



STRATEGIC ADAPTATION AND REINVENTION: THE PERFORMANCE OF PRIVATE HEALTHCARE COMPANIES IN PANDEMIC TIMES

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Abstract

Objective: To investigate at which points and to what extent private healthcare institutions adapt and strategically reinvent themselves in the times of a pandemic. **Methodology:** This was a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive study based on a case study carried out in a health clinic in northwestern Rio Grande do Sul State. For data collection, bibliographic research and semi-structured interviews were carried out with managers and collaborators of the researched clinic. For data analysis and interpretation, categorical content analysis was used, in addition to the typology model of Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985).

Originality/Relevance: Little research on management, strategic adaptation, health, and the pandemic has been carried out in private healthcare institutions. Additionally, few studies have addressed organizational strategic adaptation models as a reinvention strategy and organizational perspectives. In this way, this article opens precedents for further academic-scientific investigations regarding this theme and object of study.

Results: The results showed that the changes and strategic adaptation of the analyzed company initially occurred by the influence of the external environment and then by the company's ability to identify opportunities and implement development and optimization actions in its routines, processes, and dynamics, expanding such opportunities to future perspectives and broader contexts

Theoretical/Methodological Contributions: The study contributes to the extent that it allows us to approach the method of organizational strategic adaptation of Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) under a different approach as a strategic and proactive tool for analysis, reinvention, and organizational perspectives in the face of complex and changing contexts such as of the pandemic. The study also brings practical contributions, especially regarding optimizing strategies and predicting perspectives for private healthcare institutions, a segment that is still little studied in the scientific arena regarding the theme of strategic adaptation in the context of the pandemic.

Keywords: Strategic adaptation. pandemic. Health services. Private healthcare.

ADAPTAÇÃO E REINVENÇÃO ESTRATÉGICA: ATUAÇÃO DE EMPRESAS DE SAÚDE PRIVADA EM TEMPOS DE PANDEMIA

Resumo

Objetivo: Investigar em que pontos e até que pontos as instituições de saúde privada se adaptam e se reinventam estrategicamente, em tempos de pandemia.

Metodologia: Pesquisa qualitativa, exploratória e descritiva, com realização de estudo de caso em uma clínica de saúde, no noroeste do Rio Grande do Sul. Para a coleta de dados, foram realizadas pesquisa bibliográfica e entrevistas semiestruturadas com gestores e colaboradores da clínica pesquisada. Para a análise e interpretação dos dados, foi utilizada análise de conteúdo por categorias, além do modelo de tipologia de Hrebiniak e Joyce (1985).

Originalidade/Relevância: Poucas pesquisas sobre gestão, adaptação estratégica, saúde e pandemia têm sido realizadas nas instituições de saúde privada. Também, poucos estudos abordam modelos de adaptação estratégica organizacional como estratégia de reinvenção e de perspectivas organizacionais. Desta forma, este artigo abre precedentes para maior investigação acadêmico-científica quanto a esta temática e objeto de pesquisa.

Resultados: Os resultados da pesquisa evidenciam que as mudanças e a adaptação estratégica da empresa analisada ocorreram, inicialmente, pela influência do meio externo e, em seguida, pela capacidade da empresa de identificar oportunidades e implementar ações de desenvolvimento e de otimização em suas rotinas, processos

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e dinâmicas, expandindo tais oportunidades para perspectivas futuros e contextos mais amplos

Contribuições Teóricas/Metodológicas: O estudo contribui na medida em que permite abordar o método de adaptação estratégica organizacional, de Hrebiniak e Joyce (1985), sob um enfoque diferenciado, como ferramenta estratégica e proativa de análise, reinvenção e perspectivas organizacionais, frente a contextos complexos e inconstantes como os da pandemia. O estudo também traz contribuições práticas, principalmente quanto à otimização de estratégias e à previsão de perspectivas para as instituições de saúde privadas, segmento ainda pouco estudado na arena científica, ao tratar da temática de adaptação estratégica no contexto da pandemia.

Palavras-chave: Adaptação estratégica. Pandemia. Serviços de saúde. saúde privada.

ADAPTACIÓN Y REINVENCIÓN ESTRATÉGICA: DESEMPEÑO DE EMPRESAS DE SALUD PRIVADA EN TIEMPOS DE PANDEMIA

Resumen

Objetivo: Investigar en qué puntos y en qué medida las instituciones de salud privada se adaptan y reinventan estratégicamente en tiempos de pandemia.

Metodología: Investigación cualitativa, exploratoria y descriptiva, con estudio de caso realizado en una clínica de salud, en el noroeste de Rio Grande do Sul. Para la recolección de datos, se realizaron pesquisas bibliográficas y entrevistas semiestruturadas con gestores y colaboradores de los investigados. clínica. Para el análisis e interpretación de los datos se utilizó el análisis de contenido por categorías, además del modelo tipológico de Hrebiniak y Joyce (1985).

Originalidad/Relevancia: Se han realizado pocas investigaciones sobre gestión, adaptación estratégica, salud y pandemia en instituciones de salud privadas. Asimismo, pocos estudios abordan los modelos de adaptación estratégica organizacional como estrategia de reinvencción y perspectivas organizacionales. De esta forma, este artículo abre precedentes para posteriores investigaciones académico-científicas en torno a este tema y objeto de investigación.

Resultados: Los resultados de la investigación muestran que los cambios y la adecuación estratégica de la empresa analizada ocurrieron, inicialmente, por la influencia del entorno externo y, luego, por la capacidad de la empresa para identificar oportunidades e implementar acciones de desarrollo y optimización en sus rutinas, procesos y dinámicas, expandiendo tales oportunidades a perspectivas futuras y contextos más amplios

Aportes Teóricos/Metodológicos: El estudio contribuye en la medida en que permite abordar el método de adaptación estratégica organizacional, de Hrebiniak y Joyce (1985), bajo un enfoque diferente, como herramienta estratégica y proactiva de análisis, reinvencción y perspectivas organizacionales, frente a contextos complejos y cambiantes como el de la pandemia. El estudio también trae contribuciones prácticas, especialmente en lo que respecta a la optimización de estrategias y la predicción de perspectivas para las instituciones de salud privada, segmento aún poco estudiado en el ámbito científico, cuando se trata el tema de la adaptación estratégica en el contexto de la pandemia.

Palabras clave: Adaptación Estratégica. Pandemia. Servicios de Salud. Salud Privada.

