

# Female Entrepreneurship in Small Tourism and Hospitality Firms in Poland

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The paper examines characteristics, strategies, and the business environment of ten small firms within the tourism and hospitality industry in the southern region of Poland. The qualitative analysis is based on online surveys and Zoom interviews with ten female entrepreneurs regarding economic, sociocultural, and environmental factors contributing to the firms' success. The results indicate that female entrepreneurs developed resiliency to overcome market challenges during their first years of operation, the financial crisis of 2007, and the COVID-19 pandemic. They faced numerous difficulties that hindered their business growth and the most significant barrier included limited availability of low-cost financing. Their strategies focused on transformation aimed towards sustainability, public involvement, conservation, education, and green efforts, which contributed to the firms' growth. Recognizing market characteristics and the needs of their local communities, employees, and customers as well as cultural preservation and environmental sustainability have been critical to the firms' growth and entrepreneurial success.

*Keywords:* transformative, sustainable, medical and eco-tourism, entrepreneurs, growth, development, female entrepreneurship



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## Introduction

Polish female entrepreneurship has been studied over the years, indicating that the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy has proven to be challenging (Zapalska et al., 2004) but that the Polish economy has observed the unprecedented growth of small entrepreneurial businesses in light manufacturing, service and the hospitality and tourism industries (Zapalska & Fogel, 1998; Hunter et al., 1994). This fast-growing private sector in Poland has proven to be one of the key mechanisms in achieving economic efficiency via creating employment,

eliminating shortages, and attracting resources into entrepreneurial operations that have generated profits and economic efficiency in this new market economy (Zapalska et al., 2015). Microfinancing has been the most significant obstacle for Polish female entrepreneurs, but their ingenuity and motivation has enabled them to overcome impediments and seek resources and strategies that have enabled them to succeed (Zapalska et al., 2007).

The tourism industry in Poland was very limited under the Soviet regime, but several years before the collapse significant variation of the market mechanisms

took place, leading to the creation and successful operation of small hotels and inns owned and operated by individual entrepreneurs (Zienkowski, 2000). Joint venture investment in high-quality accommodations in the tourism industry had been permitted at the end of the 1980s, but the overall quality and extent of tourist services was still very inadequate. Extraordinary development and growth in both domestic and international tourism in Poland occurred in the early 1990s. The lack of entrepreneurial experience, the presence of a monopoly power in the tourism market and insufficient coordination and cooperation between tourism enterprises and local and regional authorities brought many of the smaller tourism entrepreneurial firms to failure (Golembki & Majewski, 2003; Zapalska & Fogel, 1998).

Since 2000, Poland's economic and political stability and the rising prosperity of its population together with its distinct pride and sense of religion, culture, folklore, heritage, and community have provided a solid base for the sustained growth of the tourism and hospitality industry. Today's entrepreneurship in the tourism industry is based on developments within special groups who choose country recreational activities and are seeking pollution-free areas, opportunities for contact with nature, a clean environment, and contacts with a regional culture, folklore and regional folk festivals, and active participation in the everyday farm lifestyle. Based on small-scale entrepreneurial firms, Poland became the destination of many tourism attractions for guests with a wide range of interests.

The aim of this article is to examine the characteristics of small female entrepreneurial firms within the Polish tourism and hospitality industry. The paper also analyses the factors contributing to and impeding the firms' growth, including the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises. The paper also examines the impact of governmental programmes and policies on the development and growth of small Polish firms in the tourism and hospitality industry to provide recommendations for the growth and expansion of this industry in the areas that are economically underdeveloped and in other countries of the EU and worldwide.

This paper's organization is as follows. First, the paper focuses on the basic characteristics of the tourism and hospitality industry (sustainability, public involvement, conservation, education, and green efforts) and its specific transformative topographies (new perspective, learn something new, reflective moment, solving a challenge, improving well-being and health, and discovering a passion) within small (fewer than fifty employees) entrepreneurial firms. Second, the paper discusses impediments to growth and development of these firms. The last section provides conclusions and policy recommendations that would support the growth and development of firms within the tourism and hospitality industry in Poland.

The paper recommends several strategies that contribute to successful development and growth of small firms in the tourism and hospitality sector. Some of these strategies include: (1) facilitating tourism capacity-building programmes that enhance transformative, cultural, sustainable, health/well-being, and ecotourism (camping, hiking, mountain biking, caving, climbing, water adventures, birdwatching, wildlife viewing, etc.) offerings; (2) focusing on tourism activities that contribute to combating climate change; (3) providing knowledge services and developing effective planning, decision-making, and policies in support of small tourism and hospitality firms; (4) reducing barriers to tourism and hospitality industry growth; and (5) enhancing its competitiveness and integration into regional and national economic growth that would further contribute to boosting employment opportunities and implementation of new projects and other supporting enterprises.

Using an example of the Polish tourism and hospitality small firms operated by females, the paper concludes that specific policy measures are needed to promote their development and growth. It is important that local authorities pursue economic and development policies that promote the creation of the necessary economic and entrepreneurial conditions and support the growth of existing, and encourage development of new, female-run and operated entrepreneurial activities within the tourism and hospitality industry. The paper also indicates the limitations of this study and provides recommendations for future

research in the area of small entrepreneurial firms owned and operated by females in the tourism and hospitality industry.

### Literature Review

Female entrepreneurial success in the area of the tourism and hospitality industry has been studied over the years (Nordbo, 2022). Several studies indicated that female ingenuity is critical to enhancing local communities through creation of jobs and providing products and services that would not be otherwise supplied (Zapalska et al., 2012). Valenti and Katsoni (2021) studied female potential for creating competitive advantages while Serafimova and Petrevska (2018) analysed factors empowering women in their entrepreneurial achievement. Motivation for, and the challenges in, running a female-led business have been found to be related to the female entrepreneurs' embeddedness in the local, regional, national, and international context and historical path dependence (Nordbo, 2022; Zapalska & Brozik, 2017).

Several authors studied the impact of national and global trends on the development and transformation process of the rural, small and hospitality tourism industry in Poland (Hjalager, 2010; Sorensen, 2011; Kosmaczewska & Poczta, 2021). Rus et al. (2022) indicated that transformative tourism, where motivation to learn and transform, the ability to immerse oneself in the experience with an open mind towards change and improved well-being, can be seen as an independent sector. The most widespread forms advanced within the tourism industry involve eco-farms, eco-healing and health or medical centres, and other eco-projects where the primary goal of the enterprise is to provide a transformative experience based on self-changing, self-transformation, self-development, self-improvement, self-fulfilment, and self-realization.

Tourism has been criticized for failing to protect environmental assets and for producing undesirable effects on the nature of the destinations and native communities (Drumm, 2008). Monti et al. (2018) argued that it also creates environmental degradation, pollution, depletion of natural resources, and destruction of wildlife habitat. However, Wolf et al. (2017) argued that sustainability and preservation of natural

resources positively impact tourists and local communities, while Kosmaczewska and Poczta (2021) noted that it also protects and maintains cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems linked to sustainability, public involvement, conservation, education, and green efforts.

