




Responsible innovation in social enterprises: A catalyst for sustainable change

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Abstract

This article delves into the critical role of responsible innovation within social enterprises, framing it as a cornerstone for sustainable and equitable progress. It scrutinizes how blending business acumen with a commitment to social good can drive transformative changes, despite the inherent challenges posed by aligning ethical imperatives with traditional business goals.

Responsible innovation, characterized by its focus on ethical, inclusive, and sustainable development emerges as a guiding principle for social enterprises. These organizations, defined by their mission to benefit society and the environment, face the intricate task of balancing innovation with responsibility. The article uses the case studies of iThrive Games and Rebecca's Natural Food to illustrate how social enterprises can successfully navigate this balancing act, showcasing the power of responsible innovation in fostering teen mental health and promoting sustainable eating. Ultimately, it posits that social enterprises are at the forefront of a broader movement towards a business ethos that prioritizes long-term societal and environmental well-being over immediate profit, paving the way for a more responsible global economy.

Keywords: Responsible Innovation; Social Enterprises; Social Entrepreneurship; Sustainability.

1. Introduction

In the quest for a more equitable and sustainable future, social enterprises have emerged as vital players, blending the drive of business with a commitment to social good (Kickul and Lyons, 2020). Central to their impact is the concept of responsible innovation—an approach that prioritizes ethical, inclusive, and sustainable development (Von Schomberg, 2013; Iakovleva et al., 2021a; 2024). This article explores the role of responsible innovation in social enterprises, examining its implications, challenges, and potential as a catalyst for sustainable change.

Responsible innovation (RI) refers to the process of developing new products, services, or processes with a conscious focus on their long-term impact on society and the environment. It involves anticipating and addressing potential ethical, social, and ecological issues at the outset (Owen et al., 2013; Stilgoe et al., 2013; 2020). The principles of RI include inclusivity, sustainability, reflexivity, and responsiveness. These principles ensure that innovation is not only about technological advancement but also about considering its broader impact on society and the environment. However, in the landscape of modern business practices, the implementation of RI principles often collides with traditional business requirements. This tension is emblematic of a deeper chasm between ethical imperatives and profit-driven goals, as discussed by Blok & Lemmens (2015). Transparency is a cornerstone of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), advocating for the equal distribution of information among all stakeholders. However, in the real-world business environment, this principle frequently encounters the hurdle of information asymmetry, where some parties hold more information than others, often leading to competitive advantages and a reluctance to share knowledge openly.

The idea of co-creation, another pillar of RRI, emphasizes shared responsibility in investment and innovation processes. Nonetheless, this collaborative approach to innovation is at odds with the conventional view where



businesses bear the investment burden alone and thus claim the resulting rewards exclusively. Stakeholder involvement, imperative to RRI, risks the peril of knowledge leakage. In the pursuit of inclusive innovation, involving various stakeholders could inadvertently lead to the dissemination of sensitive information, undercutting the competitive edge of the innovating entity. Moreover, the pursuit of RRI for the public good can precipitate what Blok (2019) describes as ‘innovation as creative destruction.’ This paradox lies in the drive for social good that could disrupt existing markets, displace current products, and render established industries obsolete, thus creating a conflict with the ingrained business ethos of market dominance and stability.

Integrating RI into the fabric of business practices poses a complex challenge, yet it is one that social enterprises may be uniquely equipped to address. These mission-driven organizations, with their inherent focus on social value, could inherently synchronize with the ethos of RI, suggesting a promising avenue for exploration. Social enterprises are businesses that exist primarily to benefit society and the environment, rather than to maximize profits for shareholders (Dees, 1998; Kerlin, 2009). They operate across various sectors, addressing issues like poverty, education, health, and environmental sustainability. For social enterprises, responsible innovation is not just a strategy; it’s integral to their ethos (Santos, 2012). They often lead the way in developing solutions that are not only effective but also ethical and sustainable. By doing so, they set an example for the broader business community. One of the main challenges faced by social enterprises is balancing the drive for innovation with the need to remain responsible and ethical (Austin et al., 2006). This balancing act requires a deep understanding of the social and environmental context in which they operate. Despite these challenges, social enterprises have significant opportunities to create impact through responsible innovation. They can drive systemic change, influence public policy, and inspire conventional businesses to adopt more responsible practices. By critically examining how social enterprises apply RI principles, we can gain valuable insights into their implications.

For the two ventures we examine in this paper, we describe and demonstrate the power of responsible innovation in creating positive social and environmental impact. The first venture, iThrive Games, is focused on promoting teen mental health and well-being through meaningful gaming experiences. The venture employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining positive psychology and youth development principles to design games that support teen thriving. The second venture, Rebecca’s Natural Food, is a socially minded grocer that provides locally sourced, sustainable, and healthy products for the public. These case studies provide valuable lessons on the importance of aligning innovation with ethical and sustainable practices, and the potential of social enterprises to lead the way in responsible innovation.