1 Introduction

The uncertain and constantly changing scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic presents numerous impacts on people's physical and emotional health, their routines (Hassan, Hollander, Van Lent, & Tahoun, 2020; Nasciutti, 2020), global socioeconomic development (Fernandes, 2020; França Filho, Magnelli, & Eynaud, 2020), and market and organizational dynamics (Rossoni, 2020; Yazbek, Raichelis, & Sant'ana, 2020; Moura & Tomei, 2021; Silva, Miranda, & Hoffmann, 2021). In just a fleeting period of time, organizations were required to create methods to adapt to this context (Backes, Arias, Storopoli, & Ramos, 2020). Parallel to this situation, what is most questioned in scientific debates are the adaptation and management strategies in organizations and health systems that, while this context impacts them, can also contribute to mitigating and better facing turbulent and uncertain situations such as those of the pandemic, including to contribute to society. After all, concern for the population's health and quality of life has never been so latent (Hassan *et al.* 2020; Nasciutti, 2020).

As far as strategy research is concerned, Whittington (2002), one of the most prominent theorists in this field, already asserted the importance of a strategist approach to analysis, considering the macro-social and organizational contexts. Moreover, Machado-da-Silva and Vizeu (2007) and Fiates, Demo, and Brilinger (2018) underlined the importance of the convergence between theory and practice in the field of strategy, emphasizing the protagonist nature of organizations in designing and conducting strategies. More recent research on strategy, such as by Vicente, Rafael, & Serra (2021), has addressed the relevance of behavioral aspects in organizations facing more dynamic and uncertain contexts. In the healthcare context, various studies have focused on researching change in strategic adaptation in hospital institutions and medical cooperatives (Sausen, Froemming, & Sausen, 2018; Zaluski & Sausen, 2018).

Nevertheless, according to research in scientific bases, most studies on organizational strategic adaptation are limited to diagnosing stages and processes of strategic adaptation in these companies and their contexts, addressing little about organizational strategic adaptation models as strategies of reinvention and organizational perspectives. In addition to the relevance of public health and its institutions to preventing and containing the pandemic (Fenandez, Castro, Fernandes, & Alves, 2020; Sarti, Lazarini, Fontenelle, & Almeida, 2020), it is worth highlighting the importance of analyzing private healthcare institutions in this context. An essential activity to the community, health constitutes the primary economic activity of these companies. However, according to database searches, few studies have been carried out in private health institutions on the themes of management, strategic adaptation, health, and the pandemic. Based on these gaps, this article poses the following research question: How have private healthcare institutions configured themselves strategically in complex times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic? Thus, this article aimed to investigate which points and to what extent private health institutions adapt and reinvent themselves strategically in times of a pandemic.

To this end, we conducted a case study in a health clinic in northwestern Rio Grande do Sul State (southern Brazil). As data collection methods, we conducted bibliographic research and semi-

structured interviews with managers and employees of the clinic. For data analysis and interpretation, we used categorical content analysis and the typology model of Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985).

The results showed that the changes and strategic adaptation of the company analyzed occurred initially due to the influence of the external environment and the company's ability to identify opportunities and implement development and optimization actions in its routines, processes, and dynamics, expanding such opportunities to broader contexts. The study contributes in that it allows us to approach the organizational strategic adaptation method of Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) under a differentiated focus as a strategic and proactive tool for analysis, reinvention, and organizational perspectives in the face of complex and inconstant contexts (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). What is more, this study also brings practical contributions, especially regarding optimizing strategies and predicting perspectives for private healthcare institutions, a segment still little studied in the scientific arena regarding the theme of strategic adaptation in the context of the pandemic.

This paper is organized into six sections, starting with the introduction. Section two presents the theoretical review, including the socioeconomic and organizational impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizational processes of strategic adaptation, and the contextual analysis of the health area in the face of the pandemic. Section three presents the method, section four presents the results, highlighting the initial impacts of the pandemic on the company analyzed and the management strategies and services of this company and its perspectives in face of this scenario. Finally, the final considerations are made, followed by the references used.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Socio-economic and organizational impacts of COVID-19

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that COVID-19 went from disease status to pandemic status quickly, triggering a crisis and emergency situation with social, economic, and physical and mental health consequences for the populations. Hence, the pandemic brought to light the already pre-existing divorce between the economy and society. In some countries, this manifested itself in public discourse through the supposed conflict between maintaining economic activity and protecting the population's health (Dallabrida, Baggio, Zatera, & Cruz, 2020; França Filho *et al.*, 2020).

The gravity of the situation has led the health sciences to give full attention to combating this disease, although it has also been highly demanding for other areas, including those linked to the social sciences, to reflect on the consequences (Rossoni, 2020). Thus, organizational studies and the business field are investigating the possible impacts of the sudden decline in economic activity and the change in behavioral dynamics in companies and among people (Backes *et al.*, 2020; Nasciutti, 2020; Yazbek *et al.*, 2020, Moura & Tomei, 2021; Silva *et al.*, 2021). The changes resulting from the crisis generated by COVID-19 have manifested themselves in all dimensions and levels, including the health, economic,

political, and social systems (Nasciutti, 2020), thereby impacting the production chain, operational dynamics of human resources, employment ties, and generating a general climate of anxiety and insecurity, subjectively, and in professional, social, and family interpersonal relationships (Hassan *et al.*, 2020).

According to research conducted in 80 countries on the spread of COVID-19 and other epidemic diseases, as COVID-19 spread globally in the first quarter of 2020, companies' main concerns were related to the collapse in demand, increased uncertainty, disruption in supply chains, and reduced emotional capacity, employee well-being, and financing, which is rare in the first quarter, although more consistent in the second quarter (Hassan *et al.*, 2020).

As for the global economy, in a mild scenario, GDP growth would be affected from 3 to 6% depending on the country, with an average decline in GDP in 2020 of -2.8%, and it could even drop by 10–15% in some countries, with each month of crisis costing 2.5–3% of global GDP, negatively affecting mainly service economies, countries more dependent on tourism and foreign trade (Fernandes, 2020), and countries with pre-existing political-economic crises (e.g., Brazil) (Nasciutti, 2020).

