

“Tourism and hospitality industry: A case study of Polish female firms”

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TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: A CASE STUDY OF POLISH FEMALE FIRMS

Abstract

The objective was to identify the firms' short-run and long-run strategies that contributed to firms' development, job creation and economic growth of local economies, and employees' and customers' satisfaction across all Butler's stages of development. The results indicate that the firms have been successful supporting environmental sustainability, conservation of natural resources, and protection of cultural elements of local communities. During the Covid-19 shutdown, the female entrepreneurs assessed past strategies, invested in development and production of new and better-quality products and services, advanced employees' and entrepreneurial skills, and transformation of digital and production infrastructure. The study identified the importance of government policies critical for entrepreneurship success, particularly during global crises. The paper illustrates several lessons focused specifically on fostering a supportive work environment that enables firms to endure through and successfully recover from market shocks or global crises. The study concludes that all female entrepreneurs were experienced, motivated, visionary, goal-oriented, and innovative regarding their entrepreneurial undertakings while focusing on understanding the needs and maximizing employee and customer satisfaction. The resiliency they developed enabled them to stay focused on their goals and maintain successful operations while facing insufficient financial and non-financial support, market challenges, and global crises.

Keywords

tourism industry, women entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial ecosystem, growth, development, exogenous shock, short-run and long-run strategies

JEL Classification

Z30, Z39, L26, M12

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the world's most important economic sectors providing entrepreneurial opportunities for women, Indigenous peoples, and many businesses operating in rural communities as well as historically and environmentally protected locations. The Covid-19 pandemic produced a wide array of unique and fundamental challenges in hospitality and tourism services (Fernandes, 2020), while other industries were able to adapt to digital platforms and continue their struggle for survival through remote operations (Korinth & Ranasinghe, 2020). Consequently, it is vital to understand the challenges faced by entrepreneurial businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry and to examine the strategies undertaken to overcome challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Poland has been regarded as a leader in the process of economic transformation and stimulation of regional and local development, contributing to the expansion of entrepreneurship and employment opportunities, especially those owned and operated in the tourism and hospitality industry (OECD, 2016; Kosmaczewska, 2007; Turystyka 2020, 2011; Kruczek, 2010). In particular, Polish female entrepreneurs in tourism and hospitality industry have been recognized for significant contributions to the country's economic prosperity and high levels of employment despite the challenges they overcame (Zienkowski, 2000; Zapalska & Brozik, 2015; Zapalska & Wingrove-Haugland, 2018).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, numerous scholars have developed different models to study entrepreneurship (Ramadani et al., 2015), indicating that numerous factors affect development and growth of entrepreneurial businesses (Dragnić, 2014; Matyusz et al., 2012; Ramadani et al., 2015). In particular, organizational life cycle and stages of development models analyze the entrepreneurial process based on stages of internal and external characteristics and various problems encountered by entrepreneurial firms over time (Simmonds, 2014; Phelps et al., 2007). The life-cycle models support that firms pass through a sequence of development stages where each stage produces unique problems and challenges, while progressing to the next stage is highly dependent on how successful the firm was in addressing the issues in the previous stage (Zapalska & Wingrove-Haugland, 2018). Kazanjian and Drazin (1990) contended that at start-up, entrepreneurial firms focus on identifying and evaluating perceived opportunities and innovating to bring resources together and to form new productive processes. Once an entrepreneurial firm is formed, the entrepreneurial process becomes effective in a cyclical progression of opportunities and development of various forms of entrepreneurship (V. Ratten & H. Ratten, 2007).