Maskay (2000) emphasized that sustainability in tourism can be ecological, economic, and social. Ecological sustainability relates to efficient management and conservation of natural resources, and consists of maintenance of biodiversity, atmospheric and other ecosystems by creating appropriate policies and awareness among people regarding wellbeing and longevity (Ahmad et al., 2012). The development of tourism oriented towards sustainability, public orientation, conservation, education, and green efforts offers opportunities for local communities to participate in self- and community development initiatives which have a positive impact on the socioeconomic activities of local communities (Butler, 2010; 1980), increased employment and economic opportunities for local communities, education, life satisfaction, emotions, and culture (Kim et al., 2013). These specific tourism characteristics can contribute to conservation of protected areas while providing alternative sources of income and local employment (Jalani, 2012), increased community solidarity and enhanced environmental quality, providing an alternative to the exploitative use of environmental resources (Wunder, 2000; Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011), promotion of nature-based and rich cultural and historical heritage (Kim et al., 2019), and biodiversity conservation (Scheyvens, 2007). Similarly, Gyan and Nyaupane (2011) argued that employment and income, generated through tourism businesses, produce incentives and a positive attitude toward conservation.

New elements of tourism emphasize the advancement of tourists' interest in learning and benefitting from ecotourist activities. Lean (2009) contends that the move from nature appreciation to transformative learning within tourism promotes progression of new experiences and learning while advancing entrepreneurship and economic development through eco-innovations. Teoh et al. (2021) suggest that

transformative tourism experiences create ideas that alter tourists' perspectives and advance knowledge, leading to transformation of experiences, life changes and behavioural habits. Perdomo (2016), Vidickiene et al. (2019) and Vidickiene et al. (2020) analyse transformative tourism by focusing on ecological issues and the importance of the entrepreneurs involved in the creation and implementation of eco-innovations that contribute to economic development and growth. The issue of transformation is an indispensable element of the tourist experience, and the goal of transformative tourism is to alter tourists' behaviour and well-being, and positively influence their livelihoods and the world.

Nandasena et al. (2022) argue that the success of learning experiences and development of appreciation for cultural, social, and environmental transformation depends on the goals and philosophy of local communities, owners and stakeholders, with strong governmental support facilitating participation of local communities in advancing and securing sustainability and behavioural transformation of both tourism providers and tourists. The authors argue that transformative experiences provided to tourists involve a process of defining, or re-defining, an individual's self-identity, self-changing, self-development, self-improvement, self-responsibility, self-fulfilment, self-realization, self-monitoring, self-transformation through personal transformation, personal development, change in oneself, reflection on oneself, immersing oneself, finding oneself, and life changes. These specific characteristics have become attractive elements in the tourism and hospitality industry specially produced by female entrepreneurs, who have allowed tourism to transform itself into new levels of human development, experience (Baker & Welter, 2015), and well-being (Marques et al., 2018).

### **Research Model and Methodology**

Data for this case study was collected through an open-ended survey and semi-structured questionnaire that was emailed to ten female entrepreneurs operating in the tourism and hospitality industry and additional interviews conducted between 2015 and 2023. These ten female entrepreneurs were selected through

the assistance provided by the National Revenue Administration Centre and Tax and Customs Service office. An in-depth questionnaire was distributed followed by additional emails or Microsoft Teams interviews which allowed authors to collect answers as needed to reveal detailed information regarding the firms' nature, characteristics, strategies, motivations, and other responses critical to complete this study. The respondents were very generous with their time dedicated to answering our questionnaire as well as to providing answers through our online interviews and friendly conversations. The interviews were conducted in the Polish language, but all respondents were fluent in English.

The questionnaire and responses were grouped into several distinctive categories to identify the nature of firms, common factors that promoted or inhibited the entrance of women into the entrepreneurial process, and those factors that were critical, important or a matter of concern for growth and development in female businesses. The survey focused on information specific to transformative, sustainable, health/well-being, and eco-tourism. Transformative tourism included a new perspective, learning something new, reflective moments, solving a challenge, and discovering a passion. The simplified version of the questionnaire, which was translated into English for the purpose of this publication, is presented in Figure 3.

The models developed and presented in Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the main research questions that this paper aimed to address. This paper utilized several studies on tourism (Maskay, 2000; Kim et al., 2013; Jalani, 2012; Gyan & Nyaupane, 2011) while developing the research model and questions for this paper. Our model and research questions related to whether the firms' characteristics were interrelated with sustainability, conservation, green efforts, public involvement, and education. All those factors are critical to firms' success in the tourism industry as without education regarding sustainability, conservation, and green efforts, there will not be understanding of the importance of public involvement and actions in tourism development. Entrepreneurial environments can be challenging, and therefore, understanding of institu-

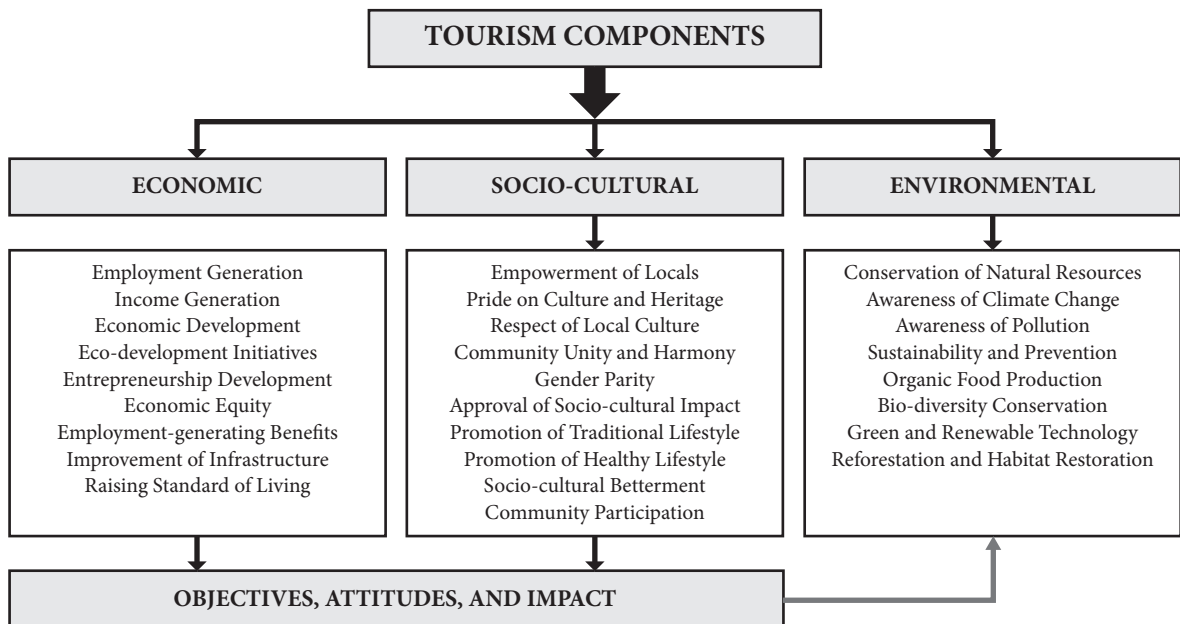


Figure 1 Basic Components of Tourism (adapted from Das and Chatterjee, 2015, p. 5)

tional perspectives on entrepreneurial behaviour is critical (Welter & Smallbone, 2011).

