



The Role of Social Accelerators in Promoting Authentic Leadership in Social Entrepreneurs

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the role of social accelerators in fostering authentic leadership profiles among social entrepreneurs who are managing high-impact social enterprises associated with such accelerators. The research adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach, focusing on narratives from selected social entrepreneurs supported by a Spanish social accelerator. Nine social entrepreneurs were interviewed, embedded in an ecosystem organized and managed by the accelerator. These social entrepreneurs have been highly successful in terms of having a positive impact on their communities, with the ability to obtain outside funding for their operations based on their performance. The case study method provided a profound analysis of the chosen cases. The study builds on existing literature linking social entrepreneurship and Authentic Leadership, adapting the theoretical framework to the context of Spanish social entrepreneurs. Through the analysis of social entrepreneurs' narratives and perceptions, the research highlights the mutual influence between social accelerators and social entrepreneurship, emphasizing the involvement of corporations and their top managers. The findings confirm that the interaction between social entrepreneurs and the accelerator supports the evolution of these entrepreneurs as authentic leaders, ultimately enhancing the impact and success of their ventures. The Authentic Leadership profile of these entrepreneurs develops while leading their social impact projects with the help of a social accelerator. This profile is based on the presence of some key characteristics: triggering events in the form of critical life experiences, a deep reflection on fundamental personal values, self-aware personalities in the process of developing their projects, efficiency and effectiveness compatible with accomplishing a social purpose, and a rich social network built around long-term relationships with valuable stakeholders. These results offer valuable insights for further applications in leadership development within the social enterprise sector.*

Keywords: authenticity, authentic leadership, ethical entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship values, social accelerator, social enterprise, social entrepreneurs.

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INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship (SE) has emerged as a crucial alternative for addressing contemporary social and environmental challenges by offering innovative solutions (Boschee, 2006). Within this context, the business dimension plays a critical role in advancing these solutions, according to the lens of stakeholder capitalism (Schwab, 2021). The academic discourse on SE has extensively explored the profiles of social entrepreneurs, emphasizing their intrinsic motivation and the processes that enable these ventures to evolve into sustainable enterprises (Dacin et al., 2011). Social entrepreneurs are often driven by a profound sense of purpose, deeply informed by their personal life experiences and a strong commitment to solving social issues (Alvarez de Mon et al., 2021b). Key strategies such as innovation, sustainability, and marketing are essential to the effectiveness of SE, especially given the sector's inherent limitations in accessing critical resources (Hockerts, 2017).

A pivotal component of this ecosystem is the presence of Social Incubators and Accelerators (SI&A), which offer indispensable support to social entrepreneurs. These institutions provide a nurturing environment that includes mentorship, resources, and networks, all vital to ensuring the success of entrepreneurial endeavors (Casasnovas & Bruno, 2013). While recent studies acknowledge the positive reception of SI&A by the entrepreneurs they serve (Lange et al., 2020), there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the comprehensive evaluation of SI&A impact from the perspective of social entrepreneurs. Additionally, the intricate dynamics and essential elements of the relationship between SI&A and social entrepreneurs remain largely unexplored, representing a fertile area for further research.

The literature on authentic leadership (AL) emphasizes the crucial role of certain aspects in leaders, such as self-awareness, a deep understanding of strengths and weaknesses, and consistency between values and actions (Liu & Qin, 2015). AL facilitates leaders' successful performance by enabling them to voice their values (Ilies et al., 2005). In this sense, there is a natural connection between SE and AL, as social entrepreneurs require self-awareness and the discovery of their values (Jensen & Luthans, 2006a). Managing innovation and change is a challenge for authentic entrepreneurial leaders. AL helps them connect with the meaning of their life experiences through reflective practices applied to their life stories (Mälkki, 2012). AL begins with understanding one's life story within a specific context and a set of experiences, providing inspiration to make a meaningful impact in the world.

The entrepreneurial ecosystem plays a crucial role in the development of SE (Diaz-González & Dentchev, 2021), including support mechanisms (Klimas et al., 2022). SI&A are critical in providing the mentorship, networking opportunities, and resources necessary to scale social ventures. While some studies have explored the contributions of SI&A to social innovation and enterprise success (Nascimento et al., 2020), there is still limited research on how these institutions foster AL in social entrepreneurs. This research attempts to fill this gap by analyzing the effects of the collaboration with an SI&A on the development of AL traits within SE, offering new insights into the leadership dynamics that drive social innovation.

SI&A play a vital role in providing a conducive environment for social entrepreneurs, ensuring that key factors for success, such as mentorship, networking, and access to resources, are readily available (Casasnovas & Bruno, 2013). Although preliminary evidence points to the added value SI&A brings to SE (Lange & Johnston, 2020), further research is needed to fully understand how these institutions shape the leadership characteristics of social entrepreneurs. By applying the AL framework, this study highlights the crucial role that SI&A play in fostering business development and cultivating leadership qualities rooted in authenticity and alignment with personal values (Ilies et al., 2005).

AL theory emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, values alignment, and reflective practices and offers a powerful tool for understanding the relationship between SE and SI&A (Jensen & Luthans, 2006a). Social entrepreneurs benefit from AL in navigating complex environments, which allows them to connect deeply with their values and life experiences (Mälkki, 2012). This connection is particularly significant for social entrepreneurs, as their motivation is frequently driven by personal commitment to creating social impact.

The AL framework offers insight into how leaders' actions and decisions are rooted in authenticity. AL emphasizes key leadership traits based on understanding strengths and weaknesses and aligning personal values with actions (Liu & Qin, 2015). These qualities position AL as an ideal framework for understanding how SI&As contribute to the growth of social entrepreneurs, not just in business terms but also in cultivating authentic, values-driven leadership.

This study investigates three primary dimensions: the profile and intrinsic characteristics of social entrepreneurs, the role of SI&A in supporting SE, and how authenticity shapes the leadership of social entrepreneurs. The central objective is to examine how SI&A promotes AL traits among social entrepreneurs.

To achieve this, the study conducts a profound analysis of a leading Social Accelerator (SA) and the entrepreneurial experiences of its top social enterprises. Using a narrative methodology (Chandra & Shang, 2017), the research captures insights from nine semi-structured interviews with social entrepreneurs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Characteristics of Social Entrepreneurs

The characteristics of social entrepreneurs have garnered increasing scholarly attention as these figures have become more prominent across global economies in recent decades. Unlike traditional entrepreneurs, whose primary focus is profit maximization, social entrepreneurs are distinguished by their pursuit of ventures to address societal challenges and fulfil unmet social needs (Sen, 2007). This conceptual shift necessitates a rigorous examination of their role, motivations, and strategies through various theoretical lenses.

From the standpoint of agency theory, social entrepreneurs are characterized by a dual mandate: creating financially viable ventures while simultaneously addressing social issues. This duality often results in inherent conflicts, as social entrepreneurs must navigate the competing demands of financial sustainability and social mission (Davis et al., 2021). This tension underscores the complex decision-making processes that social entrepreneurs face, highlighting the importance of understanding how they mediate these conflicts within the broader entrepreneurial landscape. Paradox theory further enriches this discourse by exploring the meta-skills that allow these entrepreneurs to manage the tensions brought by their dual objectives. Social entrepreneurs often grapple with competing demands, such as balancing economic performance with social impact, which requires advanced cognitive and emotional skills (Smith et al., 2012). These meta-skills are pivotal in enabling social entrepreneurs to thrive within environments marked by uncertainty and conflicting priorities, positioning them as agents capable of navigating paradoxes inherent in their dual-purpose ventures (Alvarez de Mon et al., 2021a).

Resource bricolage theory adds another layer of complexity by examining how social entrepreneurs creatively leverage scarce resources to build and sustain their ventures. This theoretical perspective emphasizes the role of resourcefulness in social entrepreneurship, suggesting that these entrepreneurs, through bricolage, can transform limited resources into opportunities for innovation and growth (Liu et al., 2020). The notion of bricolage situates them as change masters who can align their motivations with broader social objectives through resourceful and adaptive strategies.