All firms face challenges that affect firm performance throughout all stages of development and growth. The most common problems include lack of funding, experience, accounting, managerial, and technological skills, and low levels of labor productivity (Zapalska et al., 2003). Mair and Marti (2009) indicated the importance of both government and financial sector policies supporting entrepreneurial activities as they play a critical role in attaining sustained rises in economic growth, employment, and living standards. Dragnić (2014) argued that government policies support larger businesses rather than smaller entrepreneurial firms, stressing that large and politically well-connected enterprises have experienced better access to governmental assistance and financial sector's services. Zapalska et al. (2017) and Zapalska and Brozik (2018) argued that as the entrepreneurial culture influences entrepreneurship development

and growth, the levels of entrepreneurship may vary across countries due to cultural differences, making entrepreneurship for females less attractive and rewarding.

Models of organizational life cycles and stages of development indicate the types of business problems firms confront over time and assert that each stage of development has problems and challenges that can be internal or external to the firm (Kazanjian & Drazin, 1990; Gripa & de Carvalho, 2020). Most of those models do not study the impact of crises, such as climate change, wars, pandemics, or terrorist attacks, on entrepreneurial processes. In contrast, Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model (Butler, 1980) recognizes the advancement of the industry through seven stages of tourism area evolution, including exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline, and rejuvenation. This model has been regularly applied in research examinations as it represents an excellent framework for analyzing the tourism and hospitality industry, specifically in the stage of Decline (Butler, 2010; Hwang, 2017) that can be produced by external shocks, such as climate change, wars, terrorism, or pandemic.

The goal of this paper is to contribute to the entrepreneurship literature by identifying characteristics and successful strategies in the tourism and hospitality industry across seven distinct stages defined by Butler, with every stage facing its own challenges. The study highlights the importance of resilience and innovative strategies that enable firms to respond to setbacks, failures, and external shocks, focusing on the strategies applied during the Covid-19 pandemic. Resilience is an essential trait for entrepreneurs to overcome challenges, recover, move forward, and become ready to confront forthcoming external shocks (Sachdev, 2023). The goal is also to understand the needs of entrepreneurial firms and what firms' strategies and government programs can be effective in case of future external shock or global shutdown.

This paper examines 10 small female-owned firms operating in the Southern regions of Poland within the tourism and hospitality industry to identify the major firms' characteristics and factors that have promoted and inhibited the growth of those businesses. This paper examines the strate-

gies undertaken by those 10 female entrepreneurs as female entrepreneurs generally experience more challenging entrepreneurial processes while their entrepreneurial ingenuity and success are not equally recognized as their male counterparts (Zapalska et al., 2003).

2. METHODS

Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle model is implemented to analyze entrepreneurship processes throughout various stages of entrepreneurial development, growth, and operation. The Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle model is applied to identify entrepreneurial characteristics and strategies critical to firms’ success prior to, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic shutdown. Several interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2023 with ten Polish female entrepreneurs who own small family firms that operate in tourism and hospitality industry. To identify factors that provided challenges or contributed to firms’ success, the paper utilizes the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, consisting of six factors leading to entrepreneurial success or decline of the industry. The following factors were incorporated: government policies and procedures; socioeconomic conditions; entrepreneurial and business skills; financial assistance; non-financial assistance; external shocks and crises;

financial assistance; non-financial assistance; and external shocks and crisis. They were built into seven stages of the Tourism Area Life Cycle to illustrate the levels of tourism and hospitality firms’ progress and advancement over time as proposed by Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle model (Butler, 1980). The graphical presentation of the proposed framework appears to be one-dimensional, but in fact, given how the questionnaire was developed and the data were collected and analyzed around this proposed framework, it reflects the multilevel integration of environmental factors affecting entrepreneurship success across all stages of Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle model.

As it is a complex and challenging task to quantify the impact of different factors, including the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, across the tourism and hospitality industry, this paper utilizes examples of female entrepreneurial firms operating in the Southern region of Poland. To complete this research, the interviews were conducted with 10 female entrepreneurs who manage small, family-owned and operated entrepreneurial businesses, with less than 30 employees. All firms’ contact information was provided by the tax offices in 2015. The analysis was undertaken to examine numerous factors affecting firms’ growth and especially analyzing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Source: Developed by the authors based on Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle Model.