In the labor market, unemployment in Brazil reached over 12% by the end of the first quarter of 2020 (Nasciutti, 2020). Added to this are job insecurity and instability, the growth of informal work, reduced wages, outsourcing, and fixed-term contracts (Yazbek *et al.*, 2020). It is also a fact that in this conjuncture of measures of social distancing and isolation (WHO, 2020) and the spread of working from home (Losekann & Mourão, 2020; Rossoni, 2020), the COVID-19 crisis has been changing the ways businesses act regarding the role of technology in communication, especially as a strategy for supplying demands and optimizing administrative processes and organizational services, evidencing a significant increase in adherence and investments regarding technology (Barbosa, 2020; Castro, 2020; Cruvinel, 2020; Galindo Neto *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, living in a context of uncertainty with numerous uncontrollable variables makes predictions difficult, and it is thereby necessary to analyze the problem based on a resilience strategy (Lapão, 2020; Moura & Tomei, 2021). In addition to social and health protection measures, it is also necessary to create a support network in all instances whilst focusing on multidisciplinary and dialogues with different sectors of society (Nasciutti, 2020). Therefore, facing the reality of the pandemic crisis, the organizational and territorial dynamics of development, and an economy in which market competitiveness has required organizations to constantly adapt and reinvent themselves and deal with the contingencies that arise in this challenging context (Whittington, 2002).

2.2 Organizational processes of strategic adaptation

Organizations have undergone significant transformations due to world changes produced by globalization and technological advances in recent years. The market environment is increasingly competitive, and by continuously adapting, organizations ensure increasingly sustainable competitive

advantages (Whittington, 2002). Moreover, in complex and fickle contexts, added to innovation as an essential element of sustainability (Bauer, 1999; Tidd & Bessant, 2015), strategies emerge to improve articulations, providing subsidies for organizations to adapt and face such contexts (Tureta & Julio, 2016; Vieira, Lavarda, & Brandt, 2016).

Despite being under pressure from the environment, organizations are able to decide on their choice of strategies (Tureta & Julio, 2016; Vieira *et al.*, 2016), even if often limited by the concerning scenario. This brings back the theoretical debate on strategy research guided by the functionalist approach without considering the strategist approach, the macro-social and organizational contexts, as pointed out by Whittington (2002), a prominent theorist in the field of business strategy. Furthermore, the institutional analysis of Machado-da-Silva and Vizeu (2007) corroborates these assumptions by underlining the importance of the convergence between theory and practice in the field of strategy, evidencing the protagonism of organizations in elaborating and conducting strategies in view of their internal and external dynamics. In addition, recent evidence in the field of strategy has focused on organizational behavioral aspects, including in the face of more dynamic and uncertain contexts, as pointed out by a bibliometric study on strategy research conducted by Vicente *et al.* (2021).

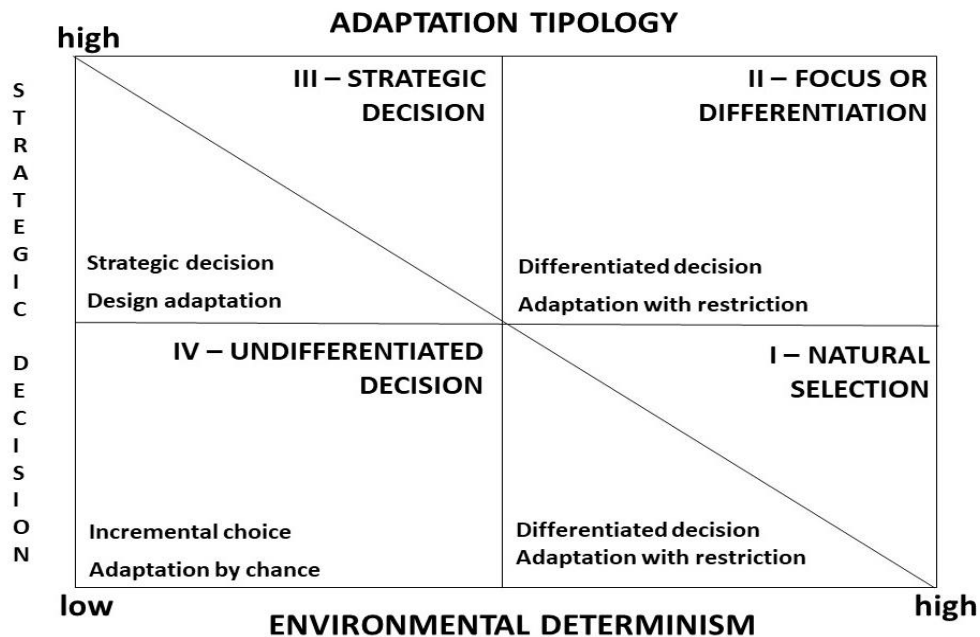
Defining strategy as a pattern in a chain of decisions (core theme) has contrasted between deliberate strategies (patterns desired before being carried out) and emergent strategies (patterns perceived in the absence of intentions), with emerging strategies being more common due to the dynamic and constantly changing context governing the market and firms (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel 2010).

In this sense, Bauer (1999) stated that the imposition of market adaptation to organizations has provided that attributes such as flexibility and creativity have acquired more importance than efficiency, to the detriment of a mechanistic mentality, moving to the appreciation of an organicist mentality. In other words, in the competitive context, relevant changes may occur in organizational processes, in which products and services are valued for productivity and innovation through continuous processes of learning, knowledge, and improvement of organizations (Tidd & Bessant, 2015).

Organizational adaptation comprises the ability to identify, interpret, and establish strategies according to the needs of the environment as a way of providing a competitive advantage (Rossetto & Rossetto, 2005). As for organizational strategic adaptation, Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) developed a model of interactive view that considers the relevance of two factors of analysis: strategic choice and environmental determinism. Such variables are independent, although their interaction is pivotal to explaining organizational behavior in the face of their internal and external contexts of action (Sausen *et al.*, 2018). The interactions influence the number and forms of organizational strategy choices. This emphasis promotes the decision on means and ends, political behavior and conflicts, and the organization's pursuit of activities in its environment, resulting in four types or quadrants of adaptation (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Relationship between strategic choice and environmental determinism



Source: Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985).

In quadrant I (natural selection), there is a high degree of environmental influence and low capacity for strategic decisions due to the lack of resources and the organizations' lack of strength in the face of the environment. In quadrant II (focus or differentiation), strategic decision and environmental determinism are high, characterizing a turbulent context, with external factors generating pressures on decision making, causing internal restrictions, although presenting room for the company to make its own decisions. In quadrant III (strategic decision), there is a high degree of strategic decision and low environmental determinism, few political restrictions, abundant internal resources, maximum power of choice, and adaptation by design. In quadrant IV (undifferentiated decision), strategic choice and environmental determinism are low, and organizations cannot create dependency or exert influence (i.e., they tend to have little strategic decision despite little external constraint).

