

Financial Resources and Challenges in Pilates Studio Management: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Study aim(s): This study aims to explore the financial resources and challenges faced by Pilates studio businesses, which have gained popularity due to the growing interest in body-mind focused exercise and healthy living. The research seeks to provide insights and strategic recommendations to enhance the financial sustainability of boutique fitness enterprises.

Methods: Based on the type of data, a qualitative research design was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 Pilates studio owners from various districts in Istanbul. Thematic content analysis was used to identify core financial themes and operational concerns from the participants' narratives.

Results: The analysis revealed several significant financial challenges, including high rental and location costs, expensive equipment procurement and maintenance, rising instructor salaries, and complex legal and tax obligations. Participants also identified issues such as economic instability, seasonal fluctuations in customer numbers, and the negative financial impact of pandemic-related closures. Key success factors highlighted were customer retention, a strong brand identity, and long-term marketing strategies.

Conclusions: The study offers practical implications for studio managers, entrepreneurs, and policymakers by addressing the financial challenges specific to Pilates studios. Contributing to the sports management literature, it highlights the need for adaptive strategies to support the long-term viability of small-scale fitness businesses.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Sustainability, Wellness, Regulation, Training

INTRODUCTION

The global shift in health perceptions has prompted individuals to engage not only in preventive healthcare practices but also in physical activities aimed at enhancing overall quality of life. Recent research indicates that the increasing emphasis on wellness culture in urban societies has expanded the role of personalized exercise routines within preventive health strategies [1]. Within this context, the Pilates method has gained significant attention due to its focus on posture, breathing, core strength, and body–mind integration. Originally developed as a rehabilitative exercise, Pilates has rapidly expanded in Turkey, becoming a lifestyle choice especially among urban, educated, and health-conscious individuals. In their regional study, Gedik and Yıldız noted a sharp increase in Pilates studio registrations in metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, reflecting the method's growing popularity among urban populations [4]. The boutique structure and personalized service model of Pilates studios distinguish them from traditional fitness centers in both economic and managerial aspects. Unlike conventional gyms, boutique studios require a more individualized managerial approach, with owners often assuming multiple roles such as trainer, marketer, and financial planner [9].

Despite this growing interest in Pilates, academic research in Turkey's sports management literature has largely concentrated on public sports facilities and state-funded fitness programs. Likewise, studies have highlighted that private-sector fitness models have received limited scholarly attention, despite their increasing economic impact in Turkey's urban centers [2]. This gap indicates the need for further studies focusing on the entrepreneurial, managerial, and financial aspects of boutique fitness businesses.

In parallel, recent empirical research has shown that Pilates contributes not only to physical

wellness but also to psychological well-being. For instance, regular participation in reformer Pilates sessions has been found to significantly increase both life satisfaction and physical activity levels among sedentary women in Turkey [7]. These findings further emphasize the relevance and potential of Pilates as an integrative health practice within urban wellness culture.

This qualitative study aims to analyze the financial challenges and sustainability of Pilates studios in Turkey by focusing on the perspectives of studio owners. Building on the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke, the study employs thematic analysis to reveal both structural and strategic insights from the lived experiences of studio owners [1].

METHODS

Research design

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design to explore the financial resources and challenges faced by Pilates studio managers. Qualitative research facilitates an in-depth understanding of phenomena by revealing participants' experiences, perceptions, and perspectives in a holistically. As noted by Yıldırım and Şimşek, qualitative designs are particularly effective in understanding socially constructed meanings through participants' lived experiences [18].

A semi-structured in-depth interview technique was employed, allowing for data collection through pre-determined questions while maintaining flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses. According to Kümbetoğlu, semi-structured interviews strike an ideal balance between consistency and adaptability, making them highly effective for exploring complex social and managerial issues [source to be numbered if added to your list].

Supporting this approach, Skinner, Edwards, and Smith highlight that qualitative research has become increasingly vital in sport management studies, especially for uncovering nuanced stakeholder perspectives and contextual insights that quantitative methods cannot capture [15].

Study sample

The study sample comprised 15 Pilates studio owners operating in various districts of Istanbul, Turkey. Participants were selected using the maximum variation sampling method to ensure diversity in studio size, location, and organizational structure. This sampling technique is frequently used in qualitative research to capture a broad range of perspectives from diverse participants [12].

