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# The Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism and Hospitality in Poland: Female Entrepreneurial Firms' Ecosystem Strategies

## Abstract

Beyond severe illness and deaths, the COVID-19 pandemic brought widespread economic disruption, businesses closing, and unemployment surging to levels not experienced since the Great Depression. The effect of this pandemic on global tourism has been fast, extensive, widespread, and devastating. This paper identifies the significant characteristics of female entrepreneurial businesses. It examines the strategies taken between 2015 and 2022 to influence the firm's growth and reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are based on the interviews conducted with ten female entrepreneurs who own and operate small family-based entrepreneurial firms in Poland's tourism and hospitality industry. This paper aims to deliver recommendations for policy actions and entrepreneurship strategies to effectively grow and curtail or counterbalance the impact of exogenous shocks such as the economic shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** tourism industry, women entrepreneurs, ecosystem, exogenous shock, growth

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a global health crisis and an economic peril affecting critical economic sectors such as tourism. The worldwide lockdown of businesses and industries produced various unique and fundamental challenges for employees and employers. Due to the economic shutdown, companies, managers, and employees lost their profits and income (Fernandes, 2020). The tourism industry is among the sectors hit hardest by the COVID-19 crisis. The shutdown of domestic and international travel resulted in losses of about US\$ 1.3 trillion in export revenues, ten times exceeding the loss during the economic crisis of 2009 (Korinth & Ranasinghe, 2020). The tourism industry had a hard time surviving because of its inability to adapt to and continue its operations through digital platforms.

While economic devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was widespread in Poland, the severity varied greatly across different industries, locations, and demographic categories. Understanding the influences of the challenges due to the pandemic on business success and survival, especially for female-run businesses, is crucial. Resources and demands related to entrepreneurial work and strategies reveal dynamics between the challenges, demands, and needed resources affected during those challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study uses survey interviews of female entrepreneurs who adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic conditions by selecting strategies to survive, successfully recover after the pandemic lockdown, and resume their post-Covid operations. The paper also provides examples of resilient and innovative strategies exercised by female entrepreneurs included in this research paper.

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This case study examines the challenges, experiences, and successful strategies of ten Polish female-owned and operated entrepreneurial businesses operating within tourism and hospitality during the COVID-19 pandemic. Identifying resilience strategies that enabled these entrepreneurs to survive after the shutdown, when the inability to work effectively during the pandemic hit the most challenging, is critical.

The paper focuses on the small family-based tourism and hospitality industry to (1) identify the significant characteristics of female entrepreneurial businesses; (2) examine factors that have promoted the growth of those businesses before the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) discuss the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; and (4) identify effective strategies that contributed to survival during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are based on the online interviews conducted in 2017 before the COVID-19 pandemic and in the summer of 2022. Recommendations of this case study could foster resilience and post-COVID-19 pandemic strategies, enhancing recovery for female entrepreneurial businesses within the tourism and hospitality sector in the event of another crisis.

The paper is organized as follows. After briefly introducing the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper provides a background on the Polish tourism and hospitality industry while focusing on the development of those small businesses and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section provides a literature review on entrepreneurship models, emphasizing Butler's Tourism Lifecycle model. This model concentrates explicitly on the tourism and hospitality industry, where the element of "crisis" leads to the industry's decline. Aspects of the model include: (1) Government Policies and Procedures; (2) Socioeconomic Conditions; (3) Entrepreneurial and Business Skills; (4) Financial Assistance; (5) Non-Financial Assistance; (6) External unpredictable shocks and crises. The last sections of the paper provide the research results, a brief discussion of strategies implemented, and a conclusion.