Thus, the typology suggests the complexity and interdependence of important variables and decision processes as a function of both choice and determinism. Adaptation as a dynamic process reveals that, for any organization, elements or variables of strategic decisions and environmental determinism exist simultaneously. The quadrants may vary according to the profile, the organizational context, and their interrelationships with the internal and external environments. Strategic change is a complex process, continuous and dependent on the environment in which the company is inserted, and research on the process of organizational strategic adaptation has been employed to analyze changes arising from the internal and external environment (Silva, Cappellari, Goularte, & Silva, 2020).

Nonetheless, understanding in depth the dynamics of organizational strategic adaptation requires going beyond the majority of studies on strategy, which project models of strategic adaptation

to a functional character as a diagnostic tool of the interactions of companies with their internal and external environments and contexts. Such approaches disregard a differentiated approach, which allows addressing such models as strategic and proactive tools for analysis, reinvention, and organizational perspectives in the face of complex and fickle contexts, as proposed in this study.

Parallel to this, in the face of the pandemic's rapid dissemination and accompanied by the sudden changes generated by this context, society and organizations, in order to ensure their survival, have had to readapt and reinvent themselves in the most diverse ways. Bringing the discussion to organizational studies, understanding the processes of strategic adaptation that organizations go through in this scenario becomes of the utmost importance. Lastly, given all these aspects, what is being questioned is how the management modes that prevailed until now will remain in institutions and in public and private organizations. How can we highlight relationships between economy and development that do not compromise life in society? In this conjuncture of global health demands, what about the public and private health systems, which, while the pandemic context impacts them, can also contribute to mitigating and better facing turbulent and uncertain situations such as those of the pandemic, including to contribute to society?

2.3 The health area: contextual analysis in the pandemic

The context of the pandemic — high transmissibility of the virus, large proportion of asymptomatic infected individuals estimated at over 30%, the absence of vaccines and proven drug therapy, insufficient coverage of tests, prolonged duration of clinical treatment, and experiences from other countries (Jackson Filho *et al.*, 2020) — explains the decisions that provoked the social isolation measures and that advised that only essential services be maintained, including the health services themselves.

In this scenario, health assumes immense responsibility for reducing the risks and impacts of the pandemic. Consolidated from the Federal Constitution of 1988 (Brasil, 1988), and in response to the national debate on universalization, qualification, and accessibility of public health services, the public health system instituted the complementary health system and the Unified Health System (SUS). This was carried out with the intention, as a duty of the State and a right of the citizen, to promote positive and effective transformation in the processes and public policies of attendance to the civil society to contemplate the entire Brazilian territory in forming a regionalized and hierarchical network of health services, especially in the subsidy of actions and services performed by non-profit organizations.

Recently, as a structural and permanent element, SUS has enabled the optimization of strategies and actions to detect and contain the pandemic in Brazil, highlighting the relevance of primary health care (PHC) as an essential pillar in emergencies and is characterized by the attributes of first contact, longitudinality, integrality or comprehensiveness, care coordination, family-centeredness, community orientation, and cultural competence (Sarti *et al.*, 2020).

However, the difficulties that the health sector has faced and that end up impacting society are quite evident, including in the context of facing the pandemic on the various territorial scales. Brazil has one of the largest universal health systems globally, anchored in an extensive PHC network, but with chronic problems with funding, management, provision of professionals, and structuring of services (Fernandez, Castro, Fernandes, & Alves, 2020). It is evidenced, at this juncture, a critical situation of the system to meet the potential demand as several micro and macro health regions operate beyond their capacity, compromising patient care, especially for those with more severe symptoms. Added to this is the demand for hospital beds, ventilation equipment, and regionalized health services organization for patient access, especially in peripheral areas and smaller localities (Noronha *et al.*, 2020).

Another aspect that draws attention to the operationalization of service provision is that, according to the Center for Studies and Research in Health Emergencies and Disasters (Cepedes, 2020), the health measures related to primary care, hospital care, urgencies and emergencies, and health surveillance have not been coordinated or implemented similarly in the state units of the national territory.

In addition, even for health professionals directly involved with patient care, little is discussed about the conditions and organization of work, prevailing protocols with recommendations for individual measures (hygiene and use of protective equipment). Proof of this is that there have been complaints from professionals and unions about poor working conditions, inadequate hygiene, strenuous working hours, lack of training, and the insufficiency or unavailability of protective equipment, even in intensive care services (Jackson Filho *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, regarding information and communication technologies, part of the Brazilian population, even with mobile devices, has limited access to fast internet connections at home and little familiarity with teleconsultation and remote surveillance (Tasca & Massuda, 2020), making it challenging to optimize services.

Therefore, it is up to healthcare to strengthen its capacities in health surveillance — sanitary, epidemiological, environmental, and worker's health — and with attention and care for health, such as primary health care, urgencies and emergencies, and hospital care (Cepedes, 2020). Furthermore, this scenario — which has the health sector as the protagonist — requires strengthening governance in a larger context. In this way, besides the reactive and corrective management of current risks, prospective management of the pandemic is pivotal. Systematizing local experiences and enhancing learning has become crucial in a global context in which health systems, like Brazil's, have shown themselves to be unprepared to absorb the impact of a pandemic (Fernandez *et al.*, 2020).

According to Rossoni (2020), the state apparatus must accelerate investments in strategic infrastructure and production to solve coordination problems, provide execution resources for large collective action programs, stimulate new explorations and technological development of products (e.g., vaccines and medicines), provide financial support and/or increased liquidity for economic activities directly impacted, as well as create support for small enterprises that goes beyond financial support. In addition to the state apparatus, the essential purpose of governance must involve vertical and horizontal

coordination and cooperation among the different levels of government and sectors involved, the active participation of civil society, and the role and responsibility of local authorities in combating emergencies and ensuring the provision of essential services (Cepedes, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite the relevance of public health and its institutions, especially hospitals, for the prevention and containment of the pandemic and all the efforts to make resources available to this sector in order to better serve the population, it is worth highlighting the private institutions of health services in this scenario. This segment is still little studied in the scientific area when dealing with the theme of strategic adaptation in the context of the pandemic.

