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Environmentally friendly activities in sports and leisure services as an expression of the corporate social responsibility

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Abstract

Today's economic reality requires entrepreneurs to introduce many changes, especially those of an organisational nature. The period following COVID-19 pandemic will require organizations to create new values, and a broader view of responsibility, to build mutual trust, and to adapt to the new reality. Corporate social responsibility, based on the three pillars of economy, ethics and ecology requires the company's full commitment to economically and ethically responsible corporate objectives. This paper introduces the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), with a focus on ecology as one of the areas of CSR.

It can be seen that the pandemic has accelerated environmental targets in many companies. This is due not only to the regulations aligned with the governmental environmental policy, but to an increasing extent also with changing social expectations. The aim of the article was to demonstrate the applicability of ecological, environment-friendly solutions as an example of CSR in the management of sports and leisure enterprises. CPOR studies show that most young people take responsibility for the state of their environment. The training of the test subjects also plays an important role here (CBOS, Environmental Awareness of Poland, 2020) It is assumed that the introduction of eco-friendly solutions in the operation of sports and leisure businesses is noticed and appreciated only by young participants in physical activity. The survey focuses on specific environmental solutions to create a socially responsible corporate image and how these companies operate in a changing environment.

The results of the studies carried out for this paper are intended to help answer the question of the importance of emphasising environmental aspects and adapting to change by integrating eco-innovation into the CSR strategies of sports and leisure companies, whether these solutions are perceived by the purchasers of sports and leisure services, as they affect their image. and whether they lead to better relations with market participants.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, ecology, environment, sports and leisure services, CSR, economic crisis

Introduction

Modern enterprises operate in a dynamically changing environment and besides business goals, they also strive to achieve social goals, including those related to the environment protection. The businesses can and do influence the surroundings through socially conscious actions. In addition, the leisure industry, including its sports and leisure sector more and more frequently identifies with the issues related to the social responsibility of the business entities. On the other hand, aforementioned actions can be intuitive, episodic and uncoordinated, what can also be observed in the operation of sport clubs. As noted by Cegliński, 'participation in the socially responsible actions is readily declared not only by modern companies, but also by the professional sport clubs, with the latter trend being on the rise. These actions should, however, stem from the deliberate strategy introduced by such entities. In practice, however, such actions are all too frequently taken without proper preparations and are precipitated by unexpected events in the economic milieu' [Cegliński, P., 2021, p. 3117]. Realization of the importance of the actions related to the corporate social responsibility (CSR), including the environment-friendly initiatives might allow us to build and develop long-lasting relations with customers and other stakeholders of that market.

Corporate social responsibility 'can be defined as a concept used for the voluntary integration of social and environmental aspects of their everyday operations and their relations with stakeholders. It should be stressed, that this is not limited to the observance of all relevant legal measures, but the actions go a step above and beyond to invest in the community or the natural environment' [Żemigła, M., 2007, p. 101]. Thus, to be considered a responsible organization, a company should voluntarily proceed with such activities as increased investments in human resources, environmental protection or the relationships with its stakeholders. CSR implementation in business encompasses many activities, such as promotion of non-discrimination programs, improvement of employee safety at work, expansion of worker benefits such as healthcare, support rendered to the local communities, maintaining efficient operation, profit generation, safeguarding transparency of business activities, enhancement of product quality and safety, reduction of pollution and other negative environmental impacts, engagement in sponsorship, and participation in charitable events [Sudolska A., Łapińska J., 2020, p. 1100]. We can agree that 'corporate social responsibility' has become a permanent fixture in the business milieu and is something more than a temporary fad. One of the reasons behind the implementation of CSR is an attempt to exert social influence and present the social responsibility towards matters that are important enough to warrant engagement' [Pawlak, G. et al., 2017, p. 924]. 'The needs of the community are the same as the needs of customers' [Saeid Kiani, M., 2021, p. 45]. Usage of the CSR concept by the companies in the sports and recreation industry, even if limited to specific areas, shows that a given company is engaged in socially important issues. On the other hand, it empowers the market participants, such as customers, by giving them feeling of agency. As stated by Żemigła, 'managers and stakeholders should be driven by the philosophy that incorporates so-called ecological philosophy. This is because ecology is a great basis for a new philosophy of life (...) [...] Spread of such interpretation of the surrounding world changes the life goals of the people, with materialistic, consumptionist goals being moved to the background and such issues as deep care of spiritual living, physical health, discovery of the harmony and unity with the nature getting to the forefront' [Żemigła, M., 2007, p. 130]. In the literature one can even find propositions to treat the natural environment as a stakeholder. As pointed by Chodyński, 'climate changes and resulting weather anomalies damage business infrastructure, resources and markets. Unity of natural environment and various aspects of the economics, what causes the natural environment to be considered a core stakeholder.' [Chodyński A., 2012, s. 23]. Idea of the corporate social