## 2. Background on Polish tourism and hospitality entrepreneurship

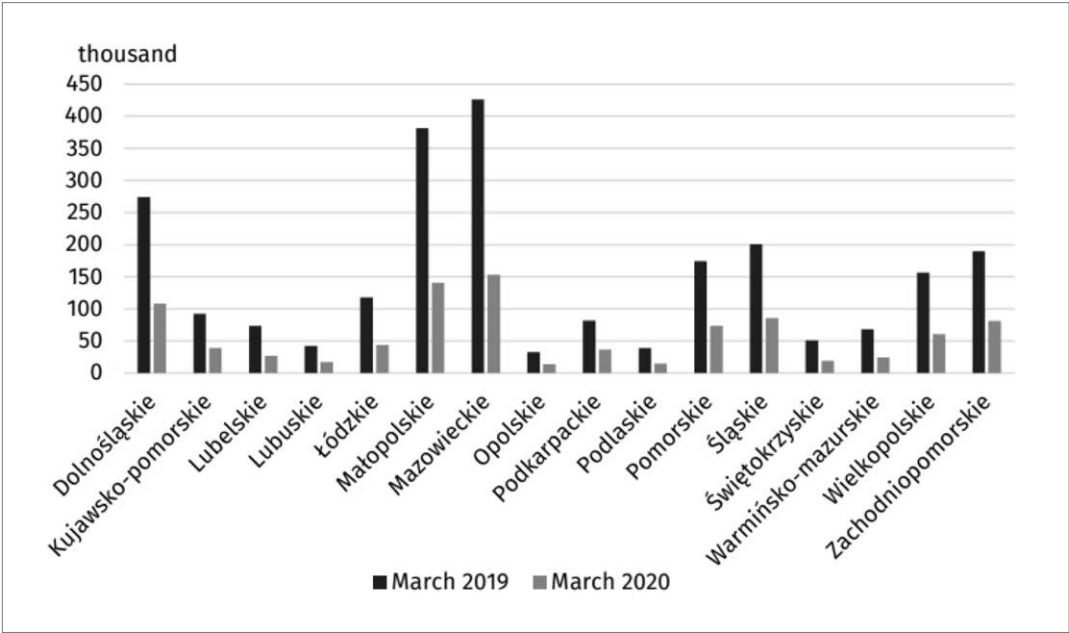
Poland is diverse in its culture and heritage, creating opportunities for small entrepreneurial businesses within the tourism and hospitality industry. New market mechanisms led to the creation and successful operation of small hotels and inns owned and operated by individual entrepreneurs at the end of Soviet control (Balcerowicz, 1995). The growth of small firms facilitated arts and crafts shop development, run by "Cepalia", the Folk and Art Industry Headquarters established by the Polish communist government, which supported the development and growth of Polish original and traditional arts and crafts. This progress allowed family-based entrepreneurial firms to develop. Later, in the 1980s, privately operated bars, cafés, and restaurants that provided classic and traditional Polish foods and entertainment significantly contributed to economic efficiency (Dana, 2009). After decades of disinterest by government authorities, joint venture investment arose in the 1980s to fund high-quality tourist accommodations (Sachs, 1994; Zienkowski, 2000).

Notable domestic and international tourism growth in Poland occurred in the first half of the 1990s, especially for Polish family businesses (Richards, 1996; Johnson & Loveman, 1995). Beginning as a simple, relatively low-skilled market segment that offered accommodations and related services to domestic travellers, financial aid from Western countries in the early 1990s supported infrastructure projects and encouraged further foreign investment in the tourism sector (Richards 1996). Assistance programs offered to the tourism sector with special E.U. funds and attention from the Minister of Sport and Tourism (Butler, 2010) also contributed to the growth of other sectors and industries. Over the years, the tourism industry has become a driving force for regional and local development, contributing to the expansion of different new entrepreneurship and employment opportunities, especially those owned and operated by females (Kosmaczewska, 2007; Turystyka, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005).

Until COVID-19, Poland's tourism and hospitality industry was determined to be the fastest growing across the country. Travelers from Western European and North American countries found Poland incredibly attractive and affordable (Jackson et al., 1999). Furthermore, Poland's economic and political stability and the rising affluence of its population provided a solid base for sustained growth in the country's tourist and hospitality service sector (Kruczek, 2010). This group of entrepreneurial firms supported the development of small family-based entrepreneurial firms, bringing the country's economic prosperity and elevated employment levels. (Zienkowski, 2000). Poland's entry to the E.U. in May 2004 strongly impacted the confidence of international tourists from the United States, Canada, and Australia.

The announcement of an epidemic emergency in Poland on March 14th, 2020, paralyzed the Polish tourism and hospitality industry. Hotel accommodations, travel, and health treatment became restricted entirely. Restrictions on people's movement reduced the number of tourists, accommodations, and travel nationally and internationally.

**Figure 1**  
Tourists accommodated by voivodship in March 2019 and March 2020



Source: Statistics Office in Rzeszow Statistics Poland (2020).