Added to this is the fact that these companies, including clinics and practices, have also faced the negative impacts of the pandemic on their business because besides being an essential activity of providing services to the community, health constitutes a primordial economic activity for the sustainability of these companies. In this scenario, challenges are put to the test, and it is essential to analyze, rethink, and implement adaptation strategies, reinvention, and organizational perspectives to improve the picture of this global crisis in which the demand for health services, as well as the concern with health and quality of life of the population, have never been so latent.

3 Methodology

This study is a social study with a qualitative approach. It is social because its field of investigation is the social reality and aspects of the being in its multiple relationships with other beings and social institutions (Gil, 2019). It is qualitative as we seek to delve into the world of meanings through the unstructured method and provide insights and understanding of the context of the problem (Minayo, 2016; Malhotra, 2012).

Regarding the study goals, the research is exploratory and descriptive. Exploratory, insofar as it enables us to investigate new findings and perspectives and conducted in an area in which there is little accumulated and systematized knowledge (Gil, 2019). Hence, this study sets precedents for further academic-scientific research regarding strategic adaptation processes and their applicability in private healthcare in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. What is more, this study is descriptive, given it proposes to describe the characteristics of the phenomenon in question (organizational strategic adaptation in the context of the pandemic), establishing relationships between these variables (Gil, 2019).

In order to investigate the contemporary phenomenon of the pandemic in the organizational context of the health area, we employed the case study method (Yin, 2015). This method was applied in a private clinic (health service provider) operating in a city in northwestern Rio Grande do Sul State, and the methods and results can be applied to similar cases considering the same profile of company performance (private healthcare) and the same external context (the pandemic). The municipality in question is recognized for the quality of health services provided to its community. At the same time,

the company (object of this study) is constituted as an expanding franchise and member of a network, with units in the three southernmost states of Brazil and Minas Gerais State (southeastern Brazil).

The company has three co-owners, six administrative employees, physicians of various specialties, and professionals from different areas, including dentists, physical therapists, nutritionists, speech therapists, nurses, psychologists, and chiropractors. In order to provide considerable savings in consultations and exams and provide service with agility and quality, the clinic offers its clients their own healthcare card. The company counts on external network partnerships through discounts granted by acquiring products and services from other companies upon presenting the card.

We conducted bibliographic research on the themes addressed, primarily in books and articles from national and international sources in the Web of Science and SciELO databases. In order to highlight how the organizational processes of strategic adaptation are applied in the face of the pandemic in the private healthcare scenario, we used semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool. The interviews took place in the second half of 2020 and, considering the peak of the pandemic in this period, were conducted remotely (online) and individually to managers and employees of the clinic in the roles of Administrative Director, Clinical Director, physician, and external salesperson.

Based on the themes addressed and the objective of the study, the interview script, previously pre-tested and validated with professionals and professors in the management area, contained the following questions: 1) How did the pandemic impact the company's business and services (sector of activity, company's public, community and health area as a whole)? 2) Which strategies and actions that the company implemented before the pandemic were affected? 3) Which strategies and actions were no longer implemented, which ones were maintained, and which new ones arose to circumvent this situation and better reach all of the company's audiences? 4) Are virtual communication and service delivery platforms and applications being used? Which ones and how often? What is the perception and adhesion of each segment regarding the use of these virtual and technological tools? 5) What are the future management and service perspectives for the company, its audiences, and the health services considering the transformations generated by the pandemic?

We used categorical content analysis as the method for data analysis and interpretation. This method consists of breaking down the content into units and analogical regrouping, highlighting the categorization, the description of the categories, and the inferences and interpretation of the results (Bardin, 2018). Based on the themes of the study and through a longitudinal perspective of analysis, we considered the following analysis categories: initial impacts of the pandemic, management strategies and services, and perspectives. Another method we used for data analysis and interpretation that guided the entire study was Hrebiniak's (1985) typology model, effectively enabling the analysis of organizational change and adaptation processes in their various contexts.

In this way, the consequences of the socioeconomic and organizational panorama concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizational processes of strategic adaptation with a focus on the typology model of Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985), and the contextual analysis of the healthcare area in the

context of the pandemic were interrelated with the data collected, highlighting the speeches of the respondents of the company analyzed.

4 Presentation and analysis of the results

4.1 Initial impacts of the pandemic on the analyzed company

There were several impacts of the pandemic on the analyzed clinic. According to the Administrative Director, the commercial part was negatively impacted by the restriction of people's movement and isolation measures. In contrast, in the clinical part, the company had to adapt its facilities and procedures according to the recommendations of the World Health Organization and health boards (WHO, 2020). Additionally, the Managing Director stated that "the health area, as a whole, has changed service protocols, intensified working hours, and adapted its activities."

According to one of the physicians who provided services at the clinic, the employees responsible for attracting new clients had the effectiveness of their work restricted by the quarantine. The company had a reduced number of consultations, and in the number of new clients, patients with less severe complaints stopped going to consultations due to the circumstances of the pandemic, and even one of the managers had to stay away because he was suspected of being infected despite the negative result found days later.

The Clinical Director added: "people became afraid of purchasing the card and then being unable to afford the expenses, there began to be less and less activity, some people started to lose their jobs." This statement refers to the direct impact of the pandemic on raising the unemployment rate, as evidenced by Nasciutti (2020) and Yazbek *et al.* (2020).

As for the strategies that the company implemented before the pandemic and that were harmed, "the strategies of customer outreach to potential customers, of professional/employees to new customers, and of customers coming directly to the company's headquarters to inquire about the advantages of the product were harmed" (physician).

In addition to the decreased acquisition of healthcare cards, beating the stipulated sales goals was also impaired given the drop in demand generated by the crisis (Hassan *et al.*, 2020). According to the Clinical Director: "the most directly damaged strategies were those related to external sales. External sales were paralyzed as well as elective consultations. Indirectly, internal sales were harmed due to social isolation measures.

Regarding external sales, the professional in charge added:

As we were starting to work, the impact was even greater because we had been working on the sales funnel under the marketing sector's guidance to get to know the customers' needs. In my case, as I work with large companies, unions, and city halls, the difficulty is greater because there is no way to gather groups to present the product and acquire feedback on the proposals.