The concept of social innovation is central to these discussions, which is frequently highlighted as a core component of the social entrepreneurial process (Gundry et al., 2011). Social entrepreneurs are often recognized for their ability to introduce new methods and practices to address persistent social issues (Hechavarría & Welter, 2015). This innovative capacity enables them to identify and exploit opportunities that traditional entrepreneurs might overlook and positions them as catalysts for shifting social norms and creating lasting societal change.

However, as Dees considers, the language can be new, but the phenomenon is not (Dees, 2001). SE is a risk-taking activity that adopts business logic and uses scarce resources to remain economically sustainable and deliver social value (Wu et al., 2020). Social entrepreneurs are identified as innovative, efficient/effective, recognizing and exploiting social needs, resourceful, and with high-risk tolerance (Lyons & Roundy, 2023). Some authors have also studied social entrepreneurs from an ethical perspective (André & Pache, 2016), suggesting that the social domain can be typically viewed as a combination of ethical and moral issues (Zahra et al., 2009). Miller et al. (2012) see in their compassion a clear, distinctive motivation arising from their exposure to a social problem that relates to their vital experience. Tiwari et al. (2017) highlight emotional intelligence as a special distinctive trait in social entrepreneurs.

Social Incubators and Accelerators (SI&A)

In boosting entrepreneurship, SI&A plays a relevant role in scaling new ventures by addressing common challenges that startups encounter, such as limited financial resources, expertise, and networks (Hackett & Dilts, 2004). Initially, incubators were considered organizations providing shared office spaces, also called coworking (Bouncken et al., 2018), including some business assistance as value-added propositions for businesses (Hmayed et al., 2015). Startup accelerators are learning-oriented programs that provide ventures with different services like networking, mentoring, education, and financial help (Hallen et al., 2019). In fact, some researchers consider accelerators as a distinctive incubation model (Pauwels et al., 2016) aiming to accelerate successful venture creation by providing specific incubation services like education (Cánovas Saiz et al., 2018) and mentoring (Cohen et al., 2019). SI&A then refers to a wide range of heterogeneous organizations whose main purpose is to help SEs to develop their social goals and achieve a greater social impact (Cote, 2023).

Different stakeholders can assist SE in their development process (Diaz-Gonzalez & Dentchev, 2022). SI&A can help overcome the unique challenges that SE face, such as difficulty accessing and building social capital (Nicolopoulou et al., 2017). SI&A offer services to the SE to support the venture creation process by empowering the collaborations with its stakeholders in strong and continuing interactions (Kher et al., 2022). The role of SI&A is central in providing key resources to SE, helping to create an adequate entrepreneurial environment (Nicolopoulou et al., 2017), facilitating social innovation and impact (Pieri et al., 2020), and guiding them with different programs like mentoring, strategic design, legal advice (Nascimento et al., 2020), education and training (Pandey et al., 2017), and networking.

All programs and services offered by SI&A start with the selection process of the potential entrepreneur to support (Sansone et al., 2020). SI&A looks for entrepreneurs with a clear social mission that offers good prospects to accomplish sustainable growth and fulfil their social objectives (Hirschmann et al., 2022). A relevant figure in this whole process of selecting the right SE is the entrepreneurial team. The authenticity of the founding team and its societal commitment are considered key factors in the selection process (Hirschmann et al., 2022). SI&A offers strategic benefits to SE, like mentoring or guidance to social entrepreneurs to transform themselves and their businesses (Bucci & Marks, 2022). In that context, something of significant value that the accelerator can bring to the SE is the specific coaching to the management team, peer learning (Bergmann & Utikal, 2021) and communication abilities (Valero et al., 2021).

Social Entrepreneurs as Authentic Leaders

A deep sense of self is mainly related to an authentic leader (Gardner et al., 2005). Self-awareness is crucial for authentic leaders when they consciously try to realize their values, emotions, identity, and goals (Gardner et al., 2005). Authentic leaders are explicitly connected with their values and try to be consistent with their behavior. In the process, they generate positive other-directed emotions as another important factor (Michie & Gooty, 2005). Authentic leaders usually have a clear purpose, putting their hearts and heads in the process (Sergeeva & Kortantamer, 2021). They lead based on self-transcendent values, with a strange combination of passion and efficiency (Michie & Gooty, 2005).

Social entrepreneurs can be considered authentic leaders given the enormous relevance of self-awareness, especially in discovering and implementing their values (Jensen & Luthans, 2006a) and in accordance with their social mission (Defourny & Kim, 2011). Social entrepreneurs must build a clear message based on their most profound convictions in leading innovation and change. That message is a meaning-making instrument rooted in their experiences and stories (Nakamura & Horimoto, 2020). Authentic leaders tend to develop long-term relationships and high-quality social networks, which are very important for facilitating social entrepreneurs' success using quality information based on trust (Dufays & Huybrechts, 2014). As networking is a critical skill for social entrepreneurs, they create meaningful dialogues between them and their stakeholders (Kelly et al., 2022). Some authors identify some key support factors for social entrepreneurs connected to the concept of AL: self-awareness, self-efficacy, and social space. Self-awareness is observed as the basis for their authenticity, self-efficacy – as their aim for social good, and social space – as their networking ability with other entrepreneurs to enrich one another (Nakamura & Horimoto, 2020).

Social entrepreneurs want to impact the world, and it is through understanding their life stories that they can get inspiration as authentic leaders (George et al., 2007). Relevant life experiences and how to give meaning to those experiences through life stories help social entrepreneurs build their sense of identity as authentic leaders (Sergeeva & Kortantamer, 2021). They develop their life stories as a significant element of their leadership role in interactions with some relevant others (Sparrowe, 2005). This way, storytelling becomes critical in mobilizing necessary resources (Kreutzer, 2022).

As authentic leaders, social entrepreneurs greatly influence their followers, especially employees, with their ethical approach (Jones & Crompton, 2009). Positive psychological feelings, optimism, resiliency and hope are important ingredients of an effective work-related performance formula based on employee satisfaction (Wang et al., 2014).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and descriptive methodology (Villareal, 2017), drawing on Yin's (2016) case study approach, which allows a profound examination of the complex and multi-faceted relationship between SAs and the development of AL in social entrepreneurs. The primary aim of the research is to investigate the narratives of social entrepreneurs supported by a well-known social accelerator, seeking to understand the specific mechanisms through which SAs contribute to the development of AL traits within this population (Pittz et al., 2017).

The case study methodology (Yin, 2015) is particularly well-suited to this research because it offers a detailed examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). From that specific context, one can build a theory (Welch et al., 2011) based on a multiple-cases approach (Stake, 2006).

Nine social entrepreneurs were interviewed, embedded in an ecosystem organized and managed by a well-established Spanish social accelerator called UnLimited Spain. These social entrepreneurs were considered by the SA as highly successful, and their SEs were sharing the following characteristics:

- high reputation for having a positive impact on their communities;
- the ability to obtain outside funding for their operations based on their performance;
- their awareness of the importance of having and measuring their social impact.

They were 36 years old on average, and 33% were women. This methodological choice enabled us to focus on these nine social entrepreneurs previously selected by the accelerator, facilitating the contrast of diverse information. These SEs were chosen not only based on their notable impact within their communities and their ability to be financially sustainable but also on the commitment of their leaders towards the achievement of a higher purpose, considering the influence of the SA on their leadership development.

UnLimited Spain has a leadership position in the context of Spanish accelerators, with Spain being an increasingly interesting place for SEs as an alternative economic and employment model. The European Social Enterprise Monitor (ESEM) 2021–2022 (Dupain et al., 2022), shows a growing interest in Spain in SE: 50% of the SEs in Spain were founded from 2012 to 2022, compared with the 23.8% of the previous decade. UnLimited Spain was founded in 2014, with a mission to put the social impact of SEs at the same level of profitability and sustainability. UnLimited Spain scrutinizes and selects entrepreneurial projects and gives them supporting services and training programs to boost their potential for high social impact. The SA holds a network that connects SEs with financial investors and large corporations. Their aim is that every SE has a triple impact logic: social, environmental, and economic. UnLimited Spain has supported more than 100 entrepreneurs since 2014 and more than 40 startups in the last two years, has worked in more than 20 projects with big companies, has a collaborating network of more than 350 corporate volunteers, and has more than 4000 beneficiaries through their supported startups (Unlimited Spain, 2023).