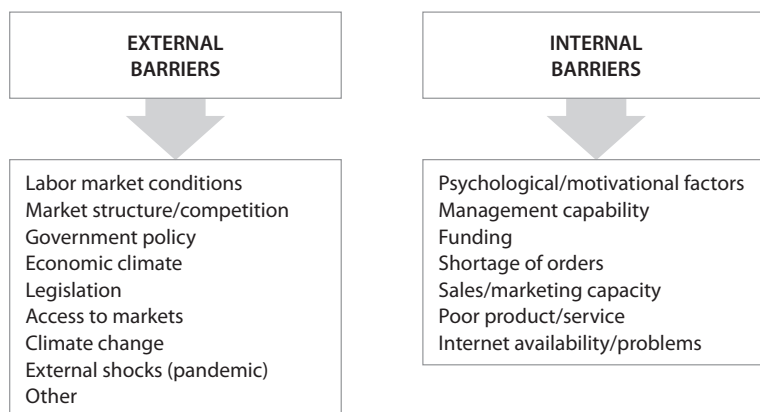
Figure 1 illustrates that tourists accommodated by voivodship due to the COVID-19 pandemic declined between March 2019 and March 2020. According to Statistics Poland – New Releases (2020), the number of tourists accommodated in hostels decreased by over 70%, in motels by 55% and in health establishments by 50%, compared with March 2019. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local governments' and companies' advertising strategies focused on supporting post-pandemic tourism recovery and creating local jobs by educating tourists on culture, history, heritage, and arts to boost the industry and the country's economy. In 2021, 89.5% more entertainment events were organized than in 2020 (Statistics Poland – New Releases, 2020). Online programs and advertisements were vital in returning international tourists from their pre-pandemic levels. According to GlobalData, after lifting all restrictions in March 2022, international travel to Poland should reach pre-pandemic levels by 2024. Moreover, as Poland hosted the European Games in Krakow from June 21 to July 2, 2023, the country returned to its preCOVID-19 levels.

### 3. Literature on entrepreneurship process and tourism models

The relationship between entrepreneurship and economic growth is complex, and as a result, different scholars have developed and applied different approaches and models to study entrepreneurship (Ramadani et al., 2015; Li et al., 2007). The impact of several factors restraining the growth of entrepreneurial businesses has been reported, and over the years, researchers have studied internal and external environments for entrepreneurship and economic outcomes (Kuratko & Gogetts, 2004; Ramadani et al., 2015). Hisrich et al., 2005 and Baum and Baron (2007) studied some of the critical factors and elements that affect entrepreneurial firms. At start-up, entrepreneurship identifies and evaluates perceived opportunities, innovates (Ratten & Ratten, 2007), and brings resources together to form a new entrepreneurial firm to pursue these opportunities (Kazanjian & Drazin, 1990). Once an entrepreneurial firm is created, the entrepreneurial process becomes influential in a cyclical progression of opportunities and the development of various forms of entrepreneurship. The common challenges faced by entrepreneurial firms include lack of financing, low productivity, lack of managerial capabilities, lack of access to management, technology skills, and experience, lack of mentors and appropriate leadership, accounting, and organizational skills, as well as the presence of heavy regulatory burdens (Turnbull et al., 2001; Zapalska et al., 2003). Those problems change and are affected by the stages of a firm's development and growth.

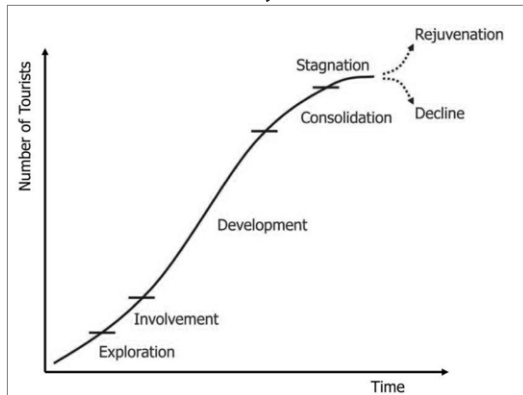
Internal and external factors affecting the entrepreneurial process are critical in stimulating or obstructing existing and prospective entrepreneurs in growing or developing their businesses (Menguc et al., 2010; Henry et al., 2003). Figure 2 illustrates examples of external and internal factors typically faced by small entrepreneurial firms.

**Figure 2**  
*External and internal barriers to entrepreneurship development and growth*



Entrepreneurship research indicates that government policies tend to support larger businesses rather than smaller entrepreneurial firms, as large and politically well-connected enterprises have experienced better access to governmental assistance and financial sector services. Research also indicates that national governments have increasingly recognized that engaging more people in entrepreneurial activities is critical in attaining sustained increases in employment and living standards (Mair & Marti, 2009). Organizational life cycles and stages of development models analyze the entrepreneurial process based on stages of internal and external characteristics and various problems entrepreneurial firms encounter overtime during the firm's growth and development stage (Lester et al. 2003). Models of organizational life cycles and stages of development provide information on the types of problems firms encounter over time and assert that each stage of development is associated with a set of problems or challenges that can be internal or external to the firm (Kazanjian, 1988). These models do not contain specific factors that affect entrepreneurial growth and development caused by natural and political crises such as climate change, wars, pandemics, or terrorist attacks.

**Figure 3**  
Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model



Source: Butler (1980).