Furthermore, in the initial weeks of the pandemic, the clinic was late in hiring new healthcare professionals. “Many healthcare professionals were not working” (Clinical Director). The attendance of some professionals was also reduced as a result of recommendations of health agencies and health councils (WHO, 2020). “In dentistry, dentists had to do only emergency work, [such as] some patient who was in pain or bleeding. This had to be remodeled because it was hindered as a result of attendance” (Administrative Director).

These measures are justified based on the relevance of preventive care directed to healthcare professionals, especially those more exposed to the virus (Jackson Filho *et al.*, 2020). The Administrative Director added: “as the virus is transmitted by upper airways, in dentistry, where the patient needs to be without a mask and exposure of the teeth and adjacent tissues, only emergency care was recommended given the high possibility of contamination.” According to the Clinical Director, “regarding the number of people, we have few employees, so it is not considered an overcrowding in relation to the size of the company.”

In summary, based on the activities performed by the clinic in the context of the global health crisis caused by the pandemic, the physician of the analyzed company reported that “most professionals were maintained, but ended up being reduced.” Additionally, despite the initial restriction in reaching the sales goals, “the internal sales were maintained, respecting the new guidelines of using personal protective equipment – PPE” (Administrative Director).

Based on the recommendations of agencies and councils from various areas of health (WHO, 2020), the Clinical Director raised concerns about the conduct and preventive measures by the clinic:

Our main issue is still in prevention, always wearing a mask, [and] social distancing. We requested that all employees and patients who entered the clinic to wear masks. Using alcohol-based hand rubs is always encouraged; there are several points inside the clinic with alcohol-based hand rubs, inside the offices, and outside. So, it is a particularly important issue. The team is always up to date in relation to precautions and the orientation that some patients may ask for, both the healthcare professionals and the administrative ones.

This statement and the facts highlighted here reinforce that, especially in the initial period of the pandemic, the company analyzed fit in Quadrant I (natural selection) of the Hrebiniak and Joyce model (1985), as characterized by the high degree of environmental influence and the organization’s low capacity for strategic decisions.

In other words, the company analyzed and its internal and external agents were impacted by the contingencies and pressures of the broader external context, that is, by the socioeconomic crisis and global health caused by the pandemic. Thus, the commercial part, initially, was negatively impacted by the restriction of people’s movement and isolation measures, especially regarding achieving the sales goals, and sales, especially the external ones, were the most affected. In contrast, in the clinical part, the company had to adapt its facilities and procedures to the orientations of the public bodies and health councils.

Hence, the model of Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) allows us to elucidate the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the business dynamics of the health area. Such prevalence is evidenced by the adaptations and restrictions in the company's administrative, commercial, and clinical routines analyzed in the pandemic's initial period, referring, initially, to imposing the external environment in the internal organizational dynamics. Such aspects corroborate Backes *et al.* (2020), Rossoni (2020), Yazbek *et al.* (2020), Moura and Tomei (2021), and Silva *et al.* (2021) regarding the impact of the pandemic on the market and organizational dynamics.

4.2 Management and service strategies and their perspectives

Amidst the complex context marked by the global health crisis that impacted several companies, including healthcare service providers, and considering the relevance of strategy as a factor for organizational survival and sustainability (Bauer, 1999; Machado-da-Silva & Vizeu, 2007; Tidd & Bessant, 2015, Vicente *et al.*, 2021), the Clinical Director cited the ability to adapt as an essential characteristic.

Being a company linked to the health area, we have to adapt to what has been happening around us in health, whether related to municipalities, state or country, or the world. We have to be always up to date and always try to adapt to the kind of context in which we are living.

As for technological and digital platforms and applications for communication and service delivery, the clinic further increased the use of these tools during the pandemic, corroborating Rossoni (2020) regarding the increased adherence to these resources in this context. Thus, it is worth noting the increased use of social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram (physician), primarily to publicize the clinic's products and services and generate content for preventing COVID-19 and facing the pandemic. "The attendance by digital means also increased, facilitating schedules and clarifications to the client with greater safety facing this pandemic" (physician). As for the clinic's new strategies and technological actions, the Administrative Director highlights the "telemedicine and WhatsApp sales to meet the demands of face-to-face services, which has been made difficult by the context of the crisis."

Regarding sales made, according to the Clinical Director's:

A good part of our sales is made virtually, in this case, over the internet. Besides this, our internal salespeople call, contact the person, make the sale, and many times the clients only come to the clinic to sign the contract and take the card.

The Clinical Director also explains the use, as well as the advantages of providing health services through technology:

We offer an application for follow-up appointments via smartphone. You download the app and can contact us, especially for return visits, which sometimes you don't have time to do in person or avoid going to the clinic to reduce the number of people circulating. It is a technology that was already being seen before the pandemic, but it is actually used now, so it is relatively new, and some patients are using it.

In light of this, adherence to these media is generally considered positive by the audiences involved in the clinic:

Managers, employees, and collaborators see the digital medium as an efficient way out of the impacts of the pandemic, betting on better results and safety for themselves. Likewise, if they were not already adapted or accustomed to virtual media, many customers were conditioned by circumstances to adapt to technology to obtain the most diverse services, including health (medical) services.

However, the acceptance of information and communication technologies varies depending on the platform and the target audience, particularly patients (Tasca & Massuda, 2020). According to the Administrative Director:

On the commercial side, the adhesion was very good, with a very satisfactory return. In relation to telemedicine, no. I think that the public (patients) are still not comfortable with this resource; they still prefer to go to the doctor's office, or, in more specific situations, they prefer to opt for home care.

This was another service differential that the clinic offers along with home delivery of health plan cards. Still, concerning the implemented home care strategies:

In this context of the pandemic, we have put a lot of emphasis on care, and it is precisely the older patient who is part of the risk group who does not need to go to the clinic and [see] the doctor. Most of our professionals can go to the patient's home to perform the care, drastically reducing the patient's exposure as this patient does not stay in the waiting room. We reduce the contact, and the doctor always goes all dressed up, with all the care, keeping all the rules of prevention, [and] of precaution (Clinical Director).

Moreover, if, on the one hand, the initial impact of the pandemic reduced the number of employees, weeks later, according to the doctor working at the clinic, the search for employees was resumed: "the strategy of acquiring more employees was expanded, increasing the possibility of meeting different demands."

Therefore, based on the information from managers and employees of the health clinic analyzed in the study, from a certain moment of the instauration of the pandemic crisis, it is evident that the company fits in Quadrant II (focus or differentiation) of Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985), in which both environmental determinism and strategic decision are high, characterizing a turbulent context, in which exogenous factors affect the decision-making processes at the same time in which the health clinic can exercise its choices.