Data collections tools

Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researcher. The form included questions on the studio's establishment process, financial resources, challenges, income-expense balance, client retention, marketing strategies, and legal obligations. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1. Demographic and Professional Profiles of the Pilates Studio Owners in the Sample Group

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Educational Status	District	Experience	Active / Passive
P1	36	Female	Married	Bachelor's	Kadıköy	8 Years	Active
P2	35	Female	Single	Bachelor's	Beylikdüzü	6 Years	Active
P3	35	Female	Single	Master's	Ataşehir	8 Years	Passive
P4	34	Female	Married	Bachelor's	Başakşehir	4 Years	Active
P5	32	Female	Single	Bachelor's	Üsküdar	3 Years	Active
P6	37	Female	Single	Bachelor's	Beşiktaş	9 Years	Active
P7	31	Female	Married	Bachelor's	Maltepe	2 Years	Active
P8	36	Female	Single	High School	Ümraniye	2 Years	Active
P9	34	Female	Single	Bachelor's	Ataköy	2 Years	Active
P10	36	Female	Single	Bachelor's	Tuzla	4 Years	Active

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to examine the qualitative data, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) identification of themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report [1]. Braun and Clarke's approach is widely adopted in the social sciences due to its clarity and adaptability across disciplines.

In line with this approach, Düzgün applied thematic analysis in his research on fitness business models in Turkey, and emphasized its effectiveness organizing and interpreting complex field data within the context of sports business management [2].

The results were categorized into five main themes, identified through a data-driven coding process:

1. Income Sources
2. Expense Items
3. Rental and Spatial Challenges
4. Customer Retention and Marketing
5. Tax and Legal Obligations

P11	37	Female	Single	Master's	Kadıköy	8 Years	Active
P12	28	Male	Single	Bachelor's	Kartal	2 Years	Active
P13	34	Female	Married	Bachelor's	Sancaktepe	1 Year	Active
P14	30	Female	Married	Bachelor's	Üsküdar	2 Years	Active
P15	40	Male	Single	Bachelor's	Kadıköy	5 Years	Active

This table presents the demographic and professional profiles of the 15 Pilates studio owners who participated in the study. Participant codes (P1–P15) are used to maintain anonymity. The variables include age, gender, marital status, educational background, studio location district, years of experience, and current activity status.

Regarding income sources, Pilates studios maintain income through package sales, private sessions, online classes, and additional services such as nutrition or yoga. These diverse streams help improve cash flow and enhance client satisfaction. Long-term packages with upfront payments were noted as especially beneficial.

P1: “Flexible membership options allow us to reach different client groups.”

P11: “Online sessions helped me reach students in other cities and countries.”

P12: “We don’t just offer Pilates; we promote a lifestyle.”

P2: “Locating the studio inside a sports club reduced rent and brought a steady client base.”

Expense Items such as rent, equipment, instructor wages, and marketing were the most frequently mentioned costs. High rents, especially in central locations, significantly limit profitability.

P1: “Rent is our biggest concern; it never stops rising.”

P6: “Imported Pilates equipment is costly and requires constant maintenance.”

P7: “Qualified instructors come with higher pay expectations.”

Promotional expenses were also significant:

P9: “Social media visibility requires continuous investment.”

P12: “Brand building is just as important as having equipment.”

Regarding the Rental and Spatial Challenges, many owners faced difficulties securing affordable, regulation-compliant spaces. Annual rent increases and legal regulations (e.g., fire exits) further complicated the process.

P9: “Rent increases by at least 50% a year—it’s overwhelming.”

P4: “We shut down due to rising costs and lack of summer clientele.”

P13: “Complying with safety regulations delayed our licensing.”

Customer retention and marketing, maintaining loyal clients remains an ongoing challenge. Studios employ personalized attention, free trials, and loyalty perks to encourage consistent participation.

P7: “Pilates is a long-term process; some clients give up early.”

P8: “Introductory sessions help demonstrate real benefits.”

P7: “Referrals from happy clients are my strongest marketing tool.”

Digital platforms are essential but demanding.

P9: “Instagram is a full-time job if you want growth.”

P5: “We’re trainers, not marketers; we need training on branding.”

Fixed taxes during low-income periods and complex licensing requirements were widely criticized by participants.

P9: “I pay taxes every month, even without revenue.”

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the financial sustainability of Pilates studios in Istanbul through in-depth interviews with 15 studio owners. Thematic analysis revealed five primary themes: income sources, expense items, rental and spatial challenges, customer retention and marketing, and tax and legal obligations. These themes reflect the structural and operational dynamics shaping the business continuity of Pilates studios within Turkey's urban fitness sector. The findings are interpreted here in relation to existing literature.