Every community or industry cycles through numerous stages at some predictable period. Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model recognizes the life cycle pattern, providing a fundamental understanding of tourism and hospitality. Figure 3 presents the linear model where distinct stages in tourism development highlight the advancement of the industry through seven stages of tourist area evolution, including exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline, and rejuvenation. The model has been frequently used as it is an excellent framework for analyzing the tourism and hospitality industry (Hwang, 2017). The Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model allows us to look at the way the tourism industry grows and develops and breaks down tourism industry development into seven distinct stages. Table 1 illustrates the stages and description for each stage using Butler's Tourist Area Life Cycle presented in Figure 3.

**Table 1**  
Butler's Tourist area life cycle theory

| Stage         | Description  |
|---------------|--|
| Exploration   | a small number of tourists visit the area; the area is well preserved and not overused, destroyed, or vandalized, as few tourist facilities exist                                |
| Involvement   | local people start to provide facilities for tourists, and tourism is recognized   |
| Development   | the host country begins to develop and advertise the area and its tourist attractions, and the area becomes recognized as a tourist destination                                  |
| Consolidation | The region continues attracting tourists, and the growth in tourist numbers has stabilized and may be slower than before, leading to tensions between the host and the tourists. |
| Stagnation    | the facilities for the tourists may decline as they become old and run down, and the number of tourists may decrease as well   |
| Decline       | if the resort is not rejuvenated or exogenous shocks take place, then tourism will decline, job loss will be present, and the image of the area will suffer                      |
| Rejuvenation  | investment and modernization may occur, which leads to improvements, and visitor numbers may increase again  |

## 4. Research methodology and conceptual framework

This case study analyses the entrepreneurial ecosystem as a dynamic process, considering the challenges entrepreneurial firms face over time. The conceptual framework for this research is based on Butler's Tourist Area Life Cycle Theory Model (Figure 3), which consists of seven stages of tourism life cycle and entrepreneurial development together with six factors contributing to the development and growth of entrepreneurial firms.

The model categorizes ecosystem factors into six general dimensions: (1) government policies and procedures, (2) socioeconomic conditions, (3) entrepreneurial and business skills, (4) financial assistance, (5) non-financial assistance, and (6) external unpredictable shocks faced by entrepreneurial forms, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, war, or impact of climate change.

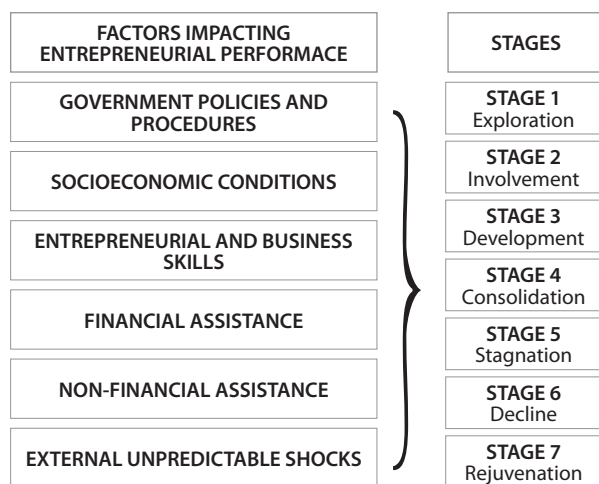
The data for this original case study was collected in 2015 and 2022 through online interviews with ten female entrepreneurs who operate and manage their family-owned and operated tourism and hospitality businesses in many different regions in Poland. The study includes small-size (less than 30 employees) entrepreneurial firms randomly selected from the list of small businesses provided by the tax office in 2015. The research was undertaken to examine numerous factors affecting their growth over the last seven years, especially analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. A follow-up e-mail was sent out to increase the response rate.

Respondents were asked to describe their organizations' working environment and relationships with their employees, local authorities, and the Polish government. Information on the size and nature of the operation, business objectives, level of employment, financial assistance received and desired, non-financial support, business training needs, socioeconomic conditions, and policies on taxation, preferences, credit financing, and reporting requirements for small businesses and any changes that took place over the last seven years were elicited. The questionnaire and responses were grouped into three distinctive categories to identify common factors that promote or inhibit the entrance of women into the entrepreneurial process and to identify those factors that were critical, important or a matter of concern for growth and development across all four stages. The survey questionnaire focused on three broad questions:

1. Which of the following elements of the entrepreneurial process and ecosystem were critical to the growth and success of your business/failure of business?
2. Which of the following elements of the entrepreneurial process and ecosystem were necessary for the growth and success of your business/failure of business?
3. Which of the following elements of the entrepreneurial process and ecosystem were concerns to the growth and success of your business/failure of business?

The study results are presented in the next section of this paper.