Thus, the pandemic's crisis and its consequences constitute determining factors for the changes and strategic adaptations of the health clinic. Nonetheless, after the initial period of the pandemic's establishment, in a second moment, the need to adapt to the changes — as a sustainability factor before the market and society and as a way to better face this context — made the analyzed company seek to reinvent itself in the face of this context by developing and implementing strategies and actions to supply demands and optimize its administrative processes and organizational services.

Given this context, this second moment is marked by process of development, expansion, adjustment, and adaptation, the result of changes that were taking place and that required, from the

health clinic, proactive and innovative strategic measures. Hence, this second moment is marked by a set of strategic actions that mix external pressures and the ability to make choices by the company and its agents involved. At this juncture, information and communication technologies take on a fundamental role in establishing contacts and making sales and meeting goals, followed by strategies focused on home care and prospecting employees.

Based on the respondents' feedback, one can note that the voluntarism assumed by the company in conducting the strategies described reinforces the assumptions of Tureta *et al.* (2016), Vieira *et al.* (2016), and Vicente *et al.* (2021) regarding the relevance of the emergence of strategies amidst inconstant and crisis moments (e.g., the pandemic). After all, this type of scenario requires adaptation and also the continuous reinvention of companies in order to improve articulations of organizational dynamics so that organizations can adapt and better cope with this context of change (Whittington, 2002), highlighting innovation (Tidd & Bessant, 2015) as a sustainability factor.

In addition to the perceptions of the survey respondents about the impacts and transformations of the pandemic on the dynamics, strategies, and practices of management and services provided by the clinic analyzed — as well as in its segments and internal and external contexts of operation — Quadrant II (focus or differentiation), by Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985), allows the perspectives of management and service provision for the respective company, involved publics, and for health services, in the view of the managers and employees considered.

Despite the negative impacts in many service economies, in countries dependent on tourism and foreign trade (Fernandes, 2020), and those with political-economic crises, such as Brazil (Nasciutti, 2020), the health clinic presents positive perspectives. In the Administrative Director's view, "because it is a company in the health area, we are managing to get very close to what was stipulated." The physician also stated that "the solution proposed by the company's business model with good prospects for the future."

As for the post-pandemic period, in the opinion of the Managing Director: "the outlook for the whole health area is good." In the words of the external salesperson: "This is a unique moment in our generation, which has fully affected our daily lives, both economically and privately. But because it is about health, I believe that we are going to get going as soon as the dust from the coronavirus clears." However, when analyzing the whole context, the salesman added: "We have very difficult times for the world economy and especially for Brazil. We have to have faith in God and work obstinately to get the train back on track again."

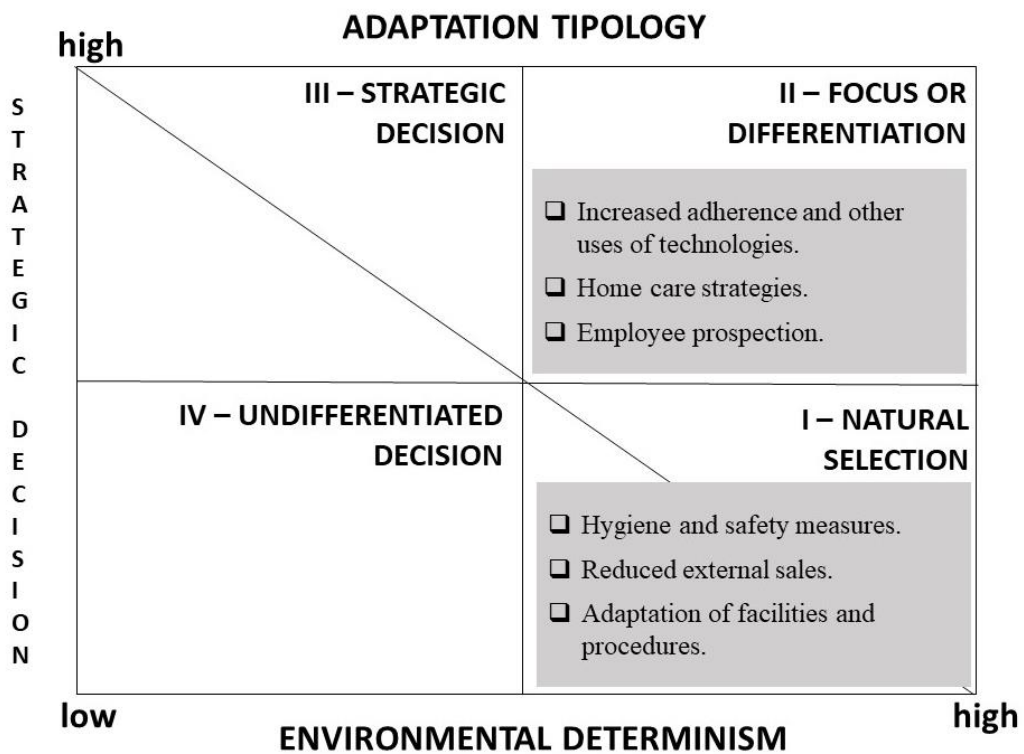
Considering the favorable conditions of accessibility of the services provided by the clinic, the physician predicts good perspectives regarding the target public, considering the bet "on a public partially unaided by the public system, with low/medium financial conditions. As the pandemic tends to impact the economy as a whole, perhaps many people will choose to reduce their expenses with more expensive health plans." The physician also highlighted the relevance of the best cost/benefit for customers about the health products and services offered. "With the topic of 'health' on the rise and

causing people to feel insecure these days, other people may choose to purchase a product that provides them with the security of care, should they need it, without compromising their financial security.”

In addition to stability and organizational sustainability, a greater awareness of people is perceived regarding the issues and measures related to health (Cepedes, 2020), as reflected in changes in habits and behaviors, focusing on a much more systemic reality in order to enhance the quality of life and physical and emotional well-being, not only as an individual but as a society (Lapão, 2020; Nasciutti, 2020). According to the Clinical Director: “soon, when all this passes, the staff will not use masks, but the use of alcohol-based hand rubs itself is always encouraged. This will end up impacting the future.” According to the Administrative Director, from this scenario: “I believe that the population will seek more health services, especially the preventive ones.” Finally, systematizing the results, Figure 2 presents the strategic adaptation processes implemented in the health clinic during the pandemic.