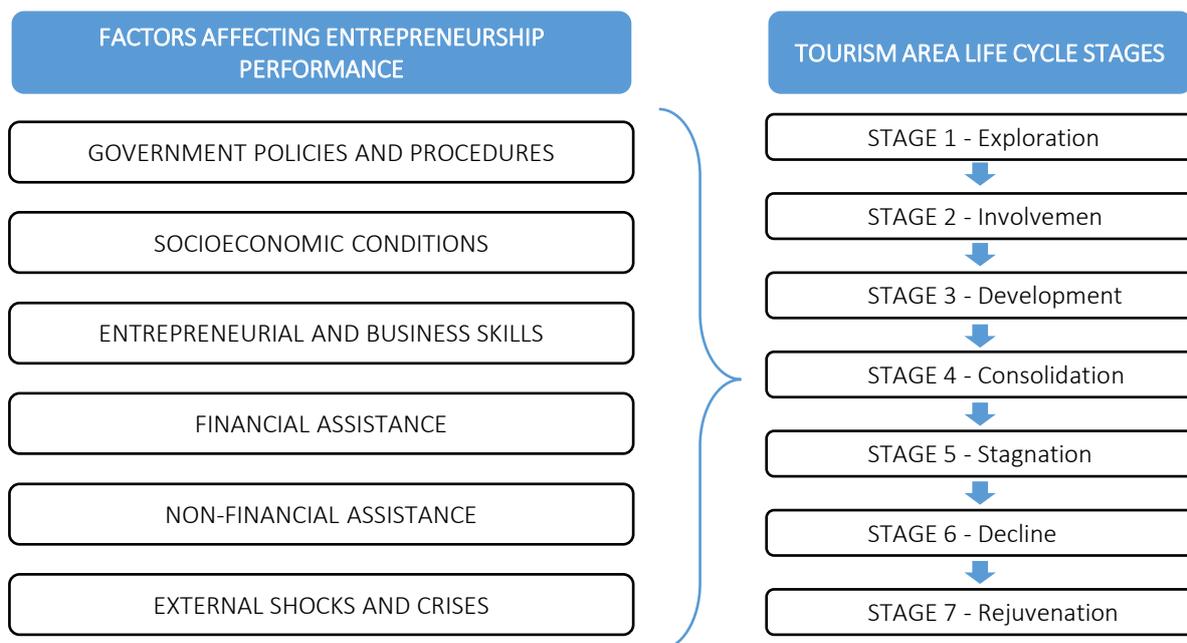


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for analyzing entrepreneurship growth and development

The data were collected through email interviews conducted in 2015, 2017, and 2022, and the meetings organized via Microsoft Teams in 2022 and 2023. All 10 selected entrepreneurs positively responded to the invitation and agreed, under confidentiality, to share their success stories based on their operations.

The questionnaire included queries regarding the size and type of operation, business objectives, level of employment, financial and non-financial assistance desired and received, entrepreneurial and business skills, socioeconomic conditions, taxation and other policies, and external shocks and crises over all the years of firms' operations. The purpose was to collect information regarding critical ecosystem domains contributing to the understanding regarding critical ecosystem domains, entrepreneurial satisfaction, and concerns with ecosystem domains within Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle Model. Respondents were asked to identify short-run and long-run strategies undertaken across the seven Tourism Area Life Cycle stages.

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework demonstrating the short-run versus the long-run entrepreneurial growth and development across seven stages of Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model. The firms' short-run strategies are intend-

ed to maintain the levels of production upward and around trend line 1 as the firms continue production toward reaching Stage 5 – Stagnation. In the short run, firms adjust strategies to prevent their operation from falling below trend line 1 but maintaining it toward and finally reaching Stage 5 – Stagnation. When an external shock arrives, the firms end up at Stage 6 – Decline and, at that time, they must assess market conditions and undertake strategies to bring production levels back to the original trend line 1 and to end up at Stage 7 – Rejuvenation. The long-run strategies tend to move the firms' operation to a higher production level as illustrated by a shift from trend line 1 to trend line 2. Table 2 summarizes the short-run and long-run strategies examined in this paper.