**Figure 4**  
*Model of organizational life cycle and entrepreneurial development*



Source: Developed by the author based on the Butler's tourist area life cycle theory model.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Basic characteristics

In this case study, all ten female respondents owned and operated their family entrepreneurial firms in an ecotourism and hospitality industry where the elements of tradition or cultural characteristics were incorporated through their services or products. Their entrepreneurial firms cover various services and products: bed and breakfast, guesthouse, and inn, agrotourism, restaurant and café, art and culture-based activities, tourist wellness and health service, cultural, sport and recreation activities and training, and medical tourism. The most common tourist activities include visiting pilgrimage places, national parks and nature experiences, outdoor and recreational activities, arts festivals and cultural events, art and folklore-related galleries and art or cooking seminars, visiting historical places, wellness and health-related workshops and training, and recreational activities and sport-oriented training such as horseback-riding or wild-berry picking or pottery making. Unique firms, like medical tourism or beauty and wellness spas, were also included in the case study.

The respondents set up their entrepreneurial ventures between late 1990 and early 2000; five began before the collapse of the Soviet government. Respondents stated that the first years of operation were challenging, but changes in the market structure in the 1990s allowed businesses to expand and flourish. Business owners sought to create jobs and deliver products and services as determined by market forces and not by directives of local, regional, or central governments and planners. Businesses that trended to sustainability used diversification and the introduction of unique tourism products or services. Demographic and geographic changes have generated a generation of well-informed and wealth-oriented consumers who require sustainable and environmentally friendly products and services. Table 1 and 2 summarize basic information on ten firms included in this study.

Table 1 shows respondents' entrepreneurial firms operated in Stage 4 - Consolidation, categorized by the Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model during the 2015 interview. In 2020, they all moved into Stage 5 - Decline due to the shutdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. As soon as the economy partially recovered from the pandemic in 2021 and finally fully reopened in 2022, all businesses entered Stage 6 - Rejuvenation. The move from Stage 4 - Consolidation to Stage 6 - Decline and then to Stage -7, Rejuvenation of entrepreneurial operation for all firms at the same time, is unusual and confirms that the COVID-19 pandemic, as an exogenous shock, had a severe negative impact on the firms' operations.

**Table 2**  
*Essential characteristics of entrepreneurial businesses interviewed*

| Type of business              | Years in operation in 2022 | Location in 2022 | Stage of operation in 2015/2020/2022  |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|---|
| Art gallery and studio        | 27                         | City             | 2015 Stage 4 - consolidation<br>2020 Stage 6 - decline<br>2022 Stage 7 - rejuvenation |
| Beauty salon and wellness spa | 37                         | City             | 2015 Stage 4 - consolidation<br>2020 Stage 6 - decline<br>2022 Stage 7 - rejuvenation |
| Agrotourism bed and breakfast | 32                         | Country          | 2015 Stage 4 - consolidation<br>2020 Stage 6 - decline<br>2022 Stage 7 - rejuvenation |
| The farm and guesthouse       | 23                         | Suburb           | 2015 Stage 4 - consolidation<br>2020 Stage 6 - decline<br>2022 Stage 7 - rejuvenation |
| The health and spa guesthouse | 25                         | Suburb           | 2015 Stage 4 - consolidation<br>2020 Stage 6 - decline<br>2022 Stage 7 - rejuvenation |

**Table 2 (continued)**

|                                      |    |            |   |
|--------------------------------------|----|------------|---|
| Horseback riding farm                | 30 | Country    | 2015 Stage 4 - consolidation<br>2020 Stage 6 - decline<br>2022 Stage 7 - rejuvenation |
| The café shop                        | 28 | Small town | 2015 Stage 4 - consolidation<br>2020 Stage 6 - decline<br>2022 Stage 7 - rejuvenation |
| Cosmetic, dental and plastic surgery | 24 | Small town | 2015 Stage 4 - consolidation<br>2020 Stage 6 - decline<br>2022 Stage 7 - rejuvenation |
| Horseback riding in the wilderness   | 37 | Suburb     | 2015 Stage 4 - consolidation<br>2020 Stage 6 - decline<br>2022 Stage 7 - rejuvenation |
| The pottery house                    | 36 | Small town | 2015 Stage 4 - consolidation<br>2020 Stage 6 - decline<br>2022 Stage 7 - rejuvenation |

Source: Developed by the authors based on the interview results for 2015, 2020, and 2022.