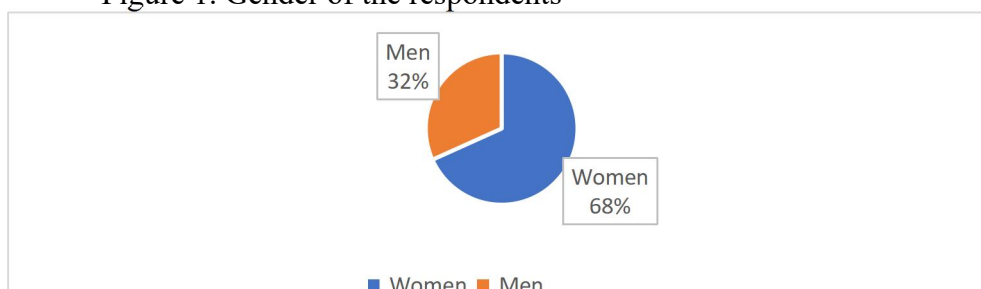
responsibility can also be used in the case of the sports and leisure businesses. Customers of such enterprises generally recruit from physically active people interested in maintaining good health, fitness, and beneficial nutrition habits. As noted by Kończak, 'sport is an inseparable element of our day-to-day life, becoming one of its most important aspects. Due to its universality, it allows people, social groups, nations and societies to communicate with each other, regardless of any differences between them' [Kończak J., 2021, p. 1179] According to Słupik, introduction of CSR, especially environmentally-friendly policies of the businesses 'positively influences their competitive edge [...] Entrepreneurs treat the environmental criteria of running a business as a platform allowing market success. All these conditions are oriented towards the realization of the environmental goals that results from the environmental consciousness and sensitivity of the decision-makers. Functioning of the ECSR thus becomes a factor that positively distinguishes given company on a competitive market. Environmental criteria can also be created by the local community and other pressure groups that expect business to treat the natural environment in an ethical manner, eventually leading to a situation, where such criteria become a source of the corporate strategy.' [Słupik, S., 2014, p. 82]. Therefore, It is very probable that the messages concerning the company activities that embody CSR will be well received by anyone valuing physical activity.

Material & methods

'Socially responsible business strives to achieve harmony between the three areas of operation: economical, environmental and social that are often refereed in literature as '3P' (People-Planet-Profit). [Mazur-Wierzbicka, E., 2013, p. 106] However, even though the corpus of the literature dedicated to the discussed matter there are publications on the environmental aspects of the CSR, the environment-friendly solutions used in practical management of the sports and leisure enterprises are still not mentioned, even though such businesses, apart from utilization of CSR for public relation purposes, can promote environmentally-friendly attitudes in the way they are already promoting healthy lifestyle.

The basic aim of the particular study was to discover the opinion of the survey-takers on thye environment-friendly solutions implemented by the sports and leisure businesses as the part of the corporate social responsibility. Environment protection is inalienable from the operation of modern businesses even when it is only limited to the compliance with the applicable laws. Stressing the eco-friendly aspects of business operation in the sports and leisure industry can influence the image of the organization that can present itself as a socially responsible entity operating in a dynamically changing environment. The survey presented below has been conducted in February and March 2022 via a Google internet questionnaire. The latter consisted of 8 questions related to the respondents' opinion on the environmental-friendly solutions in the sports and leisure facilities treated as an element of the CSR, and was made available on the Internet pages frequented by the people taking part in various sports and leisure activities. The survey has been taken by 125 respondents in total. The gender of respondents is presented in the graph below (Figure 1).