According to Nakamura and Horimoto (2020), understanding women's social entrepreneurship in Japan and its link with the concept of AL, this initial theoretical approach was adapted and used to contrast its applicability to our sample of Spanish social entrepreneurs.

A questionnaire was initially designed to run a semi-structured interview with our social entrepreneurs, allowing for the flexibility to explore emergent themes while maintaining consistency across interviews (Llanos-Contreras et al., 2019), serving as a guide to cover the main topics of the study during our interviews, run in 2022 (Harwood & Garry, 2003). The script included aspects such as: social enterprise history, social entrepreneur history, relationship with the SA, selection criteria and process by the SA, value added to the SE of the services rendered by the SA, and value added of the SE to the big organization. The semi-structured design provided a stable yet adaptable framework, enabling participants to share detailed narratives about their personal and professional journeys. Interviews lasted for an average of two hours, being audio-recorded and transcribed afterwards.

Life-story methodology helped to identify the authentic self of these social entrepreneurs and its connection with the facilitating role of the SA in the development of their AL. Other authentic leadership experts have followed this approach (Shamir & Eilam, 2005), using small samples (Sergeeva & Kortantamer, 2021). This methodology allowed us to focus on interviewed individuals and their particular circumstances as a case representing other potential cases, emphasizing self-identities construction via very personalized storytelling (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). The life-story method, used to gather these narratives, has been widely recognized for its efficacy in capturing the evolution of self-identity and leadership development over time (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This narrative approach was particularly useful in uncovering the authentic self of the entrepreneurs and its interplay with the support provided by the SA (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002).

Through the life-story interview method, authentic leaders explore the social construction of their selves (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Life-story interview shows how authentic leaders become self-aware about their identities, beliefs, and values and how their actions align with them. The study on social entrepreneurs as authentic leaders collects data from a very small sample, like other authentic leadership studies (Sergeeva & Davies, 2021). The main reason behind this approach is the need to connect intensely with the interviewed individual, in a particular context, under some particular circumstances (Crouch & MacKenzie, 2006). Social entrepreneurs build their stories based on their experiences and their reflections on those experiences. The life-story interview itself is a contingent method based on the interaction between the interviewee and interviewer.

When social entrepreneurs tell their life stories, they become clearer about who they are and what they stand for; they identify themselves with their projects and the social purpose behind them (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). The life-story method helps them to clarify essential building blocks of their lives, facilitating the connection between vital experiences and the organized interpretations of those experiences. These entrepreneurs develop their leadership roles by learning from experience (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Their stories tell about their convictions, gathered around important events for them. Every personal narrative is constructed and filled with meanings.

The decision to use narrative methodology highlights the value of life-stories in identifying AL traits. The narrative self-methodology (Sparrowe, 2005) gives a great protagonist role to the concept of identity and other relevant concepts like authenticity and leadership. The narrative self is immensely interested in empirical research on authenticity and leadership, assuming that identity is fundamentally constructed as a narrative process.

Concentrating on the vital situations experienced by these entrepreneurs, the construction of their leadership identities through storytelling was explored. The interviews were subjected to a thorough thematic analysis, allowing us to detect recurring aspects in connection with the role of the SA in fostering AL traits, like self-awareness, relational disclosure, and internal ethical paradigms.

Furthermore, using a narrative approach aligns with the growing recognition in qualitative research of the importance of individual agency in leadership development (Sergeeva & Kortantamer, 2021). The analysis examined the entrepreneurs' self-reported experiences and sought to contextualize these within the broader ecosystem of the SA, thereby offering a holistic view of how these entrepreneurs develop their leadership identities within the support structure of SA UnLimited Spain. This methodology allowed for the focus on interviewed individuals and their particular circumstances as a case representing other potential cases, emphasizing constructing self-identities via very personalized storytelling (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

Following Yin's (2016) recommendations for case studies, diverse sources of information were used, ensuring methodological rigor, and adding archival data from UnLimited Spain to the interviews. This approach provided a complete perspective of the function of SAs in fostering AL traits among social entrepreneurs while also situating the study within the broader context of social entrepreneurship in Spain. This qualitative approach, grounded in case study methodology and enriched by a narrative analysis of life-stories, allows for a nuanced and detailed exploration of the influence of SAs on the development of AL in social entrepreneurs (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Emphasizing the lived experiences of these entrepreneurs adds to previous studies on SE and AL, offering insights with pragmatic and conceptual derivatives for the field.

RESULTS

SAs and SEs create a collaborative environment that facilitates the generation of innovative and engaging social projects (Nicolopoulou et al., 2017). This relationship unfolds some basic commonalities among these two counterparts, based on a deep sense of mutual trust and respect, and some critical values that they share. This relationship is not based on a mere transaction of interests and resources, it rather consists of a rich exchange of knowledge, ideas, and experiences. The SA becomes a strategic partner in supporting the SE's activities with a complete understanding of its unique needs.

According to initial design of Nakamura and Horimoto (2020), that deals with connecting the idea of AL with the process of developing SE under the influence of a SA, a similar model has been adopted to try to understand this connection around nine Spanish SEs. The SA function is central to this interactive process, helping SE projects to be successful and sustainable. There are three main actors intervening in this process: social entrepreneurs leading their social impact projects; the SA supporting them, and some corporations sponsoring the programs designed by the SA. The model tries to identify the relationship between the initiatives taken by the SA with the SEs and the generation of an AL style in the profile of the social entrepreneurs running these SEs. This connection is based on the analysis of the social entrepreneurs' narratives (Seanor et al., 2013) and their interpretations of some critical events in their entrepreneurial journeys.

Following the theoretical approach of Nakamura and Horimoto (2020), there are five corner stones in the model, to be contrasted within the dominant discourses of the social entrepreneurs, which are fundamental parts of this connection between the SA, the SEs, and the AL building on the profile of the social entrepreneurs running those SEs:

- triggering events.
- critical reflections on values.
- self-awareness.
- self-efficacy connected with social good.

- social space or networking.

Triggering Events

Critical life experiences and stories trigger social entrepreneurs to become what they are and, in the process, develop their AL. Based on those triggering events, they construct their messages as an effective meaning-making instrument to persuade others (Nakamura & Horimoto, 2020). Authentic leaders use reflective meaning-making discourses putting together their life stories and the projects they must lead (Mälkki, 2012). As authentic leaders, social entrepreneurs inspire others with their life stories (George et al., 2007). They build their identities through these stories containing key experiences in their life development (Sergeeva & Kortantamer, 2021). Life stories are a major element of their leadership role in interactions with relevant others (Sparrowe, 2005), and storytelling becomes a critical instrument for them in mobilizing necessary resources (Kreutzer, 2022).

Necessity is a common component in the life of these entrepreneurs and an essential source of creativity and innovative disclosure. That is why social entrepreneurs are great innovators, giving solutions to social issues when others cannot do so. Entrepreneurs find difficulties early in their lives, and these are turning points for them to discover different values and attitudes that will be differential in the creation and development of their projects: *“I had a benign tumor in my knee as a child, and that contact with the disease and with the doctor who operated on me was wonderful. I saw how someone can solve someone else's problems and allow you to live a normal life”* (Entr. 4).

They adapt to unexpected circumstances using limited resources, and in doing so, they generate new ideas and find new opportunities: *“March 2022 was a very complicated time because we were already running out of cash. We had to dismiss part of the team. It was a very complicated moment, to sit down and consider how we could move on”* (Entr. 8). From there, they become champions of innovative social changes (Gundry et al., 2011), generating incremental social impact out of their business operations (Bacq et al., 2016).

The feeling of being part of a community is powerful in them from the very beginning of their lives: *“We realized that we had spent our entire childhood and adolescence closely linked to the villages of our parents in Ávila and Cáceres. That had been a source of values, it was part of our essence”* (Entr. 5). Social entrepreneurs delve into local issues, acting as community agents while attending their entrepreneurial projects. They learn at an early stage of their lives what the meaning of being of service to a community, and that facilitates their ability to connect with relevant community members later: *“At the age of 16, I was given the opportunity to set up projects. In other places they do not let you do anything, here it was part of the curriculum. They told us that we had to do a service to the community”* (Entr. 9).