In conclusion, responsible innovation in social enterprises represents a hopeful pathway towards a more equitable and sustainable future. By prioritizing ethical, inclusive, and sustainable practices, social enterprises not only address immediate social and environmental challenges but also pave the way for a broader shift in how we approach business and innovation. As they continue to grow and evolve, their role in shaping a more responsible and responsive global economy will undoubtedly expand, offering lessons and inspiration for all sectors of society.

2. Social Enterprises and the Quest for Responsible Innovation

Social enterprises (SEs) are unique organizations that operate to pursue social or environmental goals while generating revenue through their business activities. The concept of social entrepreneurship emerged in the late 1990s, representing a relatively recent phenomenon compared to the long-standing practice of corporate social responsibility, which dates to the 1960s (Mulloth, Kickul, and Gundry 2016; Peterson and Schenker 2018; Short, Moss, and Lumpkin 2009). Since its inception, social entrepreneurship, characterized by SEs addressing societal challenges through revenue-generating activities, has gained significant attention from policymakers, practitioners, and researchers (Haugh 2012; Mair and Martí 2006; Short et al. 2009).

These various stakeholders have recognized the potential of SEs to effectively deliver goods and services to underserved individuals and groups (Haugh, 2012). Notable examples include the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh (Bornstein, 1997), renowned for its provision of microfinance to empower impoverished individuals, and the

Aravind Eye Hospital in India, known for offering high-quality, affordable eye care services, particularly cataract surgeries, to marginalized populations.

Defining SEs and figuring out the boundaries of the SEs has remained a complex task as the boundaries of SEs are expanding with every new idea of a social venture, and SEs have complex structures influenced highly by local political, social, and economic contexts (Dees 1998). Notwithstanding the concerns about the definition of SE, in recent decades, the social entrepreneurship phenomenon has attracted much attention of entrepreneurs, including those involved in nonprofit work. There are multiple reasons for nonprofit organizations to turn to social enterprises, such as to gain freedom from restrictions posted by the governments, make up for the lost government support money and grants, diversify funding sources, deliver long-term sustainability, develop an entrepreneurial spirit within the organization, and take benefits of new market opportunities (Bornstein 2007; Dees 1998).

Social enterprises (SEs) distinguish themselves in the business world by merging financial sustainability with their unwavering commitment to social and environmental missions. This distinctive positioning enables SEs to not just aim for profit, but to innovatively tackle pressing societal issues, enhancing the welfare of marginalized communities (Seelos and Mair, 2005; Austin, Stevenson, and Wei-Skillern, 2006; Dees and Anderson, 2003; Defourny and Nyssens, 2010; Bacq and Janssen, 2011). They operate on a multi-bottom-line approach that demands a balance among social impact, environmental stewardship, and financial health, re-investing earnings back into their missions rather than distributing them as shareholder dividends (Thompson and Doherty, 2006; Thompson, 2008; Battilana and Lee, 2014).

This intricate balance naturally aligns SEs with the principles of RI, where the focus is not only on ‘what’ is being innovated but also on the ‘how’ and ‘for whom’. RI, a concept with the promise to address global challenges, calls for practices that are inclusive, anticipative of future impacts, and reflective of underlying values (Bacq and Aguilera, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2018; Thapa and Iakovleva, 2019; 2023). Innovation and entrepreneurial activities must start with inclusive engagement of diverse stakeholders—public sector, NGOs, citizens, and customers—to gather broad perspectives on societal needs, promoting open innovation and consensus for legitimacy (Owen, Macnaghten, and Stilgoe 2012; Chesbrough 2006; Long and Blok 2018; Huang et al. 2024; Bessant et al., 2024). Anticipating potential impacts of ventures allows for critical reflection on both positive and negative externalities, beyond financial outcomes (Guston 2014; te Kolve and Rip 2011; Oftedal et al., 2019; Zahra and Wright 2016). Reflexivity involves considering the value offered to stakeholders and society, balancing expectations with reality to build a strong societal image and maintain sustainable relationships (Stilgoe, Owen, and Macnaghten 2013; Naughton et al., 2023, Ødegård et al., 2021). Responsiveness requires innovators to respect societal actors, integrating societal and environmental well-being with profit, as today’s social expectations of business have evolved (Meijboom, Visak, and Brom 2006; Zahra and Wright 2016). Without these principles, ventures risk failure and detriment to both entrepreneurs and society.