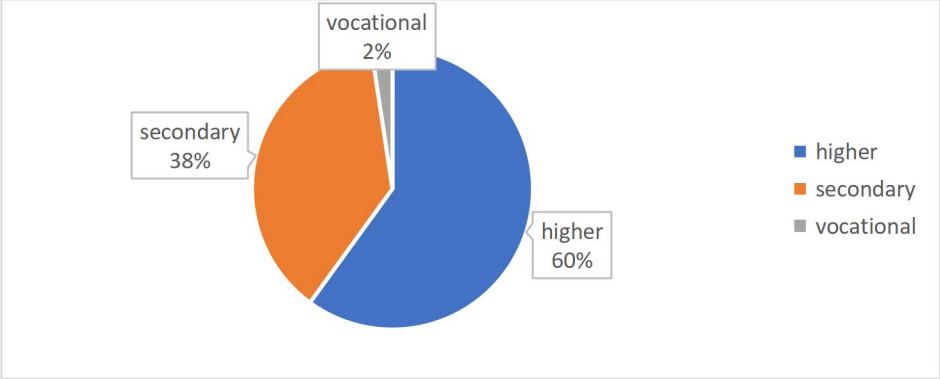
Figure 1. Gender of the respondents



Source: Personal analysis of the data collected in the study.

Respondents constituted a diverse group in the terms of age. The largest part of the group consisted of people in the range of 18-25 years (40.8%), people in the range of 46-55 years (23.2%) and 36-45 years (17.6%). Respondents were most commonly characterized by secondary or tertiary education, as presented in the Figure 2.

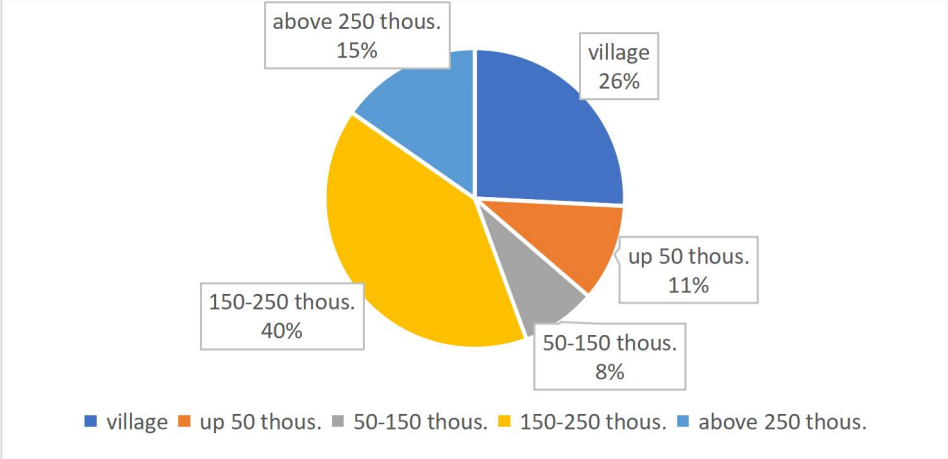
Figure 2. Education of the respondents.



Source: Personal analysis of the data collected in the study.

The largest group of respondents were residents of the cities with 150,000-250,000 inhabitants (40.3%) and rural areas (25.8%). Other sub-groups were identified in the Figure 3.

Figure 3. Residence of the responders.



Source: Personal analysis of the data collected in the study.

Second part of the survey contained questions related to the attitude towards the environment protection and environment-friendly solutions used by the sports and leisure businesses.

Results

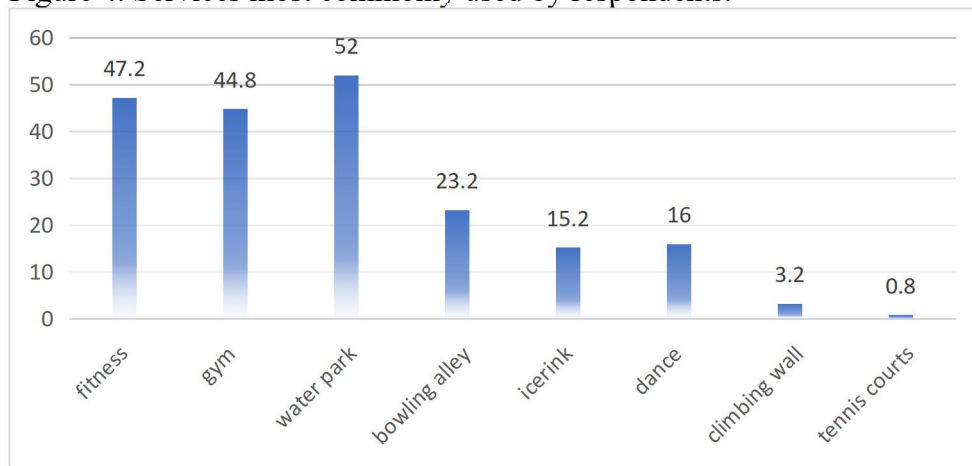
The biggest subgroup within the general population of the respondents was that of college-educated women living in larger cities. According to 90.3% of the respondents, ecology is very important in everyday life and our goal is to protect the planet. Only few per cent of respondents criticized actions aimed at environment protection and even this critique mainly pointed out that environmental actions should be undertaken reasonably, without unnecessary ideology and extremist measures.