As of the date of this case study, the sizes of businesses are relatively small, with staffing between 6 and 25 employees (Table 3). Fifty per cent of these businesses extended their services to international customers, 100 per cent of whom were international destinations in pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels. Six respondents have undergraduate college or technical education, while four graduated with a diploma. Respondents did not develop six businesses, but they were inherited or taken over after or run together by the parents. The median age of the respondent was fifty-two, with the youngest at forty-one and the oldest at sixty-nine. All respondents have been married and had children who are already alone or helping to run the family business.

The respondents also expressed commitment to generating income and decent employment for families and the local community without affecting the environment and culture of the tourist destinations. This ensured the long-term viability and competitiveness of their enterprises. These female entrepreneurs acknowledged their business success was tied to a commitment to enhance local prosperity, increase happiness, and provide health-oriented vacation or treatment services to their customers while attracting spending to be retained locally. The development and growth of their firms provide a positive experience for local populations, other tourism industry sectors, workers, and the tourists themselves.

Respondents noted that tourism in post-communist Poland has been oriented towards tourists who are better educated, health-oriented, and attuned to the cultural and natural environment. Successful, efficient businesses develop a solid competitive advantage by focusing on a particular product or service that is unique and original. Offering high-quality tourism and hospitality services and products that promote culture-based or health-oriented lifestyles has also been the key to the survival and growth of these entrepreneurial firms, especially after the recession of 2009.

Charismatic personalities made the female leaders community role models, respected, and followed by their employees. This approach was critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing hope, emotional support, and a positive outlook for the post-COVID-19 stage. Respondents note that understanding their employee's characteristics, talents, and needs created understanding and compassion, specifically during challenging times. Mutual trust and respect generated an atmosphere of respected family members. Employees utilize personal initiative in decision-making and seek solutions to problems or needs of their entrepreneurial businesses. Other elements of business success stemmed from caring leadership practices and the involvement of employees in decision-making. Respondents genuinely believe this approach contributed to their success and maintaining their operations within Stage 4-Consolidation.



**Table 3**  
*Employment level and types of clients (D = domestic/I = international)*

| Type of business                      | Number of workers<br>2015/2020/2022 | Types of clients<br>2015/2020/2022 |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Art gallery and studio                | 10 / 5 / 20                         | D I / - / D                        |
| Beauty salon and wellness spa         | 5 / 2 / 10                          | D I / - / DI                       |
| Agrotourism bed and breakfast         | 9 / 2 / 15                          | D I / - / DI                       |
| The farm and guesthouse               | 11 / 2 / 20                         | D I / - / DI                       |
| The health and spa guesthouse         | 12 / 2 / 12                         | D I / - / DI                       |
| Horseback riding farm                 | 5 / 4 / 10                          | D I / - / D                        |
| The café shop                         | 6 / 2 / 9                           | D I / - / D                        |
| Cosmetic, dental, and plastic surgery | 15 / 5 / 25                         | D I / - / DI                       |
| Horseback riding in the wilderness    | 4 / 4 / 6                           | D I / - / D                        |
| The pottery house                     | 8 / 8 / 10                          | D I / - / D                        |

Source: Developed by the authors based on the interview results for 2015, 2020, and 2022.

Poland's unique natural resource base socio-cultural, traditional, and ecological characteristics form an environment where female involvement in innovative entrepreneurial development and ownership is the norm rather than the exception. The original innovation or small invention in a product or service began in Stage 1 - Exploration and continued in Stage 4 - Consolidation. The strategies of implementing innovative products or services, which was also critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, are summarized in Table 4. Staying unique and providing distinctive and attractive products or services allowed all ten female entrepreneurs to remain successful in a highly competitive market before and after the pandemic. As illustrated in Table 3, all businesses operated on domestic and international markets before the pandemic, but only fifty per cent returned to their international markets and clients.

**Table 4**  
*Examples of innovation strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic*

| Name of business                     | Selected examples of strategies  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Art gallery and studio               | Development of new and more products, new marketing methods, training, development of new website            |
| Beauty salon and wellness spa        | Renovating the spa, training, development of new website   |
| Agrotourism bed and breakfast        | Remodeling, development of advertising   |
| The farm and guesthouse              | Remodeling, development of advertising, development of new website   |
| The health and spa guesthouse        | Remodeling, training, selection of new products and services, development of new website                     |
| Horseback riding farm                | Development of advertising, training   |
| The Café Shop                        | Remodeling, development of advertising, selection of new products, development of new website                |
| Cosmetic, dental and plastic surgery | Selection of new product, new advertising, training  |
| Horseback riding in the wilderness   | Training and purchase of new horses, development of new website  |
| The pottery house                    | Development of new products and services, training, selection of new advertising, development of new website |

Source: Developed by the authors based on the interview results for 2015, 2020, and 2022.