Moreover, this study has adopted the tourism model developed by Das and Chatterjee (2015) which considers tourism from a perspective of three pillars: *economic* (employment and income generation), *socio-cultural* (empowerment of locals and pride in culture), and *environmental* (conservation of natural resources). This model's approach, together with Welter's top-down processes approach (2011) to studying entrepreneurship in specific contexts of tourism, supports our research. Figure 1 illustrates the model that is horizontally integrated through three pillars in order to understand the firms' objectives, attitudes, and impacts. Several elements are listed under each pillar and used to answer how much different factors, such as conservation of natural resources and cultural elements of local communities, contributed to the firms' success while providing economic benefits, social empowerment, and cultural pride. Based on Figure 1, the model of tourism adopted for the purpose of this study is to analyse *economic*, *socio-cultural*, and *environmental* tourism elements recommended by Das and Chatterjee (2015).

This research also proposes a dynamic approach to tourism development to examine its impact on economic development, as illustrated in Figure 2. This approach incorporates *past experiences*, *motivation*, and *disposition* as primary factors instigating tourism activities. This paper extended the model to incorporate three environments: (1) *tourism entrepreneurial firms*; (2) *economic, policy and environmental factors*; and (3) *tourism activity* and its *objectives* together with *transformative experience* (Figure 2). This dynamic approach analyses the process of transformative experience within the tourism environment and its impact on tourists' personal change and transformation. The survey included information on specific achievement characteristics of tourism, including a new perspective, learning something new, a reflective moment, solving a challenge, and discovering a passion.

Respondents were asked to describe the type of businesses they were involved in, the working environment within their organizations and their working relationships with their employees, local authorities, and the communities. The questionnaire elicited information on the size and nature of operation, business objectives, level of employment, financial assistance

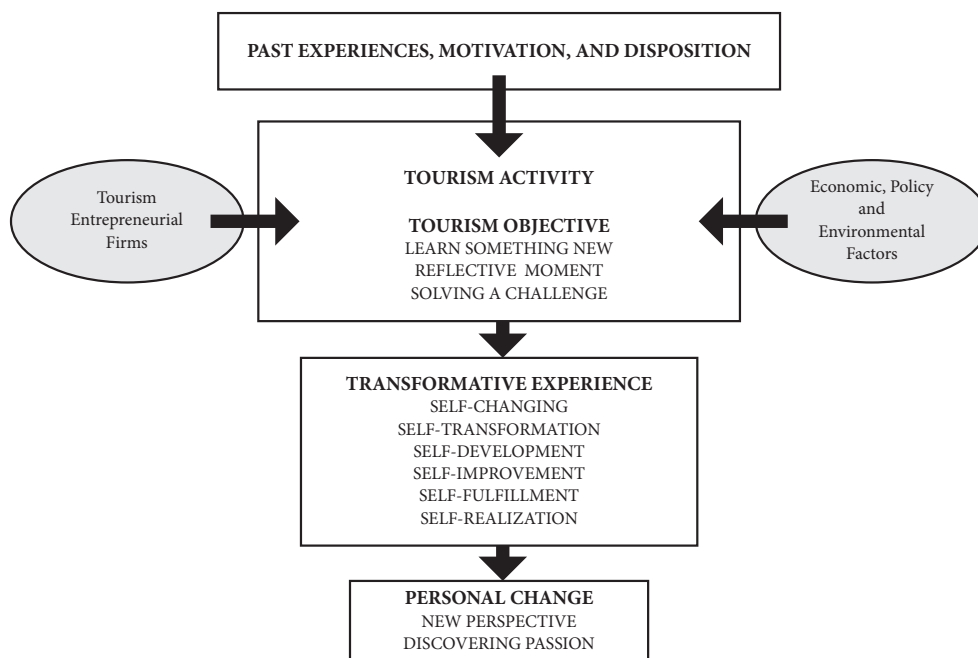


Figure 2 Dynamic Approach to Tourism

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 previous years.

There were several research questions that this paper aimed to answer. The five primary objectives of this research are as follows:

1. What are the types of tourism and hospitality industry of the firms included in this study?
2. What are the objectives of the small entrepreneurial firms run by females in the tourism and hospitality industry in Poland?
3. What are the entrepreneurial characteristics of the tourism and hospitality industry of the firms included in this study?
4. What were the sociocultural, economic, and entrepreneurial conditions that contributed to the firms' success or failure given the firms' objectives, attitudes, and impact?
5. What were the experiences, motivations, and dispositions that contributed to delivering products and services within the firms' tourism and hospitality industry?

### Background and Basic Characteristics of Tourism and Hospitality Enterprises

Based on Figure 1 and the results presented in Table 1 and Table 2, the ten female entrepreneurs operated their own entrepreneurial firms in an area of transformative, sustainable, health/well-being, and eco-tourism across different areas of Southern Poland. As Table 1 illustrates, those *socio-cultural*, *economic*, and *environmental* elements are present within the eco-products and eco-services provided by the entrepreneurs, which provide their customers with numerous opportunities to develop a new perspective, learn something new, experience a reflective moment, solve a challenge, and/or discover a new passion. Interviewees noted that pride in culture and heritage, respect for local culture, community unity and harmony, promotion of traditional and healthy lifestyle, socio-cultural betterment and community participation were critical elements of their entrepreneurial undertakings.

Examples include an Art Gallery and Studio and The Pottery House, with a focus on providing art lessons and lectures on culture, ecological aspects of life and nature, and history, while allowing tourists to learn nature painting, making wooden statues, or using

*Table 1* Type and Characteristics of Products and Services

Type of Business	Characteristics of Products and Services Provided
Art Gallery and Studio	Art lessons and lectures, cultural orientation
Beauty Salon and Wellness Spa	Wellness lectures, meditation session, yoga classes, fitness and aerobics classes, individual fitness programme
Agrotourism Bed and Breakfast	Cooking classes, wellness lectures, cultural orientation, providing traditional recipes, visiting pilgrimage places, national parks and nature experiences, outdoor and recreational activities
The Farm and Guesthouse	Cooking classes, wellness sessions, cultural orientations, providing traditional recipes, visiting pilgrimage places, nature experiences, outdoor and recreational activities
The Health and Spa Guesthouse	Cooking classes, wellness lectures, cultural orientation, yoga classes, fitness and aerobics classes, individual fitness programme
Horseback Riding Farm	Horseback riding lessons, hunting sessions, holiday festivities, relaxation sessions and nature experiences, outdoor and recreational activities
The Café Shop	Cooking classes, wellness lectures, cultural orientations, providing traditional recipes, holistic and traditional foods
Cosmetic, Dental and Health Services	Wellness lectures, holistic medical services, natural medicine treatments, yoga and other wellness sessions that improve well-being and health
Horseback Riding in the Wilderness	Wellness sessions, horseback riding lessons, cultural festivals, nature experiences, outdoor and recreational activities
The Pottery House	Cooking classes, wellness lectures, cultural orientations, providing traditional recipes, cultural festivals

