abuse (E1 and E2). The reflections presented here suggest that social innovation arose, initially, from the problem that the city where the company is located suffers with (André & Abreu, 2006; Barendsen & Gardner, 2004). Subsequently, from the relational capital and collaboration between the various actors, namely: Smile Flame, client company, public agencies and schools, it was possible to develop a project that achieves a greater purpose (André & Abreu, 2006; Morais Neto, Pereira & Moritz, 2012).

Along the same lines, interviewee E3 emphasizes the creation of purpose and engagement. He brings as an example a project carried out with a bar located in the city of Porto Alegre, where the contracted product was +1. The project aims to restructure a school for people with special needs. E1 highlights that, every month, the +1 was linked to a different type of beer marketed by the establishment, and it was precisely the one most sold. It is evident that the public understands the idea and buys the linked product, as they know that the amount is being collected for a greater purpose (E1, E3).

Additionally, E2 mentions an action made with a hamburger shop, also located in the city of Porto Alegre, where people experiencing homelessness were judges in a hamburger competition. Value is perceived in these actions

as they are able to draw attention to this community and also bring them together for a moment of relaxation. This can be the starting point for an increase in visibility in the search for **social transformation**. Similarly, E2 discusses another project in which she is also able to perceive social innovation, called "Donation Myths" (Mitos da Doação), which was carried out with employees of an organization in the financial area. This project allowed collaborators to break different paradigms about organ donation, recognizing an **opportunity** in this stimulus, and the mobilization of **resources** with a view towards **knowledge**. The interviewee understands that the language used in this action allowed employees to have a greater understanding of the subject: "[...] what we achieve is, finally, to transform serious matters into subjects that we can start talking at the table, with our family" (E2).

Given these ideas, engagement is the greatest strength present in these projects, as discussed earlier by E1, about the *Skate no Asilo* project, in which people usually say: "[...] I came here because of the skateboarding championship, I knew it was a cool project, [...] but when I got here, when I saw the grandpas [...] I understood the dimension of this project!" (E1). Finally, E3 highlights that they understand the fact that small and medium-sized companies are able to carry out social projects with high impact as a form of great innovation.

In the same vein, E2 reflects that she understands innovation as the ability to address serious causes, but in a "light" way: "[...] I really feel that this is a project, which we managed to place during families' lunch conversations about a very important subject" (E2), referring to the Donation Myths project.

By drawing a parallel between the ideas exposed by the interviewees, it is clear that the **adversities** seen by the clients are treated as **opportunities** for improvement (André & Abreu, 2006; Barendsen & Gardner, 2004; Cefai, 2014; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010). The subjects covered, even though delicate, are treated in a relaxed way.

Thus, the contribution of this research considers Smile Flame's purpose alignment with social demands and its proposition of projects, whose core is social innovation. It is possible to recognize in the methodologies developed and contextually adapted by this social enterprise, an effort to present conventional companies with alternatives, in addition to traditional innovation, in their products and processes, innovative social forms of meeting society's increasingly complex demands. From this perspective, the social effects resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic are highlighted, and for which more intense forces between government, companies and civil society will be required.

## 6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In view of the increasing demands of society regarding the role played by companies, it is understood that is no longer a possible option to focus only on profit, without

this being questioned. Companies have been led to take a stand on social and environmental issues, beyond commercial objectives of a strictly economic order. In this scenario, terminologies appear associated with others that are already widely known in the organizational environment and that aim to spark the attention and commitment of organizations, such as the case of social innovation, highlighted in this research.

It is understandable that companies that were conceived only with a focus on profit and economic commitments have difficulties in contemporary times to migrate to a model that adds social and environmental aspects to their practices. However, it is also essential that they are willing to undertake this process, as ignoring it will also lead to economic losses. In this sense, social enterprises that seek to act precisely in this intermediation, allowing conventional companies to get to know and engage in socially innovative propositions are set.

Associated with this, the objective of the research was to analyze how a social enterprise can act as an intermediary agent when developing projects for conventional companies that wish to promote social innovation. The case analyzed, motivated by the purpose that founded it, can be understood as a social enterprise that acts as an intermediary for the challenge faced by conventional companies. Because of this, its representativeness for discussion on the phenomenon, not new, but growing, of social innovation, and its wide possibilities of integration in the new and necessary ways of doing business are recognized.

The research allowed the broadening of the understanding about the role of social enterprises and, mainly, the role of companies in general as drivers of actions that benefit society. Collaborative relationships were evidenced as a central axis in the development of social projects that consider different perspectives and real demands, aligned with social innovation as a process of practices with a social purpose. Thus, the view of social innovation being social is reinforced not only in terms of its end, but also in terms of its means.

As an indication for future research, we recommend listening to other enterprises that act in a similar way to expand the knowledge of the methodologies used and social innovations generated in other contexts. In addition, another relevant point is greater attention to metrics that seek to understand the impacts of the projects developed, as well as analysis that considers the challenges and changes required during the Covid-19 pandemic period.

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