These RI principles are particularly pertinent to SEs, where inclusivity in decision-making and operations ensures that diverse stakeholder perspectives are considered, especially those who are typically marginalized or unheard (Bacq and Aguilera, 2022; Blok and Lemmens, 2015; Bessant et al., 2019). The principle of anticipation guides SEs to consider the long-term consequences of their innovations, making choices that are sustainable and beneficial over time. Similarly, reflection in SEs entails ongoing critical self-assessment, ensuring that their actions align with broader social values and ethical considerations.

However, despite their intrinsic alignment with RI, many SEs, like traditional firms, grapple with effectively embedding these principles into their practices. While the private sector shows an interest in RI (Garst et al., 2017; Scholten & Blok, 2015; Martinuzzi et al., 2018), it lacks a comprehensive framework that includes all stakeholders and accounts for the full innovation lifecycle (Blok et al., 2015; Thapa and Iakovleva, 2023; Iakovleva et al., 2021a; 2024). Questions about the appropriate timing and methods of stakeholder involvement persist



(Silva et al., 2019), and yet, SEs are often better equipped to weave these stakeholders into the fabric of their innovation processes.

Traditional firms can learn from the RI approaches of SEs, which showcase how to infuse RI with business strategies authentically and meaningfully. The interplay between RI ideals and the realities of competitive markets requires rigorous inquiry (Brand and Blok, 2019). By delving into how SEs integrate RI principles—particularly inclusion, anticipation, and reflection—we can forge a path for conventional firms to follow. SEs prove that RI can transcend theoretical bounds to become an actionable business practice, characterized by a conscientious and forward-thinking mindset.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research method, particularly case studies, which are ideal for exploring areas with limited existing theories or where understanding a specific context's dynamics is crucial (Eisenhard, 1989). Scholars have highlighted the effectiveness of case studies in SME environments for both testing and developing theories, as well as crafting conceptual frameworks for measuring outcomes (Chetty, 1996). This method enabled the incorporation of diverse data types and crucial background contexts into the analysis of social enterprises' potential to pioneer responsible innovation (Yin, 2009; Emmel, 2013).

To move away from traditional “hero”-centric case studies, we intentionally chose smaller, relatively new social enterprises as our subjects (Nicholls, 2008; Perren, 2018). This choice reflects our aim to examine organizations that better represents the common characteristics of early-stage social enterprises, despite the challenging notion of defining a “typical” social entrepreneur. The authors gathered insights through extensive interviews and observations at iThrive Games and Rebecca's Natural Foods, involving management, staff, and customers, over a year from February 2021 to March 2022. This included 12 interviews at iThrive Games, with durations ranging from 25 to 75 minutes, and 17 at Rebecca's Natural Foods, lasting between 25 and 100 minutes. Additionally, they reviewed archival materials like company reports and articles, with most interviews being recorded and transcribed. This comprehensive approach provided a deep understanding of the organizations' growth and innovations.

The interviews were semi-structured discussions focused on reviewing and understanding the data these organizations collected on their social innovation efforts. This aimed to explore the roles social enterprises have in leading responsible innovation. Additionally, conversations with founders and key stakeholders were held to delve into the organization's theory of change and their perspectives on social innovations, enriching the data collection process with diverse insights into their approaches and impacts.

The authors deliberately chose to structure their inquiry around these two organizations for several reasons. Current scholarship had offered criticisms of early qualitative social entrepreneurship scholarship, highlighting the bias of pioneering case studies toward successful, leading social enterprises that were not necessarily representative of the field (Sharir and Lerner, 2006; Van Slyke and Newman, 2006). Both iThrive Games and Rebecca's Natural Foods were more representative of small-scale, early growth SMEs targeting responsible innovation through community development and entrepreneurship (Bornstein, 2007; Esty, 1995). They also chose these organizations to contribute original social enterprise research perspectives on ventures operating in smaller regional economies within developed countries. As a smaller city, Charlottesville Virginia, served as the ideal “neutral ground” for observing how small-to medium social enterprises operate in physical and socioeconomic environments without the prominent presence of not-for-profit anchoring institutions, social entrepreneurship booster foundations or billions of dollars in impact financing. We will now turn to the two case studies to explore these issues more substantively.

4. iThrive Games: Advancing Social Change and Innovation in Gaming

iThrive Games, launched in 2014 with support from the DN Batten Foundation and led by President Batten, focused on developing “meaningful games” aimed at enhancing teens' health and well-being (Mulloth and Rivers, 2018). The organization's mission involved collaborating with game developers and engaging teenagers



throughout the development process, from idea generation to testing, to promote positive growth through gaming. By employing a social entrepreneurial strategy and leveraging a positive psychology framework, iThrive aimed to build a supportive community involving developers, researchers, funders, young people, educators, and parents to significantly impact the field of meaningful games and enrich the lives of teenagers.