3. RESULTS

The study analyzes selected characteristics of 10 Polish entrepreneurial firms operating in the tourism and hospitality industry that were investigated (Table 1). The firms are small, with less than 30 employees, owned and operated by educated females with more than two decades of business experience. Six respondents have undergraduate college or technical education, while four graduated from college with a graduate diploma. Respondents indicated that

Source: Developed by the authors based on Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle Model.

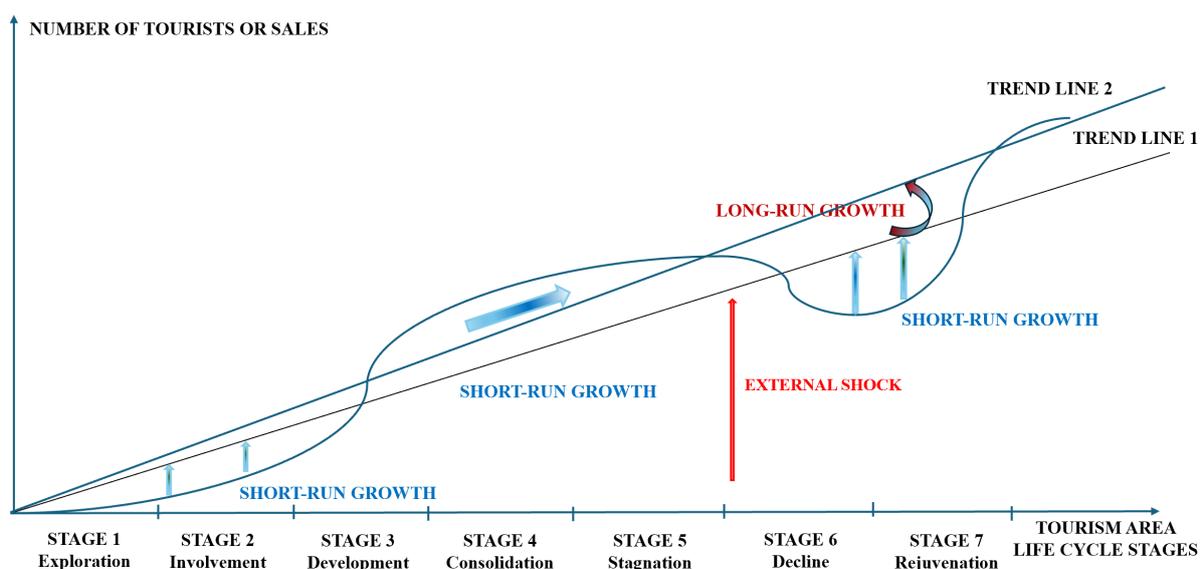


Figure 2. Conceptual framework for analyzing strategies for entrepreneurial growth and development in the short-run versus in the long-run approach

the changes in tourists' and market orientations, economic pressures, climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected the firms' goals and strategies. The firms have been committed to providing employment and economic prosperity to their families and local communities while serving both domestic and international tourists. Firms operate in a big city, small town, suburban area, or in a country and have been geared toward domestic and international visitors who are educated, health-oriented, and interested in experiencing the cultural and natural environments.

As the firms were developing and consolidating, they increasingly focused on offering products and services that supported educational transformation, well-being, and health of their clients, preserved cultural elements of their local communities, and contributed to the conservation of natural resources. The firms' operations focused on a wide variety of services and products, such as agrotourism, ecotourism, bed and breakfast, café, art and culture-based activities, wellness, health, and services, holistic medical tourism and cultural and recreation tourism activities.