Social entrepreneurs are very much committed to their original aims when creating their SEs. Among the reasons for that loyalty to their initial goals is their social consciousness in relation to a social problem suffered by precarious people, poor people. Many of them have been in touch with poverty situations early in their lives: *“I've lived in pretty poor neighborhoods in Madrid, and I think it's been very important for me to see the problems, to see other people's lives”* (Entr. 7).

They can tolerate risk and frustration, probably developed upon some learning experiences that confronted them with a hard reality: *“When I was at the company in China, I didn't like the way the workers were treated there, especially the lack of safety measures in the workplace”* (Entr. 3). They can be frustrated, but they use that frustration as an incentive to being more efficient and innovative: *“There was this frustration that no one takes it to the bedside and that a lot of scientific knowledge is published and then no one uses it in the following years”* (Entr. 4). Social innovation and change are essential components of any SE. Social entrepreneurs bring change with them, and sometimes, they coincide with a bigger change taking place globally: *“At that moment, the image of the turtle with a plastic straw in its nose appeared and went around the world. Products like ours took the wave at the beginning; we were lucky with our entrepreneurship”* (Entr. 6). Table A1 (see Appendix) shows more citations from the social entrepreneurs' discourses.

Critical Reflection on Values

Authentic leaders voice their values that are fundamental to developing their projects and confronting their challenges in the most effective manner (Kelly et al., 2022). Social entrepreneurs when managing innovation and change act as authentic leaders, finding their key values and giving voice to them through their endeavors. SE and AL are both value-adding activities, where leading entrepreneurs design and implement their visions and get relevant others to embark on them.

Social entrepreneurs operate in very demanding contexts where they need to integrate diverse and competing values. There are tensions building upon daily decisions to make, and social entrepreneurs need to clarify which values are to be prioritized. They supply goods and services not provided by the market or the

government, and often their customers cannot pay the prices of what they want to buy. So social entrepreneurs need to balance money and mission for their organizations to be sustainable (Boschee, 2006): *“What I criticize is that you say that you are here to help others and solve a problem, and then what is really behind it is that you want to make money”* (Entr. 8).

Balancing work and life, developing healthy habits, achieving happiness, or taking the right anti-stress measures are some potential challenges faced by these entrepreneurs highly committed to their causes: *“I’m super family-oriented. My brother is a fundamental part; I’ve been a mom for a very short time, and, thanks to him, the company continues”* (Entr. 2) Some tensions may arrive at the beginning of their activities, when they may use friends and family as an initial financial resource: *“The first step was to see how we could finance the project. The first thing that occurred to me was to pull from close friends and put in many hours. In the beginning, as we had few economic resources, we had to adjust to the budget we had, which was very specific and short”* (Entr. 6).

Social entrepreneurs have a notorious emotional component in their approach to their professional projects. Sympathy, empathy, and compassion are relevant motivating factors for them (Ruskin et al., 2016): *“Empathy is the most important thing in the world because this way we will be able to solve real problems that do not have to happen to us but could happen anytime”* (Entr. 7). They need to see the alignment between values, attitudes, and goals within their projects, and with the staff of SA. The entrepreneurial activity has a transcendent dimension that leads to an emotional connection with those sharing the same vision: *“I want to put my knowledge at the service of other entrepreneurs, even help entrepreneurs of large corporations, in this work of helping them to amplify their vision”* (Entr. 8).

In its partnership with the social entrepreneurs, the SA has this essential emotional dimension, too, sharing their passion and commitment towards success: *“I only have words of gratitude, if there is something to do in this life it is to be grateful”* (Entr. 6). Social entrepreneurs feel emotionally connected with their projects and with the people interacting with them: *“I consider myself a very loyal person, but if they fail me once, they don’t fail me twice”* (Entr. 2). They stick to their projects as much as they do to the people involved in them: *“I’m very, very persistent; I think it’s essential because this is very hard”* (Entr. 3). They evolve with their projects and with the challenges that go with them: *“I’m a person who really enjoys learning, I enjoy the learning process, I’m very curious. I think learning is the superpower of humans because it’s the only thing that allows us to do anything”* (Entr. 4). Table A2 shows more citations from the social entrepreneurs’ discourses (see Appendix).

Self-Awareness

Social entrepreneurs develop an AL profile when they become more self-aware of their identities and values (Michie & Gooty, 2005). In their AL, they need to create and share a vision with those involved in their SE (Jones & Crompton, 2009). Like authentic leaders, successful social entrepreneurs know their strengths and weaknesses and try to be consistent between values and actions (Liu & Qin, 2015).

Social entrepreneurs connect with their identity and the essential part of their projects during interaction with the SA (Jeong et al., 2020). In their search for meaning for their projects, they find meaning for themselves (Chandra, 2016). In parallel, they become very influential to others sensitive to their narratives (Seanor et al., 2013) self-awareness comes in the form of recognition of some fundamental values, very much related to a sense of societal duty, and to a social problem that needs to be addressed (Hirschmann et al., 2022).

A superior aim inspires these entrepreneurs, and their projects are a clear and natural manifestation of it. AL in these social entrepreneurs is a consequence of their authentic approach in all activities (Kelly et al., 2022). Authenticity then turns into a very effective instrument for our entrepreneurs to influence others using a meaningful discourse: *“The most important thing is that I believe in the project a lot, I don’t have to rehearse it or anything. I tell you about my project as if I was telling you about my life”* (Entr. 2).

An honest, simple, clear, and transparent message comes from their voice. They show what they are and do not pretend to be anything else: *“It has been key for me to say things from within, in a natural way, without wanting to sell more than you are”* (Entr. 3). The combination of telling their truth, attached to some fundamental values, creates a compelling discourse for themselves and for others: *“They tell me I’m very authentic. I don’t have a canned discourse, but it comes from our history and authenticates our story. I used to be a much worse communicator than I am now. Even though I don’t like public speaking, I’ve accumulated a lot of experience”* (Entr. 9).

Authenticity acts as a validation test in front of those who approve and support the projects after an endless process of improvements: *“On the one hand, transparency makes things clear. Projects go around a lot; you don’t understand what they’re going to be for, they’re theoretical projects. The sooner they are validated, the better”* (Entr. 7). The inner connection between the entrepreneur and the project facilitates the

attraction to potential stakeholders, as well as investors or final beneficiaries too: *“You must have a lot of stamina, it’s a long-distance race. The internal dialogue is very difficult, with your partner too. You must keep a cool head”* (Entr. 5).

These entrepreneurs identify a double nature: an activist and a business guy. They are social because they want to transform society and are business-oriented because they know how to do it (Simms & Robinson, 2009): *“I am one of those who think that capitalism can be changed but from within. The ideas of Mohamed Yunus inspired me. The model of Yvon Chouinard, the founder of Patagonia, also inspired me. I saw that there was a gap and a possible commitment to innovation in the sector where I am, which is the one I know”* (Entr. 1). Table A3 shows more citations from our social entrepreneurs’ discourses (see Appendix).

Self-Efficacy Connected with Social Good

Authentic leaders have a clear purpose coming from the very nature of their activity. They put their hearts and minds into projects built upon that purpose (George et al., 2007). A strange combination of passion and efficiency characterizes their leadership style (Michie & Gooty, 2005). Social entrepreneurs are authentic leaders with a fundamentally ethical approach (Gardner et al., 2005). They are socially good-oriented leaders, and they put their social commitment into their projects to work for them very effectively and performance-oriented (Jensen & Luthans, 2006b). Authenticity gives social entrepreneurs coherence with themselves and their social projects as a practical expression of their fundamental values (Cherré & Lemieux, 2024). To that extent, SEs are a good example of coherent, independent, sustainable, and ethical ways of doing business (Urmanaviciene & Barasa, 2024).

Social entrepreneurs are highly efficient individuals who specialize in solving social problems in difficult environments (Kuckertz et al., 2023). They have an exceptional combination of service and business orientation in highly sensitive sectors. They attend to unsatisfied needs concerning precarious beneficiaries of their goods and services. They work in sectors where the SA is an expert and has a rich network involved: *“From there, we began to think about business models that could make our idea profitable and sustainable, without losing the essence of continuing to deliver these devices free of charge to the beneficiaries”* (Entr. 7).