The iThrive team recognized a gap in opportunities for teens to develop key life skills through technology and noted that digital games offered a unique avenue for meaningful engagement. Games challenged teens to learn and grow, providing “hard fun” that rewarded effort and persistence. Through gaming, teens exercised choice, faced emotional and complex themes like empathy and social justice, and developed problem-solving skills, all within a social context. This approach aimed to harness the ubiquitous nature of gaming among teens for positive development.

Innovating for Growth: Strategies in Research and Development

iThrive Games harnessed gaming to foster teens’ social and emotional growth, employing positive psychology and youth development principles. By integrating strengths-based approaches and positive gameplay, iThrive aimed to empower teens with resilience and well-being skills. The organization collaborated closely with teens in the game design process, ensuring games not only entertained but also supported developmental needs. Through multidisciplinary expertise, iThrive’s initiatives strived to make a meaningful impact on teen thriving, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and utilizing individual strengths for personal and community benefit.

Initiatives and Pilot Programs

A. Designing Games for Adolescent Empowerment and Growth

iThrive collaborated with its expanding professional network to support game developers eager to create socially impactful games, particularly for enhancing teen development.

Recognizing the lack of resources available to these developers, iThrive assisted them in their mission to produce games that are not only engaging but also foster positive growth among teens. This partnership focused on three main activities to bolster their efforts.

i. Design Kits

iThrive developed “design kits” to aid game developers in creating games focused on teen learning and mental well-being. These kits, available for free on iThrive’s website, offer science-based resources to enhance social and emotional skills like empathy and cooperation. They feature design tips, frameworks for impactful games, and resources for a strengths-based approach. iThrive aimed to produce 20 kits within two years, collaborating with experts in teen development and positive psychology, and testing these resources in various professional settings to ensure their effectiveness.

ii. Design Hives

iThrive’s design hives were collaborative think tanks featuring leading game developers and scholars, aimed at refining development tools and expanding its mission’s reach. These sessions served as a platform for exchanging expertise, fostering industry connections, and soliciting feedback to enhance iThrive’s strategies. Additionally, they facilitated relationships with professionals and encouraged the design of games focused on teens’ welfare.

Occasional collaborations with educators and mental health experts also enriched the relevance of these projects across related fields.

iii. Game Jams

iThrive’s game jams are 48-hour events where teams create games around themes like kindness, engaging a mix of novice and experienced developers. These jams serve dual purposes: fostering the creation of meaningful game prototypes aligned with iThrive’s mission and testing the effectiveness of iThrive’s design kits. With industry



mentorship and partnerships, these jams not only yield innovative game prototypes but also refine iThrive's tools and extend its impact. Highlights include significant contributions to global game jams and recognition for promoting positive themes in game development.

B. Crafting Games: A Teen-Centric Approach

iThrive's Game Design Studio empowered teens with essential social, emotional, and STEM skills through interactive game design. It offered teens a platform to express themselves and explore their identities through game creation, focusing on life-relevant themes. This approach deepened the understanding of teen issues, fostering meaningful game development with direct input from the teens themselves. It transformed teens from passive consumers into informed media critics and creators, enhancing their decision-making skills and motivating them to take charge of their learning and development.

C. Leveraging Video Games for Psychological Well-being

iThrive's initiative combines mental health education with gaming to support teen wellness. Recognizing games as vital for teen connections and positive behavior changes, it challenges the misconception that games are harmful. Partnering with Centerstone of America, iThrive uses games designed with mental health professionals and commercial titles to improve teens' understanding and management of mental health. This approach aims to increase access to mental health care, addressing the significant number of teens with untreated mental health conditions by leveraging games' popularity for better engagement and treatment outcomes.

D. Enhancing Learning Through Gaming

iThrive aimed to revolutionize education by integrating game-based learning to bolster teens' social and emotional skills, crucial for their well-being and success. Collaborating with educators, iThrive developed curricula using commercial games for immersive and engaging learning experiences. These initiatives, designed to foster collaboration, reflection, and deep learning, were part of a broader effort to equip teachers with tools for enhancing students' resilience and engagement. The effort included creating supportive networks, curricular guides, and professional development resources to expand game-based learning's reach and impact in schools.

Driving Social Innovation

Through nine game jams and 448 game prototypes, iThrive aimed to enrich research in meaningful games and enhance community practices. This initiative encouraged broad participation and public involvement in innovation, making scientific insights more accessible and applicable. Through its initiatives and pilot studies, iThrive developed new ways to foster empathy, helping individuals connect with and understand others' emotions and viewpoints. This has led to more compassionate and responsible actions in society.