Respondents also stated that their business success was also tied to their commitment to enhance local prosperity and promote a product or service that meets the needs of consumers. During their operation up to Stage 4 - Consolidation, they were confident about their business direction, and their success was achieved after they recognized new market trends, which led them to introduce an innovative strategy or develop a product or service that was new to their local economy. Table 4 illustrates examples of innovative resilience strategies that were adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when businesses were shut down and had time to try something new, most of the firms focused on additional training, creating new

products or services, and developing fresh marketing techniques or improving their current production and marketing strategies. All respondents stated that their actions are to prevent their businesses from reaching Stage 5 - Stagnation, which can lead to Stage 6 - Decline.

Most respondents believed that their workers accepted them as leaders and mentors because of their charismatic, highly motivated, self-confident, and democratic personality traits. Job satisfaction was high in all businesses. Respondents encouraged and motivated their workers to have creative ideas, giving rewards if their employees performed well, increasing revenues and clients. This unique organizational culture positively affected firms' performance, contributing to human resource development, employee satisfaction, more efficient communication, and better cooperation. The female entrepreneurs stated that effective communication allowed them to meet the needs of their employees and clients' needs before considering their own needs. Nine of the ten respondents motivated and inspired employees by displaying enthusiasm and optimism involved the employees in decision-making, communicated elevated expectations, and demonstrated commitment to the shared goals. All ten respondents motivated their workers to be fully committed to their vision of their business organizations; it was not difficult to achieve those goals after the collapse of the Soviet bloc when spirit and drive were high.

Resiliency developed during the 1990s enabled female entrepreneurs to survive the COVID-19 era. Strategies that allowed them to stay the COVID-19 protocols included using technology to communicate with prospective customers, using the shut-down time to revise short-term and long-term goals, and developing new and innovative products to increase inventories. They have already observed the positive impacts of those strategies as their clients are well-informed about their existing and new products and services.

## 5.2. Analysis of the entrepreneurial ecosystem characteristics

Respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of five primary domains of entrepreneurship ecosystems across all stages of Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model. Respondents' perceptions regarding which entrepreneurial ecosystem domains are presented in Table 5 that is broken into three segments to demonstrate respondents' perceptions regarding (1) which entrepreneurial ecosystem domains were critical to the success of their firms across all stages, (2) satisfaction with the entrepreneurial ecosystem domains across all stages; and (3) concerns with entrepreneurial ecosystem domains across all stages.

**Table 5**  
*Responses perceptions on the entrepreneurial ecosystem domains based on Butler's model (number of positive – yes - responses)*

| Critical ecosystem domains          |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Stages                              |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Ecosystem domain                    | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  |
| Government policies and procedures  | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Socioeconomic conditions            | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Entrepreneurial and business skills | 10 | 10 | 8  | 2  | 5  | 10 | 10 |
| Financial assistance                | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Non-financial assistance            | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Satisfaction with ecosystem domains |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Stages                              |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Ecosystem domain                    | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  |
| Government policies and procedures  | 0  | 7  | 7  | 7  | 0  | 0  | 5  |
| Socioeconomic conditions            | 10 | 10 | 10 | 7  | 7  | 10 | 10 |
| Entrepreneurial and business skills | 4  | 3  | 6  | 7  | 3  | 10 | 10 |
| Financial assistance                | 0  | 0  | 3  | 4  | 0  | 0  | 0  |
| Non-financial assistance            | 0  | 0  | 7  | 7  | 0  | 0  | 0  |

**Table 5 (continued)**

| Concerns with ecosystem domains     |        |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|-------------------------------------|--------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Ecosystem domain                    | Stages |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|                                     | 1      | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  |
| Government policies and procedures  | 10     | 3  | 3  | 3  | 10 | 10 | 5  |
| Socioeconomic conditions            | 4      | 5  | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Entrepreneurial and business skills | 9      | 10 | 5  | 3  | 3  | 10 | 10 |
| Financial assistance                | 10     | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Non-financial assistance            | 10     | 10 | 8  | 9  | 8  | 10 | 10 |

Source: Developed by the authors based on the interview results for 2015, 2020, and 2022.

### Government policies and procedures

Based on Table 5, respondents agree that government policies and procedures have been critical at any stage of operation. The lack of proper policies supporting private sector growth in the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s prevented entrepreneurial businesses' development during their Stage 1 – Exploration, marking satisfaction at zero. The changes in government regulations and policies in the mid-1990s allowed firms to develop domestic and international demand. Satisfaction with government policies and procedures was recognized at seventy per cent at Stage 2 - Involvement, Stage 3 - Development, and Stage 4 - Consolidation. Satisfaction with government policies and procedures dropped to zero during the COVID-19 pandemic at stages 5 and 6 of their operations. Then it increased to fifty per cent at Stage 7 - Rejuvenation. Seventy per cent of respondents were satisfied with the extensive measures of the E.U. policies established after Poland joined the E.U.