These entrepreneurs are highly motivated change agents, and they do not give up easily: *“Another important achievement is that we are changing the sector; we are part of the change within the urban distribution of goods, which makes cities more sustainable, avoiding the use of motor vehicles in cities, since we make our deliveries on foot or by bicycle”* (Entr. 1).

They have a purpose that is at the center of their projects: *“What sets us apart is that we are a very well-rounded project, socially, environmentally, economically. We connect with a topic that is on everyone’s lips here, which is that of the emptied Spain”* (Entr. 5).

That purpose facilitates the empathetic connection with the end beneficiaries: *“From the sixth year onwards, that tree is reaching an already acceptable level of recovery. Until the sixth year, there has to be someone behind it, bearing the costs that come with it. People create an emotional bond with the tree and don’t want to leave it, and they come to see it”* (Entr. 5).

The profile of these entrepreneurs has three recurrent aspects, namely, problem-solving and results orientation, innovation, and celerity: *“Accelerate the execution of innovation, first in the generation of innovative ideas and then in the execution of that innovation. That is what sets us apart. We are faster in execution, and we enjoy what we do and the impact we generate”* (Entr. 1); *“We are much more agile, and we can connect with other agents in the entrepreneurship ecosystem more agilely, providing faster solutions”* (Entr. 3).

Social ventures are essentially very innovative (Hechavarría & Welter, 2015). SE projects are innovative in two ways: by changing the delivery of products and services and by incorporating new technologies in the process. Innovation and technology are in the core design of these SEs, crucial in their value-added proposition: *“We also work on the issue of the digital transformation of orthopedics, and we improve the quality of life of patients because we make many products that do not exist on the market”* (Entr. 2).

Business and commercial models are developed based on the high technology applied, trying to anticipate the economic and social impact of the projects: *“We have developed our own impact measurement methodology for waste recovery, measuring the environmental and social benefits that arise from giving resources a second life, preventing them from being disposed of and allowing them to replace virgin raw materials”* (Entr. 3).

An extra element very important for SE’s success is professionalism. If an SE project is to add value in competitive terms, it is because it helps solve problems in an efficient manner, helping others to do their jobs in the meantime: *“The patient does not want to wait to be diagnosed because the disease progresses. We were able to see the impact of reducing the waiting list and reducing patient deaths, which is what matters to people.”*

We were able to have a decision tree that allows you to operate reducing the times in the process” (Entr. 4). Table A4 shows more citations from the social entrepreneurs’ discourses (see Appendix).

Social Space or Networking

As authentic leaders, social entrepreneurs generate long-term relationships around their projects, building rich social networks to facilitate their success. Those relationships are based on trust and the quality of the information they manage (Dufays & Huybrechts, 2014). Networking is crucial to authentic leaders’ and social entrepreneurs’ activities to allow rich connections between them and their stakeholders (Kelly et al., 2022). SAs are central to creating a social space where social entrepreneurs can contact other entrepreneurs to create social value cooperatively and according to their social mission declarations (Pieri et al., 2020).

Entrepreneurs use networking as a key instrument to connect with others like them, as a knowledge-sharing tool that helps them to do things in alternative ways (Lange & Johnston, 2020). As authentic leaders do, social entrepreneurs build their network over enriching and powerful relationships based on a common sense of trust fueled by fluent dialogues between all participants.

Successful SE projects are based on understanding the rules operating in their respective markets and industries. The SA uses its network to offer crucial support to them when this support is more needed, at the beginning of their ventures: *“UnLimited helped us test our idea, putting us in touch with people in the sector, used to selling to large organizations, and who helped us by questioning all our initial assumptions, getting feedback from people with valid content that really helps you to improve”* (Entr. 4). Networking becomes a specifically adapted plateau where innovative ideas can be tested: *“UnLimited is a window, a support, an outlet, a place to grow, acquire new knowledge, because each time they are in contact with new entrepreneurs, with new ideas, and you are inside the circle”* (Entr. 6).

The SA provides contacts with diverse experts assisting social entrepreneurs in conducting initial testing and validation of their products and services: *“At UnLimited, they are always there for you when you need them. They tell you what or who you need, from a marketing expert to a contact with a multinational; they help you with specific things you need”* (Entr. 1). Entrepreneurs feel credited and reinforced by their complicity with the accelerator and its network: *“When I talk about Unlimited, I’m talking about belonging to a family of people with a common vision. We speak the same language and walk together in many ways; we share many things. UnLimited has given us visibility, reaching new people, some of them referents who have helped us to give relevance to the project”* (Entr. 8).

Social entrepreneurs manage scarce resources efficiently, and they need to trust the SA from the very beginning of their interaction (Jeong et al., 2020): *“From the relationship with UnLimited Spain I would highlight above all the closeness and human quality of the people who work there, a fundamental aspect for me to want to keep in touch with them. They are genuinely interested in providing value and helping you as an entrepreneur. They put a lot of heart and love into the relationship with the entrepreneurs”* (Entr. 3). This relationship is special because both parties have an engaging, social, and transformative strategic design (Plaskoff, 2012): *“It is also especially appreciated the desire that the people of UnLimited have to make a better world. That’s also our idea, to help both patients in the hospital and families to make their lives a little easier”* (Entr. 4).

A special dimension of the social supporting space that SAs provide to SEs is their mentoring programs to allow them to become viable organizations (Kher et al., 2022). Social entrepreneurs appreciate the benefits of the mentorship offered by SAs’ programs (Pandey et al., 2017). The accelerator selects mentors from its network of collaborators and from the corporations that sponsor the programs: *“The importance of having a mentor who would shape the project and give it sustainability, and who was as passionate about the educational issue as we are, who in the end has become a partner in the company, which I suppose is not typical”* (Entr. 9). Mentorship consists of different activities fostering a more professional approach of the entrepreneurs to their projects. The communication dimension has an extra added value in terms of the ability to present their ideas effectively to different audiences (Nascimento et al., 2020): *“They allowed us to put ourselves in front of a camera, offering us formal training, pitch sessions and public speaking, having the chance to tell it in different contexts, with different audiences, in different formats, with different durations”* (Entr. 9). Table A5 shows more citations from our social entrepreneurs’ discourses (see Appendix).

CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative research, based on the analysis of the narratives of nine Spanish social entrepreneurs and their interaction with a well-known Spanish SA, allowed us to identify important characteristics in that relationship that are very much aligned with the concept and implications of an AL style. Those characteristics describe the essence of the activity of the social entrepreneurs and can add a great understanding of the

successful trajectories of their SEs. This study contributes to the present literature about SE by offering a framework to understand the nature of social entrepreneurs' profiles as authentic leaders and the protagonist role of SAs in facilitating that kind of identification, with an adaptation to the context of developing SEs in Spain.

The life-story methodology applied to the analysis of the development process of an AL style in social entrepreneurs emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and identity social construction experienced by these entrepreneurs in their interaction with the SA. Their development process comes in a very natural way, which helps them to connect with their authentic self. Through its programs, the intervention of the SA assists social entrepreneurs in fulfilling their potential to become authentic leaders by adding formal reflection to the process. The reflective exercise gives purpose and meaning to the different relevant events experienced by these very action-oriented individuals. Life events are important triggers of this development dynamic, but the intervention of the SA and its formal mechanisms contribute to consolidating those events as important learning episodes. Furthermore, the AL profile in our social entrepreneurs is to be discovered and performed in their actions accomplished in the context of their entrepreneurial projects, interacting with relevant stakeholders, receiving feedback from them, and contrasting and evaluating the results of their actions.

The first characteristic in the framework that explains the appearance of the AL profile is called Triggering Events, which consists of critical life experiences and stories as important nuances for social entrepreneurs to become what they are and, in the process, act as authentic leaders. Their narratives start with these triggering events, which help them construct their entrepreneurial projects and embark on other relevant actors. The second element, called Critical Reflection on Values, allows social entrepreneurs to act as authentic leaders when they put a voice to their values. Critically reflected values are at the forefront of the design and execution of their ventures and facilitate them to confront their challenges successfully. Values, vision, innovation and change are very well-known elements that help social entrepreneurs to perform as authentic leaders.