Based on Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model and the responses provided, all firms have been successful with their operations as, at some point, reaching Stage 5 – Stagnation. Moreover, respondents indicated that even though their operations reached Stage 5 – Stagnation, they continued growing and innovating to compete

with bigger firms and to ensure that their products and services were modified to reflect the changes in market trends and customers' demand. Therefore, in some years, their operations returned to Stage 4 – Consolidation and then Stage 5 – Stagnation. However, their operations reached Stage 6 – Decline when the Polish Ministry of Health declared the Covid-19 pandemic and fully shut down the economy on March 20, 2020. However, the firms recovered quickly, reaching Stage 6 – Rejuvenation by the end of 2022. All firms confirmed that the Covid-19 pandemic was the most devastating exogenous shock they had ever encountered, which adversely affected their operations, placing them into Stage 6 – Decline.

Table 1 recaps the firms' total numbers of services in the pre-Covid-19 pandemic levels in 2019 and the post-Covid-19 pandemic levels in 2023. Both domestic and international sales increased in 2023 above the 2019 pre-Covid-19 levels despite the complete shutdown of the industry from 2020 to 2022. Those results demonstrate the firms' successful and fast recovery in both domestic and international services.

Table 2 summarizes positive responses regarding short-run and long-run strategies undertaken between Stages 1 and 5 (prior to the 2020 pre-Covid-19 pandemic), at Stage 6 (during the Covid-19 pandemic between 2020–2022), and Stage 7 (starting July 2023 when the state of epidemic emergency officially ended, and the firms fully reopened their services).

Table 1. Basic characteristics of 10 entrepreneurial firms

Source: Developed by the authors based on the interview responses conducted between 2015 and 2023.

Type of Business	Years in Service 2023	Location 2023	Total Numbers of Services (% of international services)	
			2019	2023
Art Gallery and Studio	28	City	19,107 (19%)	21,203 (21%)
Beauty Salon and Wellness Spa	38	City	10,150 (5%)	10,557 (6%)
Agrotourism Bed and Breakfast	33	Country	402 (2%)	423 (3%)
The Eco-Farm and Guesthouse	24	Suburb	1,595 (11%)	1,702 (15%)
The Health and Spa Guesthouse	26	Suburb	1,760 (20%)	1,802 (22%)
Horseback Riding Farm	31	Country	961 (2%)	1,006 (10%)
The Café Shop and Holistic Services	29	Small town	70,567 (12%)	71,602 (14%)
Holistic and Medical Services	25	Small town	4,203 (20%)	4,389 (21%)
Horses in the Wilderness Tourism	38	Suburb	1,200 (30%)	1,340 (40%)
The Pottery House	37	Small town	12,568 (11%)	13,040 (18%)

Table 2. Positive responses for firms’ short-run and long-run strategies and goals across seven stages of Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle Model

Source: Developed by the authors based on the interview responses conducted between 2015 and 2023.

Type of Strategies and Goals	Stages and Positive Responses						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Short-run Strategies							
Adjust the number of customers	0	10	10	10	10	10	10
Adjust the number of employees	0	10	10	10	10	10	10
Inventory increase	0	10	10	10	10	10	10
Improve customers satisfaction	0	0	0	10	10	10	10
Improve employee satisfaction	0	0	0	10	10	10	10
Quality assurance and market trend	0	10	10	10	10	10	10
Involve employees in decision- making	0	0	0	0	0	10	10
Long-run Strategies							
Develop new products and services	0	10	10	10	10	10	10
Develop new marketing tools	0	10	10	10	10	10	10
Digital and infrastructure transformation	0	0	0	10	10	10	10
Business and organizational model innovation	0	0	0	10	10	10	10
Increase firm’s competitive advantage	0	10	10	10	10	10	10
Improve employees’ skills and attitudes	0	10	10	10	10	10	10
Improve entrepreneurship skills	0	10	10	10	10	10	10

Respondents’ evaluation of entrepreneurial ecosystem domains whether critical, satisfactory, or of concern across all stages of Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle model are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Positive responses regarding respondents’ perceptions on the entrepreneurial ecosystem domains across seven stages of Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle Model

Source: Developed by the authors based on the interview responses conducted between 2015 and 2023.