One of the most prominent findings of this research is the centrality of income diversification in ensuring business resilience. Studio owners frequently emphasized that revenue from multiple channels — such as private sessions, package memberships, online classes, and complementary services — enhances financial flexibility. These findings align with Sharma and Singh [14], who demonstrated that virtual fitness programs became a sustained behavior pattern following the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Kumru and Kasımoğlu [8] emphasized the strategic importance of digitalization and online services as permanent business models rather than temporary adaptations. This study also supports the claim by Ramazanoğlu and Öcalan [13] that sports enterprises should extend beyond physical training to offer

P3: “VAT should be lower—sports is education too.”

P1: “Regulations should reflect our business size and realities.”

Unlicensed studios were reported to damage fair competition and service quality.

These findings illustrate the financial, spatial, and regulatory pressures shaping the management of Pilates studios in urban Turkey.

holistic well-being services, including nutrition counseling and mental wellness. Participants such as P11 reported marketing Pilates as a lifestyle, reflecting the growing integration of wellness culture into fitness services.

The study participants consistently reported that major expense categories—rent, instructor salaries, equipment purchases, and digital marketing — heavily impact their financial planning. Gedik [4] identifies high urban rent as one of the most significant fixed costs for studio operators, a finding confirmed by multiple narratives in this study. Post-pandemic rent increases have further exacerbated these operational burdens. Oğrak et al. [11] also documented that SMEs — especially in service industries — face low profit margins due to rising fixed costs, a challenge echoed in this study. Instructor salaries were identified as a non-negotiable expense, closely tied to the quality of service provided. Gümüş [5] emphasizes that qualified personnel are directly correlated with client retention, while Uyar [17] argues that pricing strategy and personnel capacity influence loyalty. Instructors' salaries — combined with tax and social security obligations — create a multi-layered financial pressure on studios. The financial strain caused by equipment purchases — mainly imported reformers, barrels, and Cadillacs — is consistent with the findings of Oğrak et al. [11] and Karataş Durmuş [6], both of

whom discuss how currency fluctuations and import dependency undermine the financial planning of small sports enterprises. As emphasized by P6, cost increases become especially unsustainable during periods of currency devaluation. Advertising and promotional expenses have also become essential, especially in digital formats. Gedik [4] and Yiğit et al. [20] both highlight that social media visibility and marketing are now indispensable for client acquisition. Participants such as P12 emphasized the return on investment in digital campaigns; however, some also expressed a lack of professional expertise, suggesting a gap in access to training and consultancy.

Securing affordable, regulation-compliant spaces emerged as one of the most significant challenges. P4 and P9 shared concrete examples of how rent increases and building limitations forced them to shut down or relocate. This aligns directly with Yıldız's [19] findings, which argue that inconsistencies and ambiguities in zoning and licensing regulations hinder entrepreneurship in the sports sector. Yıldız [19] also advocates for a sector-specific licensing framework to improve alignment between municipal regulations and the spatial realities of fitness studios. The experiences of P5 — who reported being unable to obtain a license due to the lack of a fire escape — reflect Durmuş's [6] argument that regulatory requirements often exceed the financial and spatial capacities of small enterprises. To overcome spatial limitations, studios have adopted adaptive strategies such as operating within larger sports centers or transitioning to hybrid (online and offline) models. Kumru and Kasımoğlu [8] identify such measures as indicators of managerial flexibility that support sustainability. The combination of physical limitations and high rent reaffirms the need for broader urban policy reform.

Participants viewed customer retention as central to financial stability, emphasizing personalized service, community building, and trust-based

relationships. Gümüş [5] and Uyar [17] both highlight that service quality, brand identity, and interpersonal engagement are fundamental to fostering long-term loyalty. The importance of creating a welcoming environment for clients was frequently mentioned by participants, such as P7. Word-of-mouth marketing remains one of the most effective tools, especially for boutique studios. This insight supports Ramazanoğlu and Öcalan's [13] view that emotional connection and a sense of belonging are key determinants of customer loyalty in sports enterprises. Digital marketing platforms such as Instagram and YouTube were widely utilized by participants. Gedik [4] highlights the ongoing shift from traditional to digital strategies, while Yiğit et al. [20] emphasize the impact of digital presence on consumer perceptions. Despite its significance, several participants reported difficulties related to content production, consistency, and technical skills, suggesting a growing need for sector-specific training.