The third aspect is Self-Awareness. Social entrepreneurs become more self-aware while developing their entrepreneurial projects and getting in touch with their real identities. Their AL manifests when they create and share a vision with those involved in their SEs. A fourth characteristic is Self-Efficacy connected with Social Good. Social entrepreneurs, as authentic leaders, live and work for a purpose connected with their daily activities. This purpose sets a special combination of emotions, rationality, passion, and efficiency. Social entrepreneurs are authentic, effective leaders with a fundamental ethical approach. The final fifth element is Social Space or Networking. Social entrepreneurs are successful authentic leaders who build rich social networks around long-term relationships referred to in their projects. Trust and quality of information are key aspects of those relationships.

This research confirms the presence of an AL profile in these entrepreneurs coincidentally with the interaction of their SEs with an SA promoting their impact and success. In other words, when social entrepreneurs successfully lead social impact projects with the help of a SA, they reveal and develop at the same time a clear AL profile. This finding has important implications for policymakers and entrepreneurs if they want to contribute to generating a context with the right conditions for sustainable social impact business to flourish. As a limiting condition, the results of this study, according to its exploratory and qualitative nature, are based on some specific cases. However, they are by precedent research and can be transferable to other contexts, yet this remains to be proved with further investigation. Future studies can amplify the scope of this analysis by referring to other acceleration processes in other territories and sectors.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: A. I.; methodology: N. M., O. M.; software: A. I., N. M., O. M.; validation: N. M., O. M.; formal analysis: N. M., O. M.; investigation: A. I., N. M.; resources: A. I., N. M.; data curation: A. I., N. M.; writing-original draft preparation: A. I., N. M.; writing-review and editing: A. I., N. M., O. M.; visualization: A. I., N. M.; supervision: A. I.; project administration: A. I., N. M.; funding: A. I., N. M., O. M.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

The authors have obtained and maintained written informed consent from all subjects involved in the study. The research paper titled "The Role of Social Accelerators in Promoting Authentic Leadership in Social

Entrepreneurs” has met all the ethical standards required in the publishing guidelines, as well as the ethical committee requirements of the university responsible for this research, IE University, Madrid, Spain (Certificate of Research Policies and Guidelines Compliance, Reference IERC-39/2021-2022, May 9th, 2022). There is full compliance with all ethical guidelines and regulations throughout the research process to maintain the highest level of academic integrity and credibility, as follows: the use of generative AI has been limited to improving the readability and grammar of the text. The research paper includes the necessary permissions to use the personal data and information of social entrepreneurs under study. Each individual has signed an authorization form, and their anonymity is guaranteed in the paper. The study follows all ethical standards established by the Declaration of Helsinki of 1975, revised in 2013, and the relevant guidelines of national and international ethics committees. The ethical committee of the university responsible for this research, IE University, Madrid, Spain, has approved the study, in accordance with our commitment to upholding ethical research practices and ensuring that our work aligns with the highest standards of integrity.

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Appendix

Table A1. Triggering Events

Entrepreneur	Quotes		
1	People believe that you can be an entrepreneur without having had previous professional experience, and without having worked for someone else.	It is very important that you have experience of working for someone else, because you know what it is like to be bossed around, to feel bad, to learn how to manage other people.	Working as an employee, you have to go through difficulties and limitations.
2	It started in 2014, when I presented my final degree project, which was a chair for children with motor difficulties from 3 to 5 years old. That's when I started with 3D printing. There I also touched a little on the orthopedic sector, which was a great unknown to me.	I attended some entrepreneurship courses, and there I met the technicians of "Andalucía emprende" who suggested that, instead of looking for a job, I set up an industrial design studio.	Subsequently, I applied to participate in the UnLimited program, and they accepted me. That's when I got more into entrepreneurship and growth in the health sector.
3	When I was at the company in China, I didn't like the way the workers were treated there, especially the lack of safety measures in the workplace.	On the other hand, I also didn't like their treatment of environmental issues.	My professional career has been super relevant, I have always worked in industrial environments, they are environments that I like a lot.
4	There was this frustration that no one takes it to the bedside, and that a lot of scientific knowledge is actually published and then no one uses it in the following years.	I had a benign tumor in my knee as a child, and that contact with the disease and with the doctor who operated on me was wonderful. I saw how someone can solve someone else's problem and allow you to live a normal life.	When I was a lifeguard, a friend of mine had a cardiac arrest, she had a congenital heart defect and there was no one there. She passed away and I felt sorry for her. I was very impressed by the feeling that if I had been there, I could have helped.
5	Alberto, my partner, found himself alone in the field, picking olives in the fields surrounding his village, the olives falling to the ground and no one to pick them up, a pity.	We realized that we had spent our entire childhood and adolescence closely linked to the villages of our parents in Ávila and Cáceres. That had been a source of values, it was part of our essence.	In auditing I was very saturated, I had been there for 5 years; those were the years when we were starting to get out of the crisis. I wasn't liking the financial aspect either, I couldn't find fulfillment there. Finally, my brother showed up with this and I decided to join him.
6	I was asked to promote a special cocktail. In cocktails, everything inside the glass should make aromatic sense and be edible. So, I came up with the idea of developing a grapefruit-flavored straw. I was hoping to find an end-consumer experience.	Something I highly recommend for all entrepreneurs is to sign up for all kinds of startup contests. As much as they can and more, because it's a way to make themselves known.	At that moment, the image of the turtle with a plastic straw in its nose appeared and went around the world. Products like ours took the wave in their beginnings, we were lucky with our entrepreneurship.
7	I was finishing my degree, and I got into the world of 3D printing. I was 21 years old; I finished my degree and I went to Kenya to volunteer, and I thought about how I can add value with 3D printing.	I went there with 5 arms in my suitcase, and it worked very well. The people who were given them took advantage of them to get better jobs, better quality of life.	I've lived in pretty poor neighborhoods in Madrid, and it has been very important for me to see the problems, to see other people's lives.
8	After an experience of almost four years, I decided to become an entrepreneur; it had always been my motivation.	I was impressed by a newspaper article I read concerning the effect of food waste, and I wondered on possible solutions to this issue. One out of every three foods produced in the world is wasted.	March 2022 was a very complicated time because we were already running out of cash. We had to dismiss part of the team. It was a very complicated moment, to sit down and consider how we could move on.
9	I was working at the National Cancer Research Centre. I was doing my PhD there and I was participating in scientific informative activities. We realized that there was a lot more demand than supply for this type of activity.	Having had the opportunity to attend a school in Hong Kong, United World College. Not only because of the International Baccalaureate part, but also because of the strong focus that these schools have on social service.	At the age of 16, I was given the opportunity to set up projects. In other places they don't let you do anything, here it was part of the curriculum. They told you that you had to do a service to the community.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the interviews.