*Note* Developed and provided by the authors based on survey and interviews.

their hands to create clay pottery, while experiencing the activities in natural settings in an old farm, historic cottage, or a building in the historic Skansen (open air museums). At the same time tourists can enjoy exploring outdoor folklore and cultural elements in local towns and villages incorporated in the Lesser Poland (Malopolska) Voivodeship known for its historical places, medieval landscapes and medieval-era architecture and wooden churches as well as its diverse folk costumes, dances, cuisine based on organic or Eco-foods, traditions, and folk music. Clients are involved in cooking lessons using traditional and organic foods, and cultural-based activities where they experience real culture and tradition by learning, studying something new and developing new skills and habits.

A Beauty Salon and Wellness Spa provides products and services arising from the development of healthy lifestyles, in which consumption of organic foods and herbal remedies is recommended and served. Ag-

rotourism Bed and Breakfast, The Farm and Guesthouse, and The Health and Spa Guesthouse provide services and products that are based on traditional Polish cuisine (no genetically modified or processed foods are served but organic and homegrown and old-style cooked foods), cultural orientation (participating in a pilgrimage journey to visit cultural places), and exploration of national parks and nature experiences with outdoor fitness and recreational activities (folk dance and music festivals). The Horseback Riding Farm and Horseback Riding in the Wilderness have been known for delivering horseback riding lessons, hunting opportunities, Christmas holiday festivities and relaxation sessions through nature experiences, and outdoor and recreational activities, especially during summer and winter holidays. Cosmetic, Dental, and Health Services has been proud of providing an integrated approach by recognizing the importance of limiting exposure to dental toxins since they negatively

Table 2 Basic Goals and Characteristics of Ten Polish Entrepreneurial Firms

Characteristics	Examples
Sustainability	Resource efficiency, biological diversity, physical integrity, economic viability, local prosperity, environmental purity, employment quality, social equality, cultural richness, community well-being, local control
Public Involvement	Stress on local participation, ownership, and business opportunities, provide financial benefits for conservation, raise sensitivity to community's environmental, cultural, and social climate, provide positive experiences for visitors and hosts, provide cultural awareness
Conservation	Concern for the environment through all actions and business operations, restoration, alternative energy, recycling, preservation of natural areas and resources, sustainable agriculture, no-dumping signs
Education	Organizing educational and learning meetings and sessions, providing nature programmes, water conservation actions, public conversation on controversial environmental issues in a local community, developing school gardens and composting programmes to improve the quality of meals and reduce waste, and improving well-being and health of local communities and clients
Green Efforts	Reduce, reuse, recycle, elevating science and promoting actions and volunteerism, expanding environmental education and healthy lifestyle from organic foods, healthy diet, and physical activities such as hiking, horseback riding, biking, kayaking, or canoeing

Note Developed and provided by the authors based on survey and interviews.

impact the human body. This specialized delivery of holistic medical services, and natural-based medical treatments as well as yoga practices and other wellness sessions and lectures have attracted many international clients to their practice as costs are relatively lower than in other countries, especially the U.S. or Canada. They also recommended and prescribed natural ozone therapies to target and eliminate bacteria in the mouth and other eco-products based on herbal and natural ingredients.

The Health and Spa Guesthouse, Cosmetic, Dental and Health Services, Agrotourism Bed and Breakfast, and The Farm and Guesthouse specialized in providing products comprising traditional herbal foodstuffs, medications or remedies that have been popular and utilized in Poland for more than two centuries. The production of those products continued during central planning in the state-run enterprise, called Herbapol, with its location in Lublin, Poland. Today, Herbapol products are globally known for production of natural and herb-based foods, cosmetics, medications, and remedies that have been utilized and valued by firms operated by our respondents.

Table 1 summarizes the details of each entrepreneurial firm's products and services. Table 2 summarizes

the results specifically related to the goals of the firms included in this study. The most important characteristic, rated at 100%, was the *educational* element, followed by *sustainability*, *conservation*, and *green efforts* at 90%, and *public involvement* at 20%. Those results indicate that there is a strong commitment to sustainability, green efforts, and self-education as well as educating clients by making them involved, delivering products and services. Those results support research conducted by Maskay (2000), Kim et al. (2013), Jalani (2012), and Gyan and Nyaupane (2011) but contradict the research conducted by Drumm (2008). Polish female entrepreneurial firms have focused and significantly contributed to protecting environmental and cultural aspects of their local communities. This is confirmed by the elements of sustainability, conservation, education, and green efforts that were present; according to the respondents those strategies have been critical to the firms' success and continued development. Similarly, production and provision of products and services provided by the female entrepreneurs that are based on the components of a community's well-being and longevity (well-being) are in line with the results discussed by Ahmad et al. (2012).



*Table 3* Sociocultural Conditions: Objectives, Attitudes, and Impacts

Sociocultural Conditions	Objectives	Attitudes	Impact
Empowerment of Locals	20	30	30
Pride in Culture and Heritage	100	100	100
Respect of Local Culture	100	100	100
Community Unity and Harmony	100	100	100
Gender Parity	100	100	100
Approval of Sociocultural Impact	60	60	60
Promotion of Traditional Lifestyle	100	100	100
Promotion of Healthy Lifestyle	100	100	100
Socio-cultural Betterment	100	100	100
Community Participation	100	100	100

*Note* Developed and provided by the authors based on survey and interviews (values in percent of positive responses).

Female entrepreneurs focused on delivering transformative experiences that included self-transformation, self-development, self-improvement, self-fulfillment, and self-realization. Our results are consistent with the work conducted by Nandasena et al. (2022). All respondents indicated that regardless of their business type and orientation, they have provided products and services that have allowed both domestic and international customers to learn something new, experience nature and culture and have a reflective moment, solve a challenge, provide a new perspective, discover a passion and/or improve customers' well-being through changes and reflections on their actions and lifestyles. Those results confirm the research conducted by Lean (2009). In our case study, the firms have been committed to providing transformative learning experiences with the progression of new experiences through specially designed activities, seminars, lectures, classes, and health and well-being consultations.

### Results and Discussions

This section of the paper reports on respondents' objectives, attitudes, and understanding of the impact of both objectives and attitudes on entrepreneurial conditions.