Ecosystem Domain	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
CRITICAL ECOSYSTEM DOMAINS							
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
External Shocks and Crisis	10	10	10	0	0	10	10
SATISFACTION WITH ECOSYSTEM DOMAINS							
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

Ecosystem Domain	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Financial Assistance	0	0	3	4	0	0	0
Non-Financial Assistance	0	0	7	7	0	0	0
External Shocks and Crisis	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CONCERNS WITH ECOSYSTEM DOMAINS							
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
External Shocks and Crisis	10	10	10	10	10	10	10

4. DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that all respondents are educated, experienced, and successful. The strategies they selected permitted them to overcome challenges and exogenous shocks throughout all seven stages of operation defined by Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle model. Table 2 lists the most critical short-run and long-run strategies selected, indicating that the firms’ strategies have been consistent across all respondents and all seven stages. In the short run, the firms focused on adjusting the numbers of customers, employees, and inventory levels as needed, stressing quality assurance, and improving employees’ and entrepreneurial skills. Those strategies allowed the firms to first operate below trend line 1 at Stages 1-3 and then reach operation level above trend line 1 from Stage 3 – Development to Stage 5 – Stagnation. The long-term strategies, such as investing in employees’ and entrepreneurial skills, new products, services, infrastructure, and marketing tools, enabled firms to reach a higher level of production and productivity, as presented by the production level along trend line 2.

Respondents also indicated that they assessed their strategies to adjust production levels and avoid reaching Stage 6 – Decline, in particular, during the great recession of 2007 or other market downturns they faced over the years. Unfortunately, they could not prevent their firms from reaching Stage 6 – Decline due to the Covid-19 pandemic shutdown. During that shutdown, the firms did not entirely stop their operations, but they effectively utilized free time to assess the past market trends and the strategies they selected and utilized. They also worked on improving employees and entrepreneurial skills, investing in new technology and in-

frastructure, adopting new marketing techniques, increasing inventories, and organizing production processes to ensure their firms were ready to begin their operations when the economy reopened. Respondents indicated that exercising caring leadership and involvement of employees in assessment and decision-making were effective, enabling everyone to emotionally survive and contribute to the post-Covid-19 recovery and reach Stage 7 – Rejuvenation as soon as the economy reopened.

As reported in Table 3, respondents found that all ecosystem domains were “critical” to the firms’ success, while only socioeconomic conditions were “satisfactory” across all stages of firms’ operations. High levels of “concerns” were placed on financial assistance, non-financial assistance, and external shocks and crises across all stages. The absence of financial mechanisms to provide financial assistance across all stages possibly prevented all firms from obtaining the most desirable production levels to meet market demand and trends. However, their family and personal savings provided financial assistance that enabled firms’ unprecedented development and growth. Respondents indicated that the first years of operation were tough, but as the Polish economy moved into the market-based economy, their businesses were able to develop and grow despite limited financial resources and assistance programs provided to their firms.

The external shocks have been considered “critical” and “concerns” in the ecosystem domains across all stages defined by Butler’s model. Table 3 confirms high dissatisfaction with government policies during all years of operations and especially during the economic and political transition from central planning to the market economy, the financial crisis of 2007, and the Covid-19 pandemic. No single respondent indicated a satisfactory level of local government support or the EU policy related to environmental factors allowing counterbalancing those external shocks. Those results are unsur-

prising as female-operated small firms in the tourism and hospitality industry have historically been disregarded by governmental assistance programs and policies, as reported by Zapalska and Brozik (2015) and Korinth and Ranasinghe (2020).

The other greatest hurdle to firms’ development and growth was linked to an elevated level of taxation and a lack of access to non-financial assistance across all stages of operation. Respondents indicated that higher levels of assistance were granted to males who operated in the construction or manufacturing sector. Despite those difficulties, respondents survived due to their resiliency and entrepreneurial skills that enabled them to create novel ideas regarding business directions, goals, and strategies. They all took advantage of the social, historical, and cultural characteristics and natural elements of their local economies to meet new tourism trends and market expectations, which led to the firms’ astonishing growth and success.