As evident in the survey conducted in 2020 by the Centre for Public Opinion Research, 'ecology and pro-ecology behaviours are a permanent fixture of the public discourse [...] Majority of Poles declare concern about the state of the natural environment, but these are more often related to global rather than local changes. Vast majority of respondents (70%)

declared high or very high level of concern about the global state of the natural environment, over half (53%) declared such concern in reference to the country, while only every fourth respondent (25%) expressed concern of the environment in their immediate area of residence. Such concerns were more common among inhabitants of larger cities and those with higher education. [Świadomość ekologiczna Polaków, CPOR, 2020, p.1].

Vast majority of respondents (87%) was routinely taking part in the activities offered by the sports and leisure businesses, such as fitness clubs, gyms, waterparks, bowling alleys etc. Figure 4. shows the services that were most common among the respondents.

Figure 4. Services most commonly used by respondents.

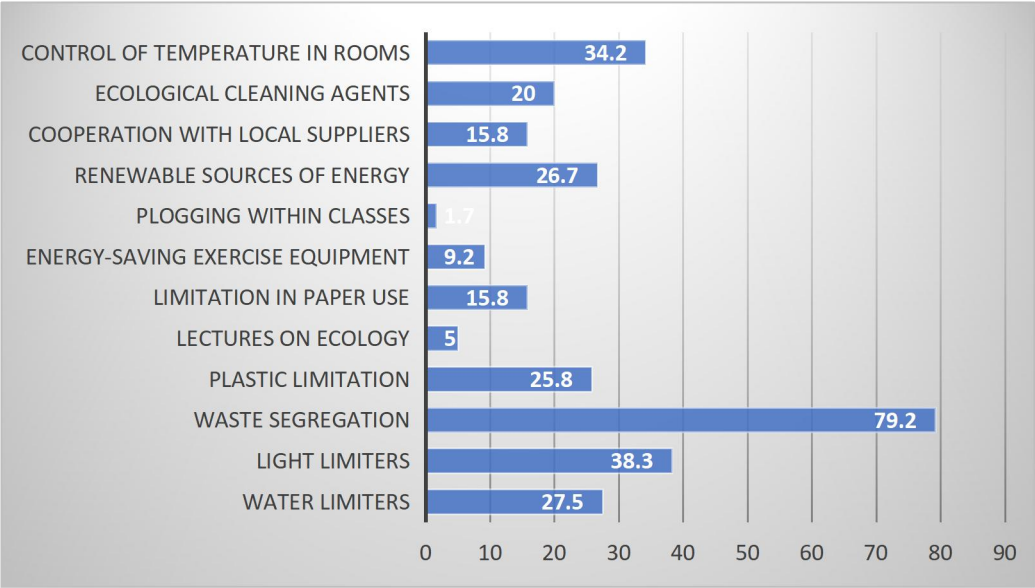


Source: Personal analysis of the data collected in the study.

Among the sports and leisure enterprises offering services that were most frequently used by the respondents of this survey we can find waterparks (52%), aerobic and fitness classes (47.2%), gyms and crossfit classes (44.8%) and bowling alleys (23.2%). Less popular services included also dance classes, ice rinks, climbing walls, tennis courts, horse riding, ski slopes, kick-boxing and other (0.8% each).

Environment-friendly actions are taken by sports and leisure enterprises, but they are either hard to notice or the businesses do not make any attempts to make customers aware why such actions are being introduced in the first place. According to the survey results, 31.2% claim that the businesses take environmental-friendly actions, while 60.8% said that they are not aware of such actions, and 8% claimed that the businesses do not take any actions of such kind. Among the most common environment-friendly actions indicated by respondents we can find waste segregation (95%), automatic light switches (38.3%), indoor temperature control (34.2%) and water flow limiters (27.5%). These and other responses can be found in the Figure 5.