Stakeholder interviews highlighted iThrive as a leader in fostering responsible innovation and achieving a significant, united effect. iThrive's game design principles emphasized "reflexivity" and "inclusivity", employing a collaborative codesign method to foster empathy and connection among players. iThrive excelled in "anticipating" potential outcomes and adapting its strategies to positively influence societal factors. This was achieved by engaging various stakeholders and establishing success measures in line with Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) principles. The organization was committed to setting and periodically reviewing clear objectives, assembling multidisciplinary design teams tailored to each project to ensure a rich blend of expertise.

iThrive championed social innovation through user-centered design, actively involving game developers, educators, mental health professionals, and especially teens in the creation process to ensure their projects delivered maximum value. By engaging teens as co-creators, iThrive not only fostered their sense of ownership but also ensured the development of games that are socially responsible and meet developmental needs. This approach underlined the shift from singular innovation sources towards collaborative networks, emphasizing the importance of "inclusivity" and "reflexivity" in fostering broader innovation ecosystems. iThrive updated stakeholders on the latest field advancements, spearheaded tech development efforts, and acted as a bridge connecting teens, game developers, educators, and mental health professionals with initiatives like design hives and game jams. This positioned iThrive at the forefront of a new paradigm in public tech engagement, enhancing



societal stakeholder roles by empowering teens, mental health professionals, and educators with active participation opportunities.

iThrive was crucial in foreseeing scenarios and actively involving various stakeholders to meet Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) standards. This was particularly vital as numerous games and technologies, despite having competitive edges and clear needs, either failed or didn't achieve the anticipated market impact. As technology and games advanced, iThrive strategically chose to focus on mental health and education through gaming, targeting areas ripe for innovation. This approach aimed at establishing success in critical domains before expanding into others, emphasizing games as tools for teen development across diverse communities. iThrive's dedication to at-risk youth and its efforts to achieve quick wins, such as organizing design hives and game jams, highlighted its social mission and commitment to impactful gaming solutions. iThrive believed that proving the potential of new gaming technologies would attract corporate and venture capital investment towards commercialization. Emphasizing the critical role of translational research, iThrive aligned with the Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) framework to drive societal change. This phase, often underfunded and challenging, was where iThrive made a significant impact by funding innovative games and fostering partnerships across the industry, demonstrating a commitment to bridging the gap between research and practical application for societal benefit.

5. Rebecca's Natural Food: Fostering Health and Community

Founded in 1987, Rebecca's Natural Food (Rebecca's) has been at the forefront of promoting healthy, sustainable, and locally sourced food free from hormones. Adopting a unique social entrepreneurship model, the store has deeply engaged with the Charlottesville community and formed collaborations with small businesses. This strategy has distinguished Rebecca's as a retailer committed to high standards, significantly influencing local food culture and consumer habits (Mulloth, 2023).

Rebecca's prioritized exceptional customer service, offering the Charlottesville community access to local, eco-friendly, and healthful foods and supplements. Their mission was to promote a healthy lifestyle through a selection of premium quality foods and supplements, supporting the well-being of local residents.

Strategies for Expansion and Innovation

The Rebecca's team was committed to delivering top-notch customer service and fostering close ties with community stakeholders to uniquely shape their products and collaborations. This approach aimed to distinguish them from larger, impersonal competitors in the health food market, such as Amazon/Whole Foods, by emphasizing local and personal connections. As Rebecca's experienced growth, the team pinpointed four crucial strategic pillars essential for their advancement, detailed in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Strategy and Implementation Techniques.

Strategy	Implementation
Aggregate and share knowledge	To keep up with the latest developments in health and wellness. Provide up-to-date information to various stakeholders through the website, newsletter, and social media.
Increase awareness	Expand our customer base through improved social media and public awareness. Host awareness events and cultivate media opportunities to educate and highlight important milestones.
Cultivate the next generation	To ensure the continuity of Rebecca's as long-term employees retire. Provide educational opportunities for clinicians and scientists by supporting fellowships and internships.
Continuous service improvement	Serving our customers better by strengthening operational procedures, such as: rapid reordering, reducing losses from theft or supplier shortages, taking advantage of pricing opportunities to increase margins,



having staff work efficiently on the floor with customers to give us better service and a sense of activity.

Source: Developed by the author.

At its heart, Rebecca's valued its employees, offering comprehensive benefits including health insurance, paid holidays, and support during hardships, a commitment that became particularly significant during the COVID-19 pandemic. To adapt, Rebecca's introduced an online ordering system for safer customer service options like curbside pickup and home delivery. Additionally, the founders collaborated with healthcare professionals to ensure that patients could easily access necessary supplements from Rebecca's, showcasing their dedication to both employee welfare and community health needs.