### Socioeconomic conditions

Socioeconomic conditions such as entrepreneurial culture, what society offers, and how individuals perceive entrepreneurship were crucial in all four stages of growth and development. Unsurprisingly, an improving economic climate contributes to firms' success or avoidance of failure during the recession. Respondents agreed that the tourism sector in Poland grew due to domestic tourists who wanted to avoid their professional responsibilities and take vacations. This growing trend towards domestic travel is vital to the Polish economy.

### Entrepreneurial and business skills

The results indicate entrepreneurial and business skills were decisive during the first three stages of firm development and stages 6 and 7 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents revealed that business skills acquired before 1990 were useless in a new post-communist economic and political environment. Female entrepreneurs who obtained business training found increased satisfaction, fostering self-confidence as they restored business operations after the COVID-19 pandemic. Any undergraduate or graduate degrees acquired before establishing entrepreneurial businesses enabled females to choose compatible enterprises given their area of residence, expertise and interest, and business' competitive advantage. New accounting standards, tax systems, more competitive economic conditions, and government policies required female entrepreneurs to gain entrepreneurial and business skills.

### Financial assistance

According to respondents, financial support was critical across all stages. Entrepreneurs who started in the late 1980s had to rely on their savings or financial support from their friends and families. Still, the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the 1990s created new opportunities for financing their firms' growth. The level of satisfaction with financial assistance increased from zero per cent to thirty and forty per cent at stages 3 and 4, respectively.

### Non-financial assistance

Business enterprises face different crises of managerial problems and issues at distinct stages of growth. According to our case study survey results, all respondents considered non-financial assistance indispensable to

their business across all stages of their operations. The most significant hurdle to their businesses' economic growth was an elevated taxation level and a lack of access to financial assistance during the first two stages. Respondents perceived that higher levels of assistance were granted to males who operated in the construction or manufacturing sector.

## 6. Conclusions

The private sector in Poland's tourism and hospitality industry has created economic growth during unfavorable economic and financial times. Economic pressures and political changes have altered the essential nature of their businesses, increased quality and concentrating their services and products on improving the wellness and health of their customers. Successful entrepreneurs focused on a particular product or niche market and developed a solid competitive advantage base. Business conducted by Polish entrepreneurial women accomplished dual outcomes of benefiting their local community and protecting natural resources. Economic independence is an obvious path towards preserving all aspects of community integrity, including lifestyle, heritage, culture, and natural environment.

Polish women cultivating an entrepreneurial business is one key to economic growth. This case study highlights the entrepreneurial ecosystem characteristics that affected the success of ten Polish female entrepreneurs in the tourism and hospitality industry. Our examination identified priority areas for strengthening the sector. Success and economic growth require a competitive tourist product or service. The development of human resources contributes to employee and customer satisfaction, which creates a welcoming environment and supports a sense of community, especially during challenging economic times. Respondents' orientation towards ecotourism and sustainable tourism services promotes a climate of respect for the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities.

These case study interviews indicate that cultural and socioeconomic conditions influenced the development of a sustainable tourism industry even before the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Respondents' firms have become more dynamic and subject to constant change and evolution towards sustainability, health, and wellness. Polish entrepreneurs have developed and opened numerous cultural centers and folk events and provided wellness, medical, and health services. Family assistance and limited funding allowed them to restore old infrastructure, open comfortable small farm inns and hotels in picturesque natural surroundings and provide high-quality services ranging from art lessons to horseback riding.

Based on the results presented in this case study, specific policy measures would be helpful to promote firms' growth. Innovation requires an unobstructed vision of what an entrepreneurial firm wants to achieve. Therefore, local authorities could pursue economic and tax incentive policies, creating, improving, and promoting the necessary economic conditions to support the growth of existing firms and encourage the development of new entrepreneurial activities. Female entrepreneurs with their small businesses have been successful in Poland because they could recognize the country's natural resource base, socio-cultural traditions, and ecological characteristics and take full advantage of them. By creating distinctive products, they positively impacted their entrepreneurial growth and employment development.

Finally, our case study illuminates the hindrance government restrictions impose on small family firms due to the unavailability of low-cost financing. Analysis of the Polish tourism industry has identified priority areas for strengthening the industry. The private sector in Poland has proven to be an essential factor contributing to economic growth and job creation. More research on the tourism industry in Poland and other regions of Central and Eastern Europe should explore the problems small businesses face and examine the importance of the regulatory environment on innovation in the growth and development of small businesses in the tourism industry in the context of global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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