Table A2. Critical Reflection on Values

Entrepreneur	Quotes		
1	The most important thing of all is that you get along with the people who see you, your colleagues, your boss.	You see people who aren't brilliant, and you wonder: how did this guy get here? Well, because he is kind with others, he builds good relationships.	Have no conflicts with anyone. If you're like that, you're capable of doing something that isn't easy.
2	I'm super family-oriented. My brother is a fundamental part; I've been a mom for a very short time, and, thanks to him, the company continues.	I consider myself a very loyal person, but if they fail me once, they don't fail me twice.	I really like the people around me to be alright, and I care a lot about the happiness of others
3	Personality-wise, I'm super hardworking. I've always been super hardworking.	I'm very, very persistent. It's essential because this is very hard.	For me it's something very hard, to have that conviction, that perseverance, I think it's essential to continue.
4	I'm a person who really enjoys learning, I enjoy the learning process, I'm very curious. I think learning is the superpower of humans, because it's the only thing that allows us to do anything.	People who get to work are people who are professionally successful, because at work 90% of that success is getting to work. Getting through problems, solving problems, or doing what no one else wants to do.	Families have to be well off financially, because there are people who have two or three children, a mortgage; economic incentives need to be aligned.
5	In these facets we are very comfortable, creating and doing things. There's that scale of values.	Maybe a person who is like a shark wouldn't have stopped for a second to see our project; my brother and I did stop.	I think that the ability to listen, and to generate a good atmosphere, to work with good vibes.
6	The first step was to see how we could finance the project. The first thing that occurred to me was to pull from close friends, and putting in many hours. At the beginning, as we had few economic resources, we had to adjust to the budget we had, which was very specific and short.	Throughout life you have to be very empathetic, a good person, and when you need it later, people trust and believe in you. I have always been a very sociable person, with a lot of empathy. I think it's important to connect with people from the beginning.	I only have words of gratitude, if there is something to do in this life it is to be grateful.
7	For me, a fundamental aspect is empathy; get an empathetic education.	Empathy is crucial, because this way we will be able to solve real problems that do not have to happen to us but could happen anytime.	Entrepreneurship projects are complicated. In my case, curiosity came first, then entrepreneurship, to solve problems that others could not solve.
8	I define myself as a very resilient person. I've probably forged that in my career as a civil engineer, which is not easy.	I want to put my knowledge at the service of other entrepreneurs, even help entrepreneurs of large corporations, in this work of helping them to amplify their vision.	What I criticize is that you say that you are here to help others and solve a problem, and then what is really behind it is that you want to make money.
9	Science is a wonderful way to teach tools for the future, because the most common thing in a lab is that things don't work out, that you must ask others, so you have to learn.	Work as a team, use your learnings to create new theories. You learn to manage frustration, to better integrate mistakes into the learning process with a series of skills that have not been worked on at school.	I'm a reliable, analytical and scientific thinking person, and I'm able to break down problems into small parts and attack them one at a time, sequentially.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the interviews.

Table A3. Self-Awareness

Entrepreneur	Quotes		
1	I am one of those who think that capitalism can be changed, but from within. I was inspired by the ideas of Mohamed Yunus. I was also inspired by the model of Yvon Chouinard, the founder of Patagonia. I saw that there was a gap and a possible commitment to innovation in the sector where I am, which is the one I know.	To communicate the project, it is key to believe in it and live it. You believe it if you live it, and that's how you explain it.	If you get into a business it's to enjoy it, and you have to persevere. You must know how to enjoy the journey. You must have a very important personal balance when it comes to entrepreneurship because the tensions can be great. You also must be aware of your own goals and your own limits.
2	I'm an engineer, that's why I do 3D printing and design, which is what I like the most. I had to learn about orthopedics to know the human body well and speak the same language with my clients. Also in these 6 years I have been acquiring knowledge of the business world, little by little.	The most important thing is that I believe in the project a lot, I don't have to rehearse it or anything. I tell you about my project as if I was telling you about my life. I switched from forest engineering to design because I thought that way I could improve people's quality of life.	I no longer have the innocence I had years ago, when I started, and my personal life has also changed. My day is all about solving problems. That's what I think sets me apart from other people, that I solve problems that arise on a day-to-day basis. I'm still happy, when a mom calls me to thank me, no one can take that away from me.

Table A3 (cont.). Self-Awareness

Entrepreneur	Quotes		
3	I needed to incorporate the environmental and social aspects into my work. I was interested to see how I could introduce sustainability and social innovation into industrial environments, which are where I operate. I came across the circular economy that responded to those needs that I was seeing.	On a personal level it was very, very hard. This process of defining what to do and how to do it, of reinventing myself and feeling useful in the process; Not knowing where I was going to go, what value I could bring here. I had never been programmed to be an entrepreneur and it is true that education in this country does not help us for this.	Another fundamental aspect is to have passion for what you do. It sounds very idyllic, but it's basically the conviction that what you're doing has to be done. People tell you that you transmit it, that conviction. It's important to have a greater purpose for yourself and your organization, I think it's imperative.
4	There is a scientist in me, an academic, a doctor, and then there is an entrepreneur and a businessman. I'm a doctor who likes data, statistics, which is not usual. That data is not real, there are assumptions that you have to validate. Now I enjoy it because I'm trying to confirm the assumptions and get a return on investment.	The style must be humble, because there are many times when you cannot give what is expected of you. I think creativity is essential, it's one of the things I enjoy, creating but with a piece of paper, it allows you to get into the details and if you can put it on a paper even better. That creativity with details to try to imagine what it would be like and what the next steps would be.	For the success of a project, you have to do the hard way, do what really adds value. Don't try to run away from the difficult, because anyone can do the easy things, and you can sign someone who knows how to do it. If you do everything else and the hard stuff isn't solved, a lot of projects suffer later.
5	We started writing the story, and after a few months, we realized it could make sense. But we also realized that we had to leave a lot of time for the project. I was the first one who took the step of quitting his job and dedicating myself one hundred percent to Apadrina, and it was a success.	Also, the desire to have personal initiatives and the desire to start things and try different approaches, a motivation to start projects that is intrinsic. For values or whatever, but we don't start projects with the idea of other entrepreneurs to get rich in the shortest possible time.	I've been working on this project for almost 9 years. They don't give you this for free, in terms of salary you are trying, you go very much against all odds. You have to have a lot of stamina, it's a long-distance race. The internal dialogue is very difficult, with your partner too. You must keep a cool head.
6	The birth of Sorbos is part of pure entertainment, it was born from the goal of generating a better version of me. It cost me money out of my pocket, but I felt more fulfilled then. The first steps are always the slowest when it comes to entrepreneurship, and it is where you have to contribute the most.	I remember me, after receiving the award, crying and crying and crying. Those moments as a salesperson are priceless, where you really value what you've done. Until that moment you don't value yourself. I believe that there is nothing more important in this life than giving value to yourself.	It is essential that the people who make up the team believe in the project, in what they do. At the leadership level, you also have to have a certain charisma, maintaining good relationships with key people.
7	I feel very sorry for the people who live in places like the ones I have lived in, maybe they have not been so lucky to continue moving forward because in the end they did not have the necessary resources, even though they had possible incredible solutions to social problems, but because they did not have resources they have not been able to move forward.	On the one hand, transparency, making things clear. Projects go around a lot, you don't understand what they're going to be for, they're theoretical projects. The sooner they are validated, the better.	Transparency and also motivation. The ease of telling the good, but also the bad, how the project has grown and, above all, where it wants to go.
8	When you are very clear about the purpose, that purpose makes you innovative and creative in what you work on. That's where the full potential of our project lies.	It's been key for me to say things from within, in a natural way, without wanting to sell more than you are. We have been too modest. I've learned not to be so pessimistic by saying the most negative things, but to rephrase them, so that it doesn't sound so negative.	I want to open myself up to new projects in which I can make this knowledge I have available to other people, to be able to develop that methodology to better validate people's purpose. I think it's something basic to develop in our society.
9	Thanks to this experience, many of the obstacles that people encounter implementing projects on a psychological level have already been overcome. We could say that we had done it before. I haven't built something from scratch.	In terms of leadership and entrepreneurial skills, in the founding team we had people who had grit. I've been discovering these entrepreneurial skills in me as I go. When you're doing a PhD, you're developing these skills without knowing it, and then applying them to the realm of entrepreneurship.	They tell me I'm very authentic. I don't have a canned discourse, but it comes out of our history and tells our story authentically. I used to be a much worse communicator than I am now. Even though I don't like public speaking, I've accumulated a lot of experience.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the interviews.