### Sociocultural Conditions

Socio-cultural conditions (entrepreneurial culture and what society offers and how individuals perceive entrepreneurship) were a hundred percent critical during their firm's development, growth, and operations. These responses are expected as, after the collapse of the Soviet system, understanding of importance of entrepreneurship, willingness to take risks, and the desire to become an entrepreneur increased with the recognition of a market economy's impact on economic efficiency and economic growth and prosperity. Interviewees stated that the socio-cultural conditions in Poland continued to improve as political and economic conditions kept cultivating free market economy conditions and society was able to experience the successful formation and operation of entrepreneurial firms with strong property rights rules and laws. A positive market-based environment, motivation and drive have strongly contributed to the firms' success during recessions and downturns. The female entrepreneurial firms in this study managed to create successful businesses that provided at first an alternative but later, after 1990, a primary source of their income and employment in their local communities, promoted the rise of cultural and environmental awareness in their local communities, and contributed to the preservation of the rural region's culture, folklore, and traditions.

Table 3 summarizes respondents' positive responses related to their objectives, attitudes, and impact regarding socio-cultural tourism conditions. The Dynamic Approach to Tourism model, presented in Figure 2, summarized their perceptions of sociocultural conditions of respondents' *objectives*, *attitudes*, and *impact* of their actions. Socio-cultural objectives result from market conditions, attitudes mirror personal beliefs and ways of thinking or feeling about entrepreneurial conditions, while impact reflects actions affecting local communities and businesses. Two responses, empowerment of locals and approval of socio-cultural impact, were low in positive responses across objectives, attitudes, and impact. Respondents did not consider either condition as critical in terms of their objectives, attitudes, and impact; they felt their roles would make little difference in empowering their local communities. However, they agreed that Polish culture, beliefs, and past experiences from the communist regime had a strong positive impact on the advancement of interest and trust in, and loyalty to their products and services characterized by the provision of transformation and learning. Those results are similar to the work conducted by Perdomo (2016), Vidickiene et al. (2019 and 2020) as we discussed in the literature review.

Respondents agreed that the Polish tourism sector grew fast due to high demand for tourism that could provide opportunities to domestic and foreign tourists. During the first years of their operations, the greatest interest was in Polish tourists who for years were hungry for any vacation opportunities that would allow them to get away from professional responsibilities. Over the years, the firms went through transformations and began to focus on delivering products and services that were based on the local culture and tradition, including goods and services that were based on traditional Polish cuisine, cooked using healthy and organic foods to promote better and healthier lives. Respondents pointed to the lack of tourism during the Soviet era, and the fall of the Soviet bloc provided new opportunities for the travel industry and especially for the small entrepreneurial firms run by our respondents.

Respondents indicated that the interest and the use of herbal and non-traditional medical products have been part of Polish culture and tradition. The recent increase in the demand for herbs for medical use and consumer consumption of herbs and natural products and foods such as wild mushrooms or berries have been fuelled by the health and wellness trend. There is an increasing number of health-conscious Poles and citizens of other countries of the European Union. More consumers are showing a preference for natural products since those products have fewer side-effects and tend to be less expensive than artificially manufactured goods. The health and wellness trends are becoming a key growth area, and marketing strategies exist within the food, pharmaceutical, and cosmetic industries in Poland. As consumers become more educated about the ecological benefits of natural foods and organic farming, production at the farms becomes more profitable.

As presented in Table 3, the increase in travel across Poland generated in tourists a greater sense of cultural pride and heritage. Our respondents stated that this growing trend towards transformative, sustainable, health/well-being, and eco-tourism among both their domestic and international customers is a vital element of the Polish economy. Respondents indicated that their objectives, attitudes, and responses towards supporting cultural, sustainability and environmental conditions were critical to surviving and growing their businesses. One of the respondents stated:

'As competition was extremely hard, my services had to be unique, safe, innovative, creative, and based on cultural and natural elements, unique to Polish culture, art, and heritage. I had to work on marketing strategies and provide quality, environmentally friendly and health-based and well-being products. Educated customers appreciated our organic foods and cultural and recreational activities we served as they supported cultural enrichment, biodiversity and clean air conservation and sustainability.'

As competition from large and franchised firms in the tourism and hospitality industry continued to grow, respondents had to adapt to those competitive conditions. Several strategies were adopted and used to survive and grow the firms. For example, one of the

Table 4 Environmental Conditions: Objectives, Attitudes, and Impacts

Environmental Conditions	Objectives	Attitudes	Impact
Conservation of Natural Resources	100	100	100
Awareness of Climate Change	100	100	100
Awareness of Pollution	100	100	100
Sustainability and Prevention	100	100	100
Organic Food Production	50	50	50
Biodiversity Conservation	100	100	100
Green and Renewable Technology	50	100	100
Reforestation and Habitat Restoration	0	0	0

Note Developed and provided by the authors based on survey and interviews (values in percent of positive responses).

respondents stated that ‘Over the years, as competition was increasing and my clients demanded high-quality products and services, I had to innovate to meet their expectations.’ Another female entrepreneur stated that ‘I provided my clients with new perspective(s) and allowed them to learn something new, reflect on it and make them discover that this is their new passion. Markets are competitive and I have to stay educated in what clients need. During the COVID-19 pandemic when my business was shut down, I had time to evaluate my strategies.’

A third respondent admitted that ‘Increased customers’ interest in transformative tourism and sustainability orientation saved me and my business. Poland has so much to offer in terms of ecological aspects while providing educational experiences related to its unique and rich history, culture, and heritage. I also noticed that my customers were attracted to my offerings as I supported sustainability, conservation, and green efforts.’ Respondents took advantage of the increasing opportunities for growth and expansion of their transformative, culture-based, and eco-based tourism businesses especially as soon as the local economy returned to post-COVID-19 conditions, as well as the role of gender for contextualizing entrepreneurship while drawing attention to the interplay between history, place, and gender. Some of those results confirm the lessons from the study conducted by Baker and Welter (2015).

#### Environmental Conditions

Responses documented in Table 4 reveal that respondents were operating under objectives and attitudes aimed at improving their own and their clients’ lifestyles through transformation of their lives while incorporating elements of ecosystems, preservation and conservation of natural resources, cultural elements, and traditions. *Reforestation and habitat restoration* was ranked at zero percent as those operations were not related to the firms’ objective. Respondents stated that their primary objective of their entrepreneurial ventures was to eliminate activities that would reverse conservation of natural resources. They all supported those activities that enhanced and encouraged sustainability, especially actions that prevented devastation of the ecological environment. All expressed concerns regarding climate change but upgrading to green and renewable technology was not possible due to the high costs of investment. However, their products and services were based on sustainability, conservation, and ecology. Natural and organic products and materials (especially in medical tourism) were used to increase quality and the well-being and health of their customers.