Respondents also indicated they had to be innovative, optimistic, proactive, disciplined, motivated, decisive, and empathetic. They had goals, vision, passion, and understanding of the needs of their clients and market trends. Their entrepreneurial resilience allowed them to adapt and recover from setbacks and challenges they encountered. They had to learn how to endure difficulties to survive and achieve both short-term and long-term success. They indicated the importance of developing mental toughness, pushing forward toward achieving goals, and possessing determination to keep going to compete in a male and big firm-dominated market. It is also critical to handle challenges and setbacks and use them as opportunities to learn and grow. The ability to bounce back from failure or keep pushing during crises is what sets successful entrepreneurs apart from those who give up during times of crisis and hardships. The combination of all those characteristics helped respondents to overcome obstacles and achieve success.

CONCLUSION

The primary goal of this study was to identify the characteristics of 10 small female-owned entrepreneurial firms operating in the tourism and hospitality industry in the Southern region of Poland. The paper also examined factors and strategies that affected firms’ growth and develop-

ment across seven stages of operations identified by Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model. The interviews were conducted via email correspondence and online interviews with 10 female entrepreneurs between 2015 and 2023.

The research results indicate that 10 female entrepreneurs were experienced and successful. Their operations focused on offering products and services based on the country's natural, ecological, well-being, historical, and cultural elements and generating economic growth and employment within their local economies. Their entrepreneurial operations were hindered by several factors, especially by the unavailability of non-financial and financing assistance, adequate government policies, and other supportive programs, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Entrepreneurial strategies were intelligently analyzed, selected, and applied by all respondents and categorized as short-run and long-run. The short-run strategies included maintaining operational levels around trend line 1 by adjusting levels of employees and customers, increasing employee satisfaction, adjusting operations in response to market signals, and fulfilling clients' needs and satisfaction on a regular daily basis. The long-run strategies enabled firms to stay competitive, reach higher levels of operations, and continue operations along trend line 2 by responding to the changes in tourism trends and market dynamics by investing in new infrastructure, marketing, and employee training and entrepreneurial skills.

This paper highlights several conclusions. First, entrepreneurial growth can be attributed to innovative ideas, including delivering products and services based on preservation of cultural and historical elements, wellness and health of customers and conservation of natural resources. Second, government policies are critical for success regardless of firm type and scope, particularly during national or global crises. Third, it is imperative to provide support and an inclusive work environment to employees during crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, to contribute to employee satisfaction and firm survival. Fourth, it is vital to develop resiliency to allow entrepreneurs and employees to adapt to and recover from setbacks and challenges during trying times caused by market volatility or global crises. Entrepreneurs must advance emotional fortitude and resiliency to manage the ups and downs of firms' operations, make required changes, and when necessary, bounce back from failure or setbacks and keep pushing forward toward achievement of goals by utilizing the most effective short-run and long-run strategies.

This analysis has identified priority areas for strengthening female entrepreneurship in the tourism and hospitality industry. Similar examinations should be undertaken to further investigate the challenges that small female-run and operated businesses face, assess the importance of the regulatory policies and assistance programs that are needed to contribute to assisting those firms in crises and promoting further development and growth of small female-run and operated businesses within the tourism and hospitality industry.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Alina M. Zapalska.

Data curation: Alina M. Zapalska.

Formal analysis: Alina M. Zapalska.

Investigation: Alina M. Zapalska, Robin McCutcheon.

Methodology: Alina M. Zapalska.

Resources: Alina M. Zapalska.

Visualization: Alina M. Zapalska, Robin McCutcheon.

Writing – original draft: Alina M. Zapalska.

Writing – review & editing: Robin McCutcheon.

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