Table A4. Self-Efficacy and Social Good

Entrepreneur	Quotes		
1	We have shown that the social sector has the capacity and desire to employ its people in an urban distribution, delivery and parcel activity.	Another important achievement is that we are changing the sector, we are part of the change within the urban distribution of goods, which makes cities more sustainable, avoiding the use of motor vehicles in cities, since we make our deliveries on foot or by bicycle.	Accelerate the execution of innovation, first in the implementation of new initiatives and then in the execution of that innovation. That's what sets us apart. We are faster in execution, and we enjoy what we do and the impact we generate.
2	We also work on the issue of the digital transformation of orthopedics, and we improve the quality of life of patients, because we make many products that do not exist on the market.	Our goal is to improve the standard of living of our beneficiaries and their environment. We are also looking for the environmental impact, because by printing within the orthopedics itself we reduce courier expenses.	There are times when we need to raise our heads and see what we are doing in our day to day; innocently, without knowing it, I think that is what we contribute.
3	All companies produce waste, all people produce waste, and they need raw materials. Linking these concepts, we started working with waste, connecting this concept with that of opportunity for recovery.	We have developed our own impact measurement methodology for waste recovery, measuring the environmental and social benefits that arise from giving resources a second life, preventing them from being disposed of and allowing them to replace virgin raw materials.	We are much more agile and we can connect with other agents in the entrepreneurship ecosystem in a more agile way, providing faster solutions.
4	That was the origin, in deciding that all our effort had a real value, automating a repetitive task, which doctors do not enjoy doing and that helps in the diagnostic process, which is to read electrocardiograms.	The patient does not want to wait to be diagnosed because the disease progresses. We were able to see the impact of reducing the waiting list and reducing patient deaths, which is what matters to people. We were able to have a decision tree that allows you to operate reducing the times in the process.	Startups, and projects like ours, can bring speed. The speed with which things can be changed and innovated within a startup is much greater because there are fewer processes and because things that don't work can be taken away.
5	We think we have succeeded if we have managed to get that person to come to the village to see their olive tree. A person who comes to the village knows his olive tree, he knows our work, that person is loyal to us and to our project.	From the sixth year onwards, that tree is reaching an already acceptable level of recovery. Until the sixth year, there has to be someone behind it, bearing the costs that come with it. People create an emotional bond with the tree and don't want to leave it, and they come to see it.	What sets us apart is that we are a very well-rounded project, socially, environmentally, economically. We connect with a topic that is on everyone's lips here, which is that of the emptied Spain.
6	A company that is dedicated to developing single-use products, with the unique experience of changing the plastic element for edible.	We managed to remove about 45 million plastic straws from the market.	We offer new, fresh ideas, be more agile. In large organizations, it's harder to get around. We offer tools and ideas to make everything more agile.
7	Impact in 2021: 25,000 people benefited (patients/users, people at risk of exclusion); present in 55 countries, 150kg of plastic reused per year.	From there, we began to think about business models that could make our idea profitable and sustainable, without losing the essence of continuing to deliver these devices free of charge to the beneficiaries.	We also wanted to educate in social technology, and after the pandemic we launched an educational program for schools. We delivered a 3D printer and educational books that we have made ourselves. We train the teacher and the teacher can teach the class; that allows us to be everywhere.
8	We should be close to the 100 tons of food a year that we prevent from going to waste. At the family level, we must be close to 400 families that we have helped.	We help to prevent surplus food from ending up in the rubbish bin. Families in situations of exclusion, accompanied by social entities, can access food in a new innovative way, without stigmatisation, which allows them to choose what to eat and when to do it through an app.	The money put in by social entities and public administrations is reverted to the local neighbourhood economy, because our food network is a network of local food shops.
9	We have worked with more than 20,000 children, with learning and satisfaction rates of over 90% in all cases. It is estimated that between 5% and 10% of these children will develop scientific vocations. We have promoted 1235 new vocations at the end of 2021.	Children improve their self-perception and self-concept, in terms of seeing themselves as scientists, and they see themselves very closed to science and technology professionals.	In 2018 we also started to get involved in teacher training issues, because it is the way to make it more scalable at the primary education level. Teachers are the ones who are supposed to awaken vocations because they are working with children of sensitive ages.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the interviews.

Table A5. Social Space, Networking

Entrepreneur	Quotes		
1	At UnLimited, they are always there for you when you need them. They tell you what or who do you need, from a marketing expert to a contact with a multinational; they help you with specific things you need.	Another important topic was to be introduced to BCorp. We were certified by BCorp thanks to funding from UnLimited. UnLimited is a program that adapts to you, not the other way around.	They give you support in what you need, contacts you need, expert advice. Their attitude is that of how can we help you?
2	We participated in the Emprende in Health program, between UnLimited and Lilly, and were assigned a mentor.	They made me see that what is not measured does not exist. Measure the benefit for the client, two days less off, 8 out of 10 days enjoying the pool, etc.	Compared to other entrepreneurship programs I've been in, none of them gave value to social impact; they were just numbers. At UnLimited, they are clear that we are in this world to improve it, not to destroy it.
3	In my case, the connection with a company was very important. I liked it a lot, I still have contact with the person from the company. It is also super important to have at your disposal that network of mentors, advisors, investors, who are really interested. It can also help you unblock a specific problem you may be having at the moment.	From the relationship with UnLimited Spain I would highlight above all the closeness and human quality of the people who work there, a fundamental aspect for me to want to keep in touch with them. They have a genuine interest in providing value, in helping you as an entrepreneur. They put a lot of heart and love into the relationship with the entrepreneurs.	At UnLimited Spain is highly valued the ability to generate a social and environmental impact, to be economically self-sufficient, to be able to generate economic income. Commitment, credibility and personal legitimacy are also highly valued, that people are actually involved in the projects they lead.
4	UnLimited helped us test our idea, putting us in touch with people in the sector, used to selling to large organizations, and who helped us by questioning all our initial assumptions, getting feedback from people with valid content that really helps you to improve.	It is also especially appreciated the desire that the people of UnLimited have to make a better world. That's also our idea, to help both patients in the hospital and families, to make their lives a little easier. UnLimited helps you measure your proposals, how to measure the impact you're going to have.	Thanks to these efforts, two important investment funds have invested in our company. I doven becomes a vehicle for social impact, providing value to those around you and who are committed to you as a project. Measurement is key to move forward and to know about it.
5	UnLimited is an engagement generator. Everyone there has a very high commitment, starting with Manuel Lencero, who is a person with a lot of purpose in life, a great vocation for what he does, and communicates that very well into all the people who work with him.	Thanks to Manuel's vocation, you can call him directly and he gets involved with you, he goes down into the ground. At UnLimited they are very close, and they have been able to generate a community spirit very well.	At UnLimited, everyone knows who you are.
6	UnLimited, for me, is a ship that you, as an entrepreneur, got on at a time when it helped you a lot and that you have at your disposal, and they prepare a port for you whenever you want.	For me it is a window, a support, an outlet, a place to grow, acquire new knowledge, because each time they are in contact with new entrepreneurs, with new ideas and you are inside the circle.	Connection, networking, an organization that connects with all spheres of society, that allows you to be present at different events or meet investment funds, allows you to meet people, businessmen, other entrepreneurs.
7	Although it was a time of pandemic, they facilitated our company design. On the commercial side, knowing how to deal with a conversation with a potential client and knowing how to grow. In terms of the project, in terms of knowing what money I have and how to use it to make it more productive, how to invest and grow the project.	They value your project and value the effort you're making. I love how lucky I was to have been able to get inside the circle of UnLimited; It gives me the chance to be with amazing people from all walks of life. That hasn't happened to me in any kind of previous training, which in the end are one-off events that you say goodbye very good and that's it.	When UnLimited selects you, it's because they see the value proposition, and they're inside the person who is directing the projects, their attitude, their commitment. With Unlimited, we met the pharmaceutical company Lily, who were one of the first companies to hire us for a training course. UnLimited also gives you the chance to meet other startups from different fields and ecosystems.
8	From February 2019 we made a first round of funding, in which we raised €8000, among our close network, family, friends. That's also where our outside investor came in, and today he is the secretary of our board of directors.	The latest funding has been raised among our current investors and opening the opportunity to become partners to our community of 80,000 users, selecting the top 1500 users, some of whom have placed more than 300 orders with us.	Unlimited means belonging to a family of people with a common vision. We speak the same language, we walk together in many ways, we share many things. UnLimited has given us visibility, reaching new people, some of them referents who have helped us to give relevance to the project.
9	The importance of having a mentor who would shape the project and give it sustainability, and who was as passionate about the educational issue as we are, who in the end has become a partner in the company, which I suppose is not typical.	They gave us the opportunity to put ourselves in front of a camera, offering us formal training, pitch sessions and public speaking, having the chance to tell it in different contexts, with different audiences, in different formats, with different durations.'	We didn't have all the necessary knowledge at a financial, logistical and management level to start a project, and thanks to the initial training we received with UnLimited, we learned a little more about how all this was going. Nowadays, I think it's more of a network issue.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the interviews.