Driving Social Innovation

Rebecca's leveraged its initiatives to cultivate empathy and meaningful connections, steering towards a compassionate local and regional community. By embracing "collective impact," Rebecca's aimed for widespread systematic change, a strategy distinct from usual cross-sector collaborations. This method is built on five pillars: unified goals, shared outcomes, coordinated efforts, ongoing dialogue, and robust central leadership, ensuring alignment and transparency among stakeholders, underpinned by a dedicated organization at the helm to guide the collective efforts. By focusing on community food security, Rebecca's not only enhanced its social capital but also strengthened community ties and civic engagement. The longevity of Rebecca's impact is attributed to consumer commitment to health and sustainability. However, Rebecca's choices in location, pricing, and product offerings, reflecting specific cultural and socioeconomic preferences, may inadvertently exclude some groups. Instead of viewing this as a shortfall in community building, it's insightful to consider how alternative food movements affect diverse members of the community.

Stakeholder interviews had showcased Rebecca's as a trailblazer in responsible innovation and meaningful community engagement. Its dedication to reflexivity and inclusivity was evident through its customer-centric philosophy, building strong connections. The initiative had proactively met societal needs, embracing diversity and pivoting to offer unique, local products to improve community health. Rebecca's commitment to clear goals, ongoing refinement, and hiring specialists to guide customers underscored its contribution to promoting healthier living choices.

Having expanded its product range and enhanced its service, Rebecca's was dedicated to promoting sustainable, healthy eating and strengthening community practices. By fostering broad engagement and easing access to its products, Rebecca's served as a pivotal community figure, cultivating a culture of trust through user-centric innovations. The organization engaged customers from varied backgrounds as co-creators, boosting their involvement and accountability to the community.

Rebecca's actively developed and supported ethical food initiatives, creating a network abundant in incentives, expertise, and resources. This approach, highlighting ecosystem collaboration and a dedication to reflexivity and inclusivity, successfully navigated the complexities of innovation. Rebecca's moved beyond conventional methods, utilizing shared knowledge to drive forward sustainable eating practices and connect diverse stakeholders with the community. This method marked a transition to cooperative innovation, emphasizing the critical role of flexibility and community involvement in influencing the future of food and health.

As the complexity of community needs grew, Rebecca's strategically chose to concentrate on food products and body care supplements, aiming for significant impact in these essential areas before expanding further. The focus was also on promoting locally sourced, organic items across various communities. Additionally, Rebecca's leveraged social media and events to boost public awareness and education, targeting "easy wins" to effectively communicate their milestones and benefits.

Rebecca's strategy anticipated that validating community-focused initiatives would inspire larger companies to support the local food sector, fostering a culture of healthy eating. This approach aligns with the Responsible



Research and Innovation (RRI) framework, emphasizing that research should meet societal needs and values. Rebecca's significantly influenced the challenging phase of translating basic concepts into practical solutions, particularly in emerging markets like the CBD industry, by fostering collaborations across public and private sectors to overcome funding challenges and drive transformative change.

6. Discussion

It is apparent from our two case studies that the broad aim of RI is to connect the practice of research and innovation in the present to the futures that it promises and helps to bring about (Stilgoe et al., 2020). RI was not intended to be another ethical review or bureaucratic hurdle, but rather a positive realignment of innovation to socially desirable ends that was values-based rather than just rules-based. (Owen et al., 2013) It was therefore important to consider the concept of responsibility in the context of innovation as a collective, uncertain, and future-oriented activity.

Our article begins by acknowledging the optimistic vision of RI principles, which promise substantial societal benefits. However, we initially posited that these principles might be at odds with traditional for-profit business models. Upon further examination, we argue that social enterprises—while also profit-seeking—can be more closely aligned with RI principles, thereby experiencing less conflict when integrating RI into their business strategies. Social enterprises operate with the dual mission of generating profit and addressing social imperatives, naturally embodying the ethos of RI. Far from a mere coincidence, this alignment is woven into the fabric of their identity. As entities championing societal and environmental welfare (Dees, 1998; Kerlin, 2009), social enterprises intrinsically advocate for RI principles such as transparency, stakeholder involvement, co-creation, and a commitment to the public good.

In practice, as evident from our cases, RI within social enterprises is evidenced by a profound accountability towards stakeholders, sharply contrasting with the information asymmetry prevalent in conventional business environments. By democratizing information access, social enterprises address risks associated with unequal knowledge distribution, thus enacting a fundamental RI principle (Blok & Lemmens, 2015). Initially funded philanthropically, iThrive aimed to develop a sustainable model by connecting impact investors with gaming start-ups, leveraging its curated knowledge. Questions arose about selecting impactful projects and introducing iThrive-influenced games into the market. In April 2018, iThrive rebranded as iThrive Games Foundation, Inc., becoming a private foundation separate from the Centerstone Research Institute. This shift aimed to reduce costs, promote financial sustainability, and increase autonomy, facilitating the broader adoption of meaningful game technologies and potentially shifting towards influencing public policy on technological innovations for youth well-being.