According to Table 4, all respondents were concerned about climate change and environmental problems and therefore, there was a hundred percent positive response within objectives, attitudes, and impacts related to *awareness of climate change*, *awareness of pollution*, *sustainability and prevention* and *biodiversity conservation*. The types of businesses

Table 5 Economic Conditions: Objectives, Attitudes, and Impacts

Economic Conditions	Objectives	Attitudes	Impact
Employment Generation	100	100	100
Income Generation	100	100	100
Economic Development	100	100	100
Ecodevelopment Initiatives	100	100	100
Entrepreneurship Development	100	100	100
Economic Equity	100	100	100
Employment Benefits	100	100	100
Improvement of Infrastructure	0	0	0
Raising Standard of Living	100	100	100

Note Developed and provided by the authors based on survey and interviews (values in percent of positive responses).

and their orientation support those results summarized in Table 4. For example, the female entrepreneur operating Agrotourism Bed and Breakfast indicated that

‘From the very early years, I realized that my competitive advantage was in products heavily based on cultural aspects, historical elements, and natural resources. Also, providing organic traditional meals and packaging them with cooking classes, wellness sessions, and cultural and eco-orientation of my services increased the numbers of bookings of established and loyal clients. My new website developed during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed me to extend my services to the clients from the Unites States and Canada.’

The female entrepreneur who owns The Farm and Guesthouse emphasized that ‘I stressed the importance of providing sustainability and conservation of natural resources while making my customers aware that well-being is based on a healthy lifestyle. I enjoyed providing cooking lessons and a family cookbook - based on organic and traditional foods - with activities that deliver natural, cultural, and religious experiences to my clients.’ Those results support previous studies discussed in literature and are not limited to the studies conducted by Kim et al. (2019), and Gyan and Nyaupane (2011).

According to respondents, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis severely affected their businesses because clients could not travel. Our respondents stated that the impact of COVID-19 on tourism after its emer-

gence in March 2020 was both overwhelming and immediate. Respondents said that none of them were prepared for such unforeseen emotional distress and economic shock. However, the post-COVID economic recovery outlook was improving fast as domestic and international numbers of clients are continuously increasing. Respondents stated that they observed that the pandemic enhanced the need for technology and strategy solutions. During the pandemic shutdown, entrepreneurs had to find ways to save their operation and focus on restructuring, reorganizing, modernizing, renovating, increasing inventories, and developing new products/services to meet the needs of their customers. Post-COVID entrepreneurs’ actions and strategies are different compared to those that existed prior to the pandemic. Entrepreneurs encouraged transformative, sustainable, health/well-being, and eco- tourism while their strategies firmly focused on the development of strong relationships with their clients where loyalty is dominant in this unique firm-employee-client relationship.

#### Entrepreneurial Conditions

Respondents observed that business skills acquired before 1990 were not useful in a new post- communist economic and political environment. Undergraduate or graduate degrees acquired prior to the establishment of entrepreneurial businesses allowed the respondents or their parents (who owned and operated their businesses in the past) to choose businesses

that were most efficient given their area of residence, expertise, interest, and competitive advantage. New accounting standards, tax systems, more competitive economic conditions, and government policies required them and their employees to obtain new entrepreneurial and business skills during the early years of their operations. Development of entrepreneurial skills was crucial during the first years of their firms' development and some respondents continued to be dissatisfied with their entrepreneurial and business skills. Respondents admitted that their skills were satisfactory at the time of the pandemic and recovery from the COVID-19 shutdown. Innovative strategies included business training and investments in activities that broaden their tourism products, while reorganization contributed to their success during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Confidence gained in restoring their operations brought their enterprise to effective levels as soon as tourism reopened after the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### Economic Conditions

Table 5 summarizes objectives, attitudes, and impacts of economic conditions. Of the responses provided, respondents allocated 100 percent positive responses to all economic conditions, but *improvement of infrastructure* measured zero percent for respondents' objectives, attitudes, and impact. Respondents stated that entrepreneurial operations under a free market mechanism confirmed the importance of the impact of free market forces on their firms' success.

Respondents reflected that they never considered their entrepreneurial ventures could affect the improvement of the infrastructure in their local communities, therefore their objectives, attitudes and understanding of the impact measured at the rate zero. Improvement of infrastructure has allowed them to grow their businesses and elevate access to their clients, which in turn, positively affects economic growth and economic development of their communities. All respondents stated that income generation, economic development, equity, employment benefits and raising standards for their families and employees were critical and therefore strongly incorporated into their firms' objectives, attitudes, and impacts. For

example, the female entrepreneur running The Café Shop stressed that, her life as an entrepreneur improved as soon as she focused on improving her employees' economic status and incomes, well-being, and feeling of belonging to the family that operated the firm. Her workers accepted her terms and their trust – that developed over time – pushed them to contribute to her decision making based on their own experiences and observations. This was an important strategy even during the very difficult economic conditions of the 2007 recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. Those actions allowed her firm to survive and keep her workers loyal even during the loss of their employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. She also realized that provision of the sense of equity was important, and the development of self-gratification and work satisfaction led to substantial increase in her employees' productivity and dedication to providing quality services and products during hard economic conditions.

#### Financial Assistance

Respondents reported that the availability of financial support was critical, yet insufficient, across all years of their operations. Financial mechanisms and the legal framework for effective financial assistance were not available to our respondents during the market socialism between the 1980s and 1990s and prevented their businesses from obtaining a desirable level of production to meet market demand. Entrepreneurs initiating operations in the late 1980s had to rely on their own savings or financial support from family or friends. The collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1990 resulted in a more satisfactory level of financial assistance. After Poland joined the EU, and an efficient and competitive financial sector developed, more options became available to entrepreneurs, and the satisfaction level increased to 80 percent. Financial assistance satisfaction decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic as the process for obtaining available funding was inadequate and restricted due to the pandemic. Diversification to meet customer demand requires financial assistance to be available. The respondents indicated that at first, they could not take full advantage of the governmental programmes prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic when times were

quiet and their businesses stopped their operations due to full lockdown, respondents were able to incorporate recommendations provided by the authorities and regional tourism organizations. Today, they all look back and appreciate the assistance provided to them via regional tourism organizations to enhance their operations as expected by the EU Commission.

One of the respondents stated:

Years of hard work, together with our beautiful culture and attractive nature, allowed me to materialize my dreams and benefit my community through job creation and making my customers happy as they were learning something new or exploring new areas after years of shortages and poor access to tourism activities. My services and products also provided appreciation of ecological elements and brought transformation of the lives of my customers. However, more financial support is needed to let our firms grow continuously and recover fast in the case of economic downturn such as the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. We were lucky during the financial crisis of 2007 as our markets were still new to our customers and we did not lose clients at that time, but the COVID-19 pandemic paralyzed us badly. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we evaluated our past performances and strategized our future plans.

#### Non-Financial Assistance

Business enterprises face a variety of crises at the managerial levels. According to our survey results, all respondents considered non-financial assistance integral to their business regardless of the stage of operation. The greatest hurdle to the growth of their businesses, according to respondents, was the elevated level of taxation and a lack of access to accounting services and training during the early stages of their operations. According to the female entrepreneurs, construction and manufacturing operations were granted higher levels of financial assistance, especially if run by men. Female-run firms within the tourism and hospitality sectors were ignored, deemed irrelevant, or unimportant. During recessionary times, our respondents learned to decrease the market price of

their services and products while covering their cost of operation, with the objective of maintaining normal economic profits. Respondents concentrated on providing products and services by taking advantage of natural resources, as well as cultural and historical elements of Polish society, which were their clients' objectives and attitudes. They produced products and services of high quality and unique characteristics which supported respondents and their clients' patriotic orientation and actions relevant to Polish heritage, culture, and tradition.