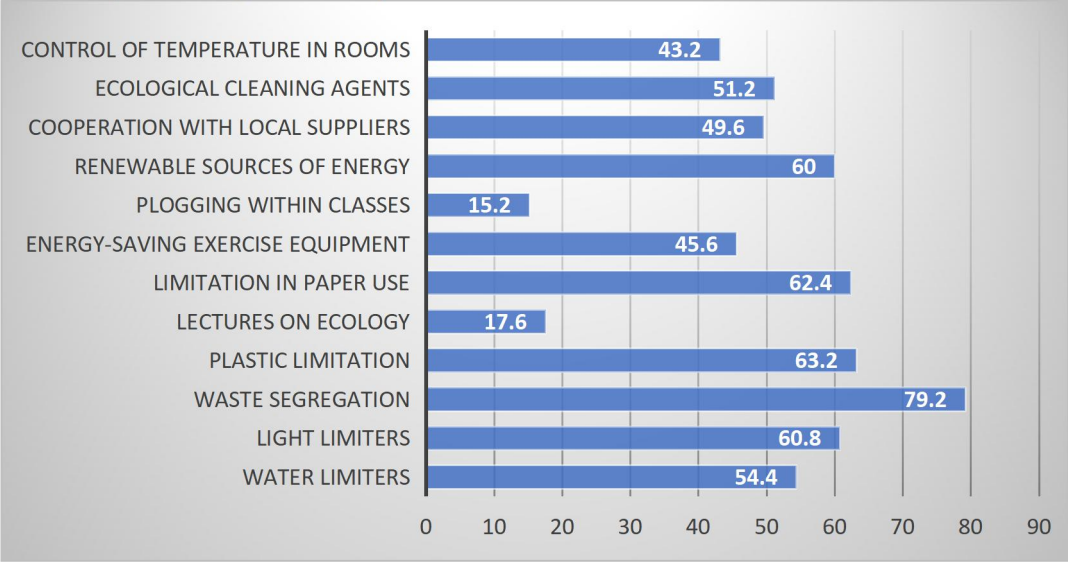
Figure 5. Most popular environment-friendly solutions respondents met in sports and leisure facilities.



Source: Personal analysis of the data collected in the study.

Respondents also have shown that they noticed such environment-friendly solutions as plastic bottle compactors and collection of used batteries. The next item of the survey asked for the solutions that should be introduced in the sports and leisure businesses. The results of this query are shown in the Figure 6.

Figure 6. Environment-friendly solutions that should be implemented in sports and leisure facilities, according to the respondents.



Source: Personal analysis of the data collected in the study.

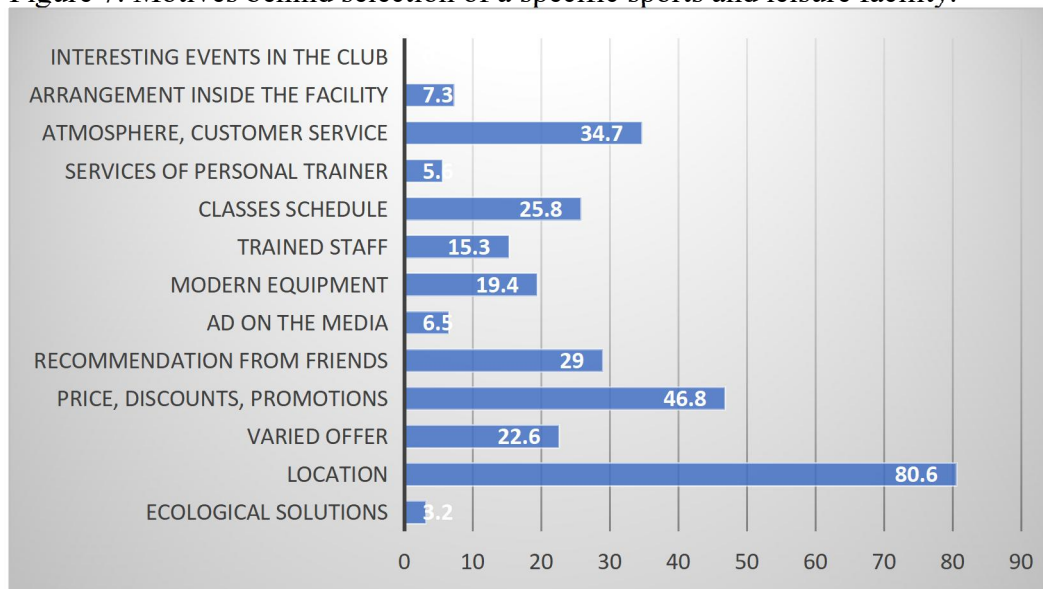
As we can see on the last two diagrams, the aspects of environment protection related to waste segregation were similarly popular. Selective waste collection is mandatory, as regulated by the Waste Act. Responses that were not presented in the diagrams included proposals for environment-friendly solutions that can be implemented in the sports and leisure businesses such as heat recuperation in the HVAC and hot water systems, sullage utilization,

rainwater retention and utilization, or intelligent systems managing devices using heat and electric energy.