In the case of Rebecca's, after the advent of giant conglomerates such as Whole Foods to a nearby shopping center, the management were contemplating ways to differentiate their store. It was clear that the expertise and passion of Rebecca's staff was a key competitive advantage.

Yet, the management was confronted with the challenge of continuing to distinguish the store and keep customers coming back. In this context, the team explored the idea of establishing an off-site facility dedicated to CBD processing, alongside the production of their own granola and gluten-free offerings. Additionally, they contemplated forming joint ventures with local farms to enhance their product range. The possibility of expanding their operations to include a network of medical professionals was also considered, aiming to seamlessly integrate these experts with their health and wellness platform. This effort sought to replicate the successful collaboration they had established with the University of Virginia School of Medicine. The advent of the COVID-19 era further presented an opportunity to launch a platform for virtual health consultations and community support groups, utilizing Zoom and other similar technologies. The management envisioned these initiatives to catalyze further adoption of their approach in a financially viable manner because it could help the store stay ahead of the curve and create a unique market niche. As with many organizational leaders of collective impact, Rebecca's will surely shift its role over time, perhaps pivoting from delivering strategic products and



services to advancing public policy focused on the best practices for promoting community health and well-being.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Theoretical Contribution

This article consolidates and advances the understanding of Responsible Innovation (RI) by exploring how social enterprises (SEs) effectively navigate challenges traditionally associated with stakeholder inclusion. Examinations of organizations through the RI framework have shown that meaningful change cannot occur in isolation. Instead, it requires collaborative networks and a deep understanding of stakeholder needs and perspectives. As Inslee and Hendricks (2008) observed, innovative networks have the power to reframe urgent societal challenges into transformative, system-wide opportunities. SEs exemplify this dynamic by embedding co-creation and stakeholder engagement into their core operational frameworks. This inclusive approach not only upholds RI principles but also mitigates risks such as knowledge leakage (Blok, 2019; Iakovleva et al., 2021a; 2024), which are common in conventional business models.

Moreover, the RI tenet of ‘innovation as creative destruction’ is particularly resonant within the context of social entrepreneurship. SEs advance societal welfare by challenging and transforming inefficient or inequitable systems, demonstrating RI’s dedication to the common good (Santos, 2012). For instance, Rebecca’s Natural Food’s pivot to digital innovation and virtual health consultations during the COVID-19 pandemic not only sustained their operations but also deepened their community impact. Similarly, iThrive Games’ emphasis on teen mental health through collaborative game development underscores how SEs embed inclusivity and reflexivity into their innovation processes.

By critically examining the application of RI principles within SEs, this study highlights their capacity to harmonize profit motives with social and environmental objectives. Unlike traditional firms that often struggle with information asymmetry or misaligned goals, SEs leverage stakeholder engagement as an integral and sustainable strategy. This approach facilitates the co-creation of innovative solutions tailored to community needs, aligning with RI’s anticipatory and reflective dimensions.

For example, iThrive Games actively involves teens as co-creators in game development, fostering an inclusive process that directly addresses the needs of its primary beneficiaries. Rebecca’s Natural Food, on the other hand, strengthens local partnerships to enhance community well-being, illustrating how SEs achieve systemic impact by aligning their operations with stakeholder-driven goals. These practices not only exemplify RI principles but also demonstrate how SEs can serve as a paradigm for responsible and sustainable innovation in the broader business world.

This theoretical contribution lies in elucidating the mechanisms through which SEs operationalize RI principles. By addressing and reframing the challenges of stakeholder inclusion, SEs provide a model for embedding ethical and sustainable practices into business strategies. This extends the work of Bacq and Janssen (2011) on the multi-bottom-line approach of SEs, illustrating how financial sustainability can coexist with social and environmental value creation. Additionally, the findings reinforce the importance of reflexivity and responsiveness in sustaining SEs’ long-term impact.

In conclusion, SEs represent a distinctive model of innovation that not only addresses but also redefines the challenges associated with stakeholder inclusion. By linking these insights back to theoretical debates on RI, this study enriches the discourse and paves the way for future research on the applicability of SE practices across diverse organizational contexts. SEs emerge as trailblazers in responsible business practices, demonstrating how RI’s noble aspirations and practical applications can converge to create sustainable and transformative change.