Our respondents shared their success stories with us. The first one indicated that:

'As a female, I have a special aptitude to create a transformative and nature-based environment for my international and non-local customers that they truly enjoy. My products are of high quality as they are safe and organically grown while my business actions are through [*sic*] conservation of natural resources and cultural elements. My clients, who come from all over the world, appreciate the uniqueness of my foods and services based on Polish heritage and traditions. I focus on developing an atmosphere of community unity and harmony through folklore accents and services that provide an authentic experience of Polish culture, heritage, and traditions. I have been providing and improving them throughout the years. Their impacts are appreciated by our customers and make them come back to enjoy and experience a healthy lifestyle, healthy food, and community participation through music, arts, and lessons and experiences related to our traditions. My clients keep coming back every year, bringing or recommending my services to their family members and friends.'

Our second respondent stated that 'During the COVID-19 pandemic I had time to re-evaluate my services and strategies as there has never been a sufficient level of assistance of any kind. I wish we had some small business incubator centres.' The third female entrepreneur admitted that:

'Financial and non-financial assistance is needed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to develop high tolerance for risk and take a pause and reassess my strategies. I also took time to talk to my people to see what they had to say about working for me and how

all together we could recover from this unexpected shock. This was a great strategy to see what had to be changed and it worked out as my employees were able to build trust in my leadership and managed to vest their talents and interests in contributing to the firm's growth and success.'

#### Government Policies and Procedures

Respondents provided their opinions on the impact of the EU, national and local policies, and procedures. According to all respondents, government policies and procedures have always been critical to the success of their operations. Lack of effective and market-based policies supporting private sector growth prior to the 1980s prevented private sector development and growth. The changes in government policies between the 1980s and 1990s, followed by the collapse of the Soviet bloc regime, allowed start-up businesses to flourish, developing operations at domestic and international levels. As domestic economic policies provided support for the firms' operation, respondents recognized the importance of the local and national-level policies to their firms' development and growth. Most respondents stated that after the introduction of post-communist reforms and free-market economy policies, their entrepreneurial firms' operations began flourishing; positive effects were visible in terms of numbers of new businesses created and their increasing levels of employment, and numbers of clients.

Respondents rated their level of satisfaction with government policies and procedures at 20 percent during early stages of the firms' development, while 60 percent of respondents were satisfied with the extensive measures of the EU policies established after Poland joined the EU and 30 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the respondents indicated in her open-ended response:

'We all have expected greater government support but after all the years with no assistance, I have learned to care about my workers and clients on my own. I learned that productive workers are those who feel appreciated by employers and customers, and hence they are critical to our business success and profitability. The generation of solid incomes, employment benefits and steady increase in their standards of li-

ving allowed me to create loyalty, which in return increased productivity and high-quality customer service delivered by my employees. I also cared about the loyalty of customers which I developed through provision of healthy products and high quality of products and services.'

Despite the remarkable success of Polish entrepreneurial operations during and after the 2007 financial crisis, respondents stated that their business success was the result of strategic decisions, innovative strategies, and effective resource allocation in those areas that seemed to be low risk. Training and newly developed investment strategies (development of new services, products, marketing, and advertising techniques) undertaken during that time contributed to their survival during and after the financial crisis. Over the years, progressively better local and national government policies have had a positive impact on tourism and hospitality. Respondents gave a rating of 80 percent for local governments, 70 percent for the national level, and 40 percent for the EU government levels. Respondents reported that local and national policies of assistance were more effective than EU policies. Those results are in support of work developed by Kosmaczewska and Poczta (2021).

#### Conclusions

Polish female entrepreneurs included in this study have developed and opened culturally based activities and events as well as provided wellness, well-being, and health services. Respondents' firms have become more dynamic and subject to steady change and evolution towards sustainability, health, and wellness. Respondents stated that common tourist interest and orientation was towards activities that supported enjoyment of nature, sport-related experiences and other outdoor recreational activities, including outdoor arts and folk festivals, cultural events, pottery making, visiting historical places, and enjoying organic food-based and medical and wellness services. The firms' success was found in delivering products and services that allowed their clients to learn something new, reflect on experiences, solve a challenge, discover a new passion or perspective, grow, and be changed through new experiences and self-reflection, and learn how to stay true

Figure 3 A Copy of the Survey Questionnaire.

### **RESEARCH STUDY: FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE POLISH TOURISM INDUSTRY**

(The original version was in the Polish Language)

Thank you for responding to our request and agreeing to participate in our survey. Your business identity and responses are confidential and will be used to analyse the factors that contributed to your business's success. Your involvement is critical as we want to understand the factors that are critical to female entrepreneurship firms' success and/or failure. This questionnaire is under the first stage of our research. After you complete this survey, we will contact you for additional responses that would provide all information necessary to complete this study. For further correspondence please use the following email address: XX@gmail.com. If you have questions, please contact us. We will be discussing your answers and asking additional questions during the second stage of your interview if necessary to complete our research study. Thank you again for contributing to our research.

#### **STAGE 1: Interview Questionnaire (Responses should be emailed to XXX)**

##### Section One: Background and Basic information

1. What type of business do you operate? What are the characteristics of your entrepreneurial business?
2. How many years have you been in business and what is your educational background and entrepreneurship experience?
3. Provide information that relates to your business regarding: the size and nature of operation, level of employment, financial assistance received and desired, non-financial support received and desired, business training received and desired, socioeconomic conditions, and policies on taxation, preferences, credit financing, and reporting requirements for small businesses.
4. What are the factors that contributed to your business success or failure? Did those factors change over the years?
5. Would you categorize your entrepreneurial business as ecotourism (green efforts and healthy living) and why?
6. Would you categorize your business as transformative (transforms people's lives) and why?
7. Do you believe that the regional, national and/or the EU policies contributed to: (1) increased access to capital and investments; (2) becoming more connected to innovation ecosystems; (3) enhancing your openness, competitiveness, and global potential; (4) enabling growth and innovating of your business within ecosystems; (5) facilitating your access to the local, national, and international markets; (6) improving marketing of your products and services; (7) improving your knowledge on regulatory frameworks and networks to support joint cross-border ventures in new markets? Briefly explain your answers.

##### Section Two: Elements of Ecotourism

1. What are the objectives of your business? How did they change over time and why? Please briefly explain.
2. Does your business operate with the purpose of sustainability, public involvement, conservation, educating others, and/or green efforts? If yes, when, and why did you choose this objective? Please briefly explain.
3. Using the table provided below, please respond YES or NO.