In majority of responses, environment-friendly solutions were positively valued by the respondents who generally expressed support for their use in sports and leisure facilities. As we can see, people routinely partaking in physical activity are not indifferent to the needs of the natural environment. Customers of the sports and leisure businesses are aware of the crisis brought by the time of climatic catastrophe.

The next question was related to the motives behind the selection of the particular sports and leisure business. Proposed answers included the usage of the environment-friendly solutions. This aspect, however, did not play a decisive role in the choice of a particular business and was of generally low importance, what could have been caused by the lack of information concerning the pro-ecology actions of a given enterprise present in the marketing messages. Among the most popular motives behind selection of a particular business, there was location (80.6%), pricing and sales (46.8%), and the good atmosphere and customer care (34.7%).

Figure 7. Motives behind selection of a specific sports and leisure facility.



Source: Personal analysis of the data collected in the study.

The last question referred to the evaluation of the environment-friendly actions undertaken by the sports and leisure businesses. Respondents very positively evaluated the usage environment-friendly solution by this industry. Three most popular responses indicated that respondents consider such businesses as socially responsible (53.2%), treat such solutions as important for the planet (47.6%), and that they positively influence the company image (43.5%). Respondents also indicated the savings that can be achieved thanks to the implementation of the environment-friendly solutions (24.2%) and possibility of utilization of environmental aspects in the advertisement messages (27.4%). Very small minority of the respondents answered that such solutions are unnecessary, unnoticeable and meaningless (4.8%), are only important for young people (4.8%), result of a transient environmental fad (7.3%) or that such action are nothing more than greenwashing, i.e. declaration of being eco-friendly that is not backed by real actions.

Discussion

Purchasers of the services offered by the sports and leisure enterprises partake in the physical activities for several reasons: to maintain their psychomotoric fitness, to take care of

their health, to satisfy their wish for physical movement, to nourish their well-being, to actively rest and recuperate or to keep a healthy work-life balance. In addition, for many of these people, physical activity is a part of the life philosophy based on the concept of wellness, i.e. keeping the proper alignment of body and mind. Another modern trend is the idea of a work-life balance (time management concept based on the idea of equilibrium between professional duties and private life). Propagation of such attitudes leads to changes of attitudes towards life and the expectation concerning the surrounding world. As the results of the survey shows, customers of the sports and leisure businesses are not indifferent towards the natural environment and actions aimed at its preservation. Thus, sports and leisure enterprises should consider using the environment-friendly solutions that serve both business and educational goals. Reinforcement of required attitudes towards human health and natural environment, and utilization of the integrated marketing actions might facilitate the creation of coherent messages and image of a socially responsible business.

Conclusions

Key findings from the study:

1. The most popular sports and leisure services are fitness centres, gyms and waterparks.
2. The most important motivations behind the selection of a particular sports and leisure business is the location of the latter, offered pricing and other monetary incentives, as well as a good atmosphere and customer care.
3. According to the responders, the most common environment-friendly solution used by sports and leisure businesses include: waste segregation, automatic light switches and indoor temperature control.
4. Environment-friendly actions are noticed and praised not only by young physical activity aficionados.
5. Majority of respondents is supportive of the utilization of environment-friendly solutions by the sports and leisure businesses. Most of the solutions proposed in the survey were positively evaluated by the respondents.
6. According to the respondents, environment-friendly actions and solutions are a sign of corporate social responsibility.
7. It can be noticed that the environment-friendly solutions that can be utilized by the sports and leisure businesses are a permanent trend rather than a transient fad. They are also not limited to a simple greenwashing.
8. Stressing the eco-friendly solutions in the marketing messages can facilitate the creation of a socially responsible enterprises.
9. As indicated by the survey results, environment-friendly solutions can be introduced into the management practices in the sports and leisure enterprises. The most important of such solutions would be the presenting such actions in the marketing communication.

The analysis presented above is related to only one of the areas of the corporate social responsibility and as such, it does not allow extrapolation on different CSR areas, such as customer relations, organization order, human rights or responsible market practices. This paper can be treated as an introduction to further studies concerning utilization of CSR by sports and leisure enterprises.

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