6.2. Implications for practitioners

This study highlights practical ways practitioners can embed Responsible Innovation (RI) into their operations, drawing lessons directly from social enterprises (SEs). Four key strategies emerge:



Engaging stakeholders early and effectively is essential. Practitioners can utilize tools like participatory design workshops or stakeholder mapping to ensure diverse perspectives shape the innovation process from the outset. This approach, as seen in iThrive Games' involvement of teenagers, can transform stakeholders into active collaborators.

Embedding reflexivity into workflows ensures continuous alignment with evolving stakeholder needs. Regular review cycles, as demonstrated by Rebecca's Natural Food during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowed for timely pivots while reinforcing community trust. Collaborating with local networks and communities enhances both relevance and scalability. Rebecca's partnerships with local producers show how leveraging local resources strengthens operations and deepens societal impact.

Finally, adopting adaptive business models enables organizations to iterate effectively in response to changing societal conditions. SEs' agility illustrates how strategic pivots can turn challenges into opportunities, fostering long-term resilience and innovation.

These practices provide a roadmap for integrating RI principles into real-world contexts, showing how innovation can be both responsible and impactful.

6.3. Avenues for Future Research

Future research must chart the course for the private sector to leverage the insights of SEs in applying RI principles effectively and meaningfully, thus contributing to a more accountable and equitable innovation ecosystem.

Studies should explore how the responsibility frameworks and approaches of social entrepreneurs can be adapted and applied across various business sectors. Recent endeavors have initiated this exploration, but there's a need to delve deeper into the practices and lessons learned. Firm practices, reflecting the interplay between actors' skills, organizational dynamics, and both tangible and intangible factors, are pivotal in RI (Buse et al., 2018; Teece et al., 1997; Chen et al., 2022). These practices, steeped in tacit knowledge and routines, are shaped by organizational structures and leadership values, thus influencing the uptake of RI and deserving further investigation.

Social ventures showcase how RI principles can be integrated into firm practices. Yet, considering the broad spectrum of for-profit organizations, the influence of social entrepreneurs can be expanded. Establishing a social enterprise that adheres to RI principles is complex but essential for addressing societal challenges and contributing to sustainable development goals. Research should assess the capabilities, such as Value Absorptive Capacity, that enable firms to embed RI (Garst et al. 2021, 2022), and examine broader networks and ecosystems that facilitate RI's practical application (Jakobsen et al., 2019; Long and Blok, 2017).

Furthermore, regional initiatives like organizational networks and conglomerates may alleviate the challenges of incorporating user inclusiveness in individual firms' R&D processes (Coffay et. al, 2022). Environments akin to Open Innovation labs that encourage co-creation and ease integration into established systems are also promising avenues (Iakovleva et al., 2024). These areas provide fertile ground for research that could illuminate the path for widespread adoption of RI practices, ultimately fostering a business landscape where innovation is both socially conscious and commercially viable.

There are also implications for advancing social enterprise research as a domain. For example, Future research should not only inform how traditional firms might adopt social entrepreneurship (SE) principles but also push the boundaries of SE research itself. While current efforts often aim to translate SE methods to conventional business settings, there is a wealth of untapped potential in studying the unique mechanisms and impacts of SEs.

Scholars should investigate the distinctive practices of SEs in applying RI principles and how these can be refined and enhanced. This includes examining the inner workings of SEs, understanding how they balance social missions with financial sustainability, and the unique challenges they face in scaling their impact.



One area of focus could be the development of specialized frameworks that assess the effectiveness of RI practices within SEs. This would involve identifying metrics that measure social impact in tandem with financial performance, expanding the current understanding of ‘value’ in the business context.

Furthermore, research could probe into how SEs navigate the complexities of stakeholder engagement and co-creation, particularly in addressing power dynamics and ensuring equitable participation. The study of governance structures within SEs that facilitate RI, and how these may differ from or inspire those in traditional firms, could also yield insightful findings. There is also an opportunity to study the role of SEs in driving systemic change, including how they interact with policy and larger economic systems. This encompasses evaluating the influence of SEs on public policy, market dynamics, and societal norms.

Exploring the potential for regional and sector-specific SE models that foster RI practices would provide granular insights into how SEs can be catalysts for sustainable development within different contexts. Additionally, examining the role of technology and digital platforms in amplifying the reach and efficiency of SEs could highlight new pathways for innovation. By expanding research to these areas, scholars can contribute to a deeper understanding of social ventures, moving beyond comparisons with traditional firms to uncover the intrinsic value and transformative potential of SEs in the RI landscape. This approach will enrich the discourse on SEs, positioning them not just as alternatives to conventional business models but as pioneers in a responsible, inclusive, and sustainable economic future.

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