One of the most burdensome aspects mentioned was the rigidity of tax obligations. Participants such as P9 and P3 reported having to pay VAT and monthly taxes regardless of their income flow. This aligns with Gedik [4] and Oğrak et al. [11], who emphasized that fixed tax obligations undermine the survival of small fitness enterprises, particularly during economic downturns. The literature suggests that tax incentives and tailored tax regulations could help ease this burden. Eğmir and Hazman [3] found that such policies increased compliance and reduced perceived tax stress among SMEs. This study confirms that similar mechanisms are urgently needed in the fitness sector. The difficulty of navigating licensing and regulatory requirements was another recurring theme. Yıldız [19] and Karataş Durmuş [6] both critique the lack of clarity and uniformity in sports facility licensing. Participants, such as P5, noted that even the minor infrastructural deficiencies—such as

the absence of an emergency exit, can delay or prevent full compliance.

Furthermore, the presence of unlicensed studios was perceived as detrimental to the integrity of the sector. Sunay and Kaya [16] emphasize that systemic regulatory gaps contribute to market inequality. Several participants noted that unlicensed operators gain an unfair advantage by avoiding taxes and inspections, thereby placing compliant studios at a disadvantage.

In light of these findings, it is evident that the sustainability of Pilates studios depends not only on managerial capacity and strategic planning but also on broader structural reforms. Internal mechanism such as income diversification, digital adaptation, and client loyalty play a critical role in are internal enhancing resilience. However, high fixed costs, rental volatility, regulatory burdens, and market inequities caused by unlicensed operators all demand policy-level intervention. The literature supports the view that combining internal adaptability with external support mechanisms is essential for ensuring long-term success in the boutique fitness industry. Regulatory harmonization, targeted tax reforms, access to professional consultancy services, and expanded training opportunities could significantly improve sustainability outcomes. In sum, the financial sustainability of Pilates studios in Istanbul reflects broader trends in small business management, urban regulation, and the economics of wellness. Continued interdisciplinary research is needed to expand on these insights and guide future policy and practice.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the financial sustainability of Pilates studios in Istanbul through in-depth interviews with 15 studio owners. Thematic analysis of the data revealed five interrelated factors influencing business resilience: income diversity, cost

management, spatial challenges, client retention, and regulatory obligations. The findings highlight that Pilates studios adopting diversified income models such as private sessions, long-term membership packages, online classes, and complementary wellness services like yoga and nutrition counseling, demonstrate greater resilience amid economic volatility and market competition. These diversified strategies not only provide financial security but also enhance client satisfaction and loyalty. However, rising fixed costs, particularly rent and instructor salaries remain significant obstacles to sustainability. In metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, rental expenses often exceed manageable levels for small business owners. Additionally, the spatial and structural limitations of buildings, coupled with the complexity of municipal licensing procedures, present further operational risks. Many studios struggle to meet these requirements, resulting in delays in opening, increased legal vulnerability, and, in some cases, permanent closure. Another key dimension identified is customer retention. The ability to build and maintain close, trust-based relationships with clients plays a central role in securing consistent revenue streams. Personalized services, flexible membership options, and community-oriented studio cultures were found to positively influence customer loyalty. However, despite acknowledging the increasing importance of digital marketing and social media for reaching new audiences, several studio owners reported a lack of expertise in these areas, indicating the need for capacity building and targeted training in digital strategy.

Taxation and legal obligations were also identified as among the most burdensome aspects of running a Pilates studio. Participants noted that fixed tax payments, regardless of income fluctuations, impose a disproportionate strain on small-scale operators. Moreover, the presence of unlicensed

studios operating without proper oversight contributes to unfair competition and undermines the overall quality of services in the industry. In summary, the financial sustainability of Pilates studios depends on a complex interplay between internal strategies and external structural conditions. Flexibility, innovation, and client-centric approaches are essential for navigating the market. However, these internal strategies must be complemented by broader institutional support. Policymakers, local governments, and industry associations should collaborate to create a more enabling business environment for small fitness enterprises. To achieve this, reforms should prioritize simplifying licensing procedures, tailoring tax policies to the scale and characteristics of the fitness sector, and providing accessible consultancy and training services. Additionally, establishing standardized operational frameworks could enhance transparency and elevate service quality throughout the industry. Future research should consider studies across different regions or countries to understand how local governance structures, urban planning, and economic contexts influence Pilates studio management. Longitudinal studies may also shed light into the

evolution of studio strategies over time, particularly in response to digital transformation and shifting consumer behaviors. Ultimately, by addressing both the operational and systemic challenges identified in this study, stakeholders can contribute to a more sustainable, equitable, and professionalized Pilates sector, benefiting not only entrepreneurs and instructors but also the growing population seeking health, wellness, and community through this practice.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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