Figure 2

Processes of strategic adaptation implemented in the analyzed company



Source: Prepared by the authors (2021).

Therefore, through the answers given by managers and employees of the health clinic, Figure 2 illustrates the processes of strategic adaptation implemented by the company analyzed during the pandemic, crossing Quadrants I (natural selection) and II (focus or differentiation) of the Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) model.

Thus, and as identified above, Quadrant I characterized by a high degree of environmental influence and low capacity for strategic decisions on the part of the organization, is marked by a period of sanitization and safety measures, reduced external sales, and adaptations of facilities and procedures by the analyzed company, in the face of the pandemic context. Quadrant II is characterized by high environmental determinism and high strategic decision on the part of the organization, highlighting a period of greater adherence and other uses regarding information and communication technologies, home care strategies, and employee prospection, demonstrating greater autonomy and the ability of the health clinic to reinvent itself in the face of the challenges of the pandemic.

After all, on the one hand, healthcare companies cannot abstain from scientific advances, industry demands, and population demands, while on the other hand, although there is environmental determinism, the organization adopts a dialectical posture, with room for strategic decisions (Machado-da-Silva and Vizeu, 2007; Fiates *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the model of Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) of strategic adaptation typologies allows us to understand the influences of the company's strategic positioning changes arising from external and internal issues during its transition phases (Zaluski & Sausen, 2018). Therefore, this model contributes not only to diagnosing organizational strategic adaptations using the contexts that arise but also to the evidence of organizational strategic reinventions facing these contexts, besides enabling the prediction of some future contexts and scenarios, allowing companies to act preventively and actively in the optimization of their internal and external dynamics. Finally, this method and the results evidenced in the study can be applied to similar cases, considering the same company's performance profile (private healthcare) and the same external context (pandemic).

5 Concluding remarks

Based on the socioeconomic, organizational, and territorial impacts of the pandemic, the relevance of diagnosing and reinventing strategic adaptation processes concerning management models in inconstant and crisis scenarios, and the relevance of studying the health system and private healthcare institutions in this context, we fulfilled the objective of investigating at which points and to what extent private healthcare institutions adapt and reinvent themselves strategically in times of pandemic, focusing on a health services clinic in a city in northwestern Rio Grande do Sul State.

Through the analysis of the interviews conducted with the managers and employees, we identified that the changes and strategic adaptation of the company were conducted in moments interrelated to the pandemic context, initially by the influence of the external environment and then by the ability to identify opportunities and implement development and optimization actions in their routines, processes, and dynamics, expanding such opportunities, including to broader contexts.

Thus, in the initial period of the pandemic, the health clinic fitted into Quadrant I (natural selection) of the Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) model and characterized by a high degree of environmental influence and low strategic choice capacity, in which adopting preventive measures for hygiene and

safety, following the guidelines of the World Health Organization (2020) and other health agencies, ended up impacting mainly in the reduction of external sales and the consequent achievement of goals in the commercial area, as well as in the adaptations of facilities and procedures in the clinical area.

At a later stage and after already adapted to this reality, to meet demands and also optimize its internal dynamics of activities and service provision, the healthcare clinic began to reinvent its strategies and actions, migrating to Quadrant II (focus or differentiation) of the Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) model, in which both environmental determinism and strategic choice are high, with emphasis primarily on information and communication technologies in making contacts and sales, in addition to home care strategies in specific cases and employee prospection. Additionally, as to the organizational and systemic perspectives, in general, and in contrast to the reality of numerous services providing companies, the insertion of the clinic in Quadrant II (focus or differentiation) allows evidence of promising perspectives of management and service provision for the respective company, the public involved and the health services, in the view of the managers and collaborators considered in the study.

Such analyses are in line with the interactive vision of Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) concerning the ability of organizations to adapt to the environment, constituted by concomitant forces of determinism and voluntarism. Therefore, based on the data presented, we found that this model of strategic adaptation allows for an assertive analysis of the different moments organizations go through, evidencing relevant strategic diagnoses based on the interactions of companies with their internal and external environments and contexts in the face of the different and diverse scenario changes that arise.

Moreover, amid the moments of limitations and conflicts caused by the pandemic, we noticed that the company attempted to focus on strategies and volunteer actions as much as possible to stand out through the optimization of its resources, seeking the best way to face this context, not only at the organizational level but also seeking to contemplate the individuals working in this scenario and even their communities of operation.

Thus, the social, economic, political, cultural, and institutional impacts of the pandemic are inevitable, and it is up to people, companies, and society to adapt as much as possible, rethink their emotional perceptions, and reinvent their strategies, jointly and for the greater good, including in the post-pandemic period.

We emphasize the relevance of this study for the company analyzed, as well as for academics, professors, and theoreticians in the areas of management, strategy, health, and development, to the extent that the study contributes to approaches related to COVID-19 and complex and inconstant contexts, to the processes of change and organizational strategic adaptation, and health services. The study also contributes to the way these approaches impact the actors and dynamics of organizational and territorial development in times of complexity, change, and uncertainty, highlighting its relevance for managers and other stakeholders involved in the processes and dynamics of organizational performance and development, in the area of private and public healthcare, and other types of organizations.

Originally, the study contributes to the extent that it allows addressing the method of organizational strategic adaptation by Hrebiniak and Joyce (1985) under a differentiated focus as a strategic and proactive tool for analysis, reinvention, and organizational perspectives in the face of complex and inconstant contexts such as those of the pandemic. The study also brings practical contributions, mainly regarding the optimization of strategies and predicting perspectives for private healthcare institutions, a segment still little studied in the scientific arena when dealing with the theme of strategic adaptation in the context of the pandemic.

As limitations of this study, we highlight the sample size and analysis restriction to a single company in the private healthcare industry. Therefore, the conclusions of this study cannot be generalized, although the results of the study may prove useful for further analysis, serving as a comparative basis for other cases. Furthermore, the study's analysis method (Hrebiniak and Joyce's model) is relevant for analyzing change processes and strategic adaptation of other healthcare institutions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, in order to add to the study, we suggest case or multi-case studies on the performance of the strategic adaptation typology in the context of the pandemic considering larger samples, in larger territorial scales, and in other private and public healthcare institutions. Additionally, to contribute with new perspectives, we recommend studies considering the perceptions of other segments involved in the dynamics of organizational performance and studies directed to organizations in other sectors.

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