	<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Attitudes</b>	<b>Impact</b>
<b>Sociocultural Conditions</b>	<b>Yes/No Response</b>	<b>Yes/No Response</b>	<b>Yes/No Response</b>
Empowerment of Locals			
Pride in Culture and Heritage			
Respect of Local Culture			
Community Unity and Harmony			
Gender Parity			
Approval of Sociocultural Impact			
Promotion of Traditional Lifestyle			
Promotion of Healthy Lifestyle			
Socio-cultural Betterment			
Community Participation			
<b>Environmental Conditions</b>	<b>Yes/No Response</b>	<b>Yes/No Response</b>	<b>Yes/No Response</b>
Conservation of Natural Resources			
Awareness of Climate change			
Awareness of Pollution			
Sustainability and Prevention			
Organic Food Production			
Biodiversity Conservation			
Green and Renewable Technology			
Reforestation and Habitat Restoration			
<b>Economic Conditions</b>	<b>Yes/No Response</b>	<b>Yes/No Response</b>	<b>Yes/No Response</b>
Employment Generation			
Income Generation			
Economic Development			
Ecodevelopment Initiatives			
Entrepreneurship Development			
Economic Equity			
Employment Benefits			
Improvement of Infrastructure			
Raising Standard of Living			

### Section Three: Elements of Transformative Tourism

4. Does your business operate in support of green efforts, sustainability, public involvement, conservation, and/or education? When and why did you begin this type of operation? Briefly explain.
5. Does your business operate to provide your clients with self-transformation, self-development, self-improvement, self-fulfilment, and self-realization experiences? Are there any other transformative experiences that you incorporated? When and why did you begin this orientation?
6. Did you and why did you develop products and services that would allow your clients to learn something new; have a reflective moment; solve a challenge; provide a new perspective; discover a passion; change ones lifestyle; reflect on oneself; and being true to oneself?
7. If there is anything else that you would like share with us, please feel free to include it in the space provided below. We will have additional questions next time we meet on a Zoom session. Please email us your times and days when you are available to meet on Zoom. We will be asking additional questions that will be specific to the nature and the character of your entrepreneurial business. We will also be ready to answer any questions you have for us.

Thank you again for contributing to our research on female entrepreneurship in the Polish tourism industry. Your collaboration is greatly appreciated. We will share the results of our study once they are available.

to themselves. Female entrepreneurs confirmed that self-transformation, self-development, self-improvement, self-fulfilment, or self-realization offered through their services and products guaranteed enjoyment for their clients, who keep returning to enjoy and learn something new again. Those results are in support of the earlier studies conducted by Maskay (2000).

Entrepreneurs work under the constraints of their environments. Our examination has identified priority areas for strengthening the industry. Success and economic growth require competitive consumer-based services and products that are produced with the objective of physical and emotional health, and which support sustainability and biodiversity conservation and conservation of natural resources. Development of transformative, sustainable, health/well-being, and ecotourism characteristics contributed to employee and customer satisfaction, created a welcoming environment, and supported a sense of community, especially during the challenging economic times of the 2009 recession and later after the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents' orientation towards transformative, sustainable, health/well-being, and ecotourism promoted a climate of respect for the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities and preservation of their cultural and traditional values as well as ecological orientation and preservation of natural resources. Those results have been confirmed by the work produced by Kim et al. (2013), Kim et al. (2019), Jalani (2012), Wunder (2000), Nyaupane and Poudel (2011), and Gyan and Nyaupane (2011), as discussed in the literature review.

Overcoming challenges of changing economic conditions made these women become resilient and determined to preserve their community's heritage, culture, and natural environment, as well as their own lifestyle. Their resilience, dedication, and hard work reaffirmed belief in their local communities, enabling them to grow and maintain their operation, especially during the challenges and difficulties encountered during the first years of their operations, the great recession, and later during the COVID-19 pandemic. Primary factors that contributed to their success include creatively, tolerance for risk, responsiveness to opportunities, and leadership that appreciates and cares for

its creative, loyal, and productive employees and the ability to take advantage of the specific characteristics of their natural, cultural, and historical elements.

The majority of tourism policies are primarily oriented towards increasing economic benefits, attracting profitable visitors, and targeting tourism market share, with limited environmental and social sustainability measures in place to mitigate negative tourism impacts. Respondents believe transformative, sustainable, health/well-being, and ecotourism ought to be allowed to expand without any regulatory or policy impediments, so that socio-cultural pillars of sustainability can be maintained. Policymakers could provide incentives to promote sustainability. Successful policies would lead to expanded business activity, creating value for a wider range of clients. Local authorities could pursue economic and tax incentives to improve, promote and encourage development of new entrepreneurial activities.

However, the results presented in this study indicate that entrepreneurial development continues to be hindered by fast-changing business conditions, increasing competitiveness, new rules and requirements imposed by the local authorities and the national government that includes new accounting standards, tax systems, more competitive economic conditions, and policies that required them and their employees to obtain new entrepreneurial and business skills. The unavailability of low-cost financing to female entrepreneurs seems to be the most frequently mentioned burden in growing and operating small tourist firms. Those results are consistent with Zapalska's research results (Zapalska et al., 2004; Zapalska et al., 2007; Zapalska et al., 2015).

There are several lessons learned from this research regarding practical approaches to managing small female-operated firms in the tourism and hospitality industry. The first lesson that we have learned is that small firms in the tourism and hospitality industry must focus on products and services that are trendy and meet the expectations of the consumers. The trends are changing as the environmental, economic, and political elements are altering, producing new challenges. Therefore, to be successful, entrepreneurship in small sectors of tourism and hospita-

lity must be vigilant to changes and up to date with what tourists need and cannot receive from the large franchise-based industry. Our second practical lesson learned is that tourism is moving towards sustainability, ecological, well-being, and cultural products and services. Today, tourists want to learn and see the preservation of culture, traditions, and healthy practices that contribute to improving the wellness and well-being of our communities. Third, due to increasing competitive pressures from the large sector, this paper recommends that small entrepreneurial firms should continue focusing on supporting economic growth, employment, and sustainability of the local communities while at the same time maintaining loyalty to their employees' needs and customers' interests.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings, and future studies should also consider those limitations. One of the most critical shortcomings of this research is that it relies on a small sample of respondents, and therefore the approach is limited in terms of examination and obtaining more concrete and extensive assessments. Moreover, contrasting operations of female- versus male-owned and operated small entrepreneurial firms in the tourism and hospitality industry would allow us to obtain a better understanding of how women significantly contribute to this sector of the economy. More research on the tourism and hospitality industry in Poland and other regions of the Central and Eastern Europe is needed and should focus on examining the regulatory environment and its impact on innovative strategies that are critical to strengthening entrepreneurial growth. The authors hope that this paper will develop more interest in addressing the problems faced by small entrepreneurial firms operated by female entrepreneurs in the tourism and hospitality industry as the benefits from those firms to their local communities have been extensive and significantly appreciated by the local communities, employees, and tourists.

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