

FROM STRATEGY TO COURT: A SCALABLE BUSINESS MODEL FOR A MULTIDISCIPLINARY SPORTS FACILITY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a scalable business model for a multidisciplinary sports facility designed to integrate education, community engagement and recreational sport in the context of growing physical inactivity among youth. Through a combination of theoretical analysis, case studies from the United States (Chicken N Pickle and Smash Park) and a pilot implementation scenario for Bistrița, Romania, this paper outlines a replicable and financially sustainable framework. Key aspects include stakeholder collaboration, modular infrastructure, digital integration and strategic marketing. The proposal demonstrates that investing in such facilities is not only economically viable but also a strategic move for the community well-being and social innovation.

KEYWORDS *scalable business, sports entrepreneurship, urban sociology, modular infrastructure, hybrid facilities, pickleball, community hub, afterschool, Bistrița, Romania*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: L83, M13, R58, O18, Z13, L26

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of sedentary lifestyles among youth is not only a health crisis but a social and economic challenge. Across Europe and globally, governments and communities are grappling with increasing rates of obesity, anxiety, depression and reduced attention spans among children and teenagers. Romania is no exception—school programs are overextended, families are busier and access to structured physical activity outside of elite sports is limited. As digital entertainment becomes more pervasive, opportunities for real-life movement, interaction and holistic development continue to shrink.

The traditional school system, even when performing well academically, often fails to address the physical and social development needs of students. On the other hand, commercial gyms and sports clubs are either prohibitively expensive or focused exclusively on performance, not inclusion. In this vacuum, the potential for a new kind of hybrid space emerges—one that combines physical activity with education, social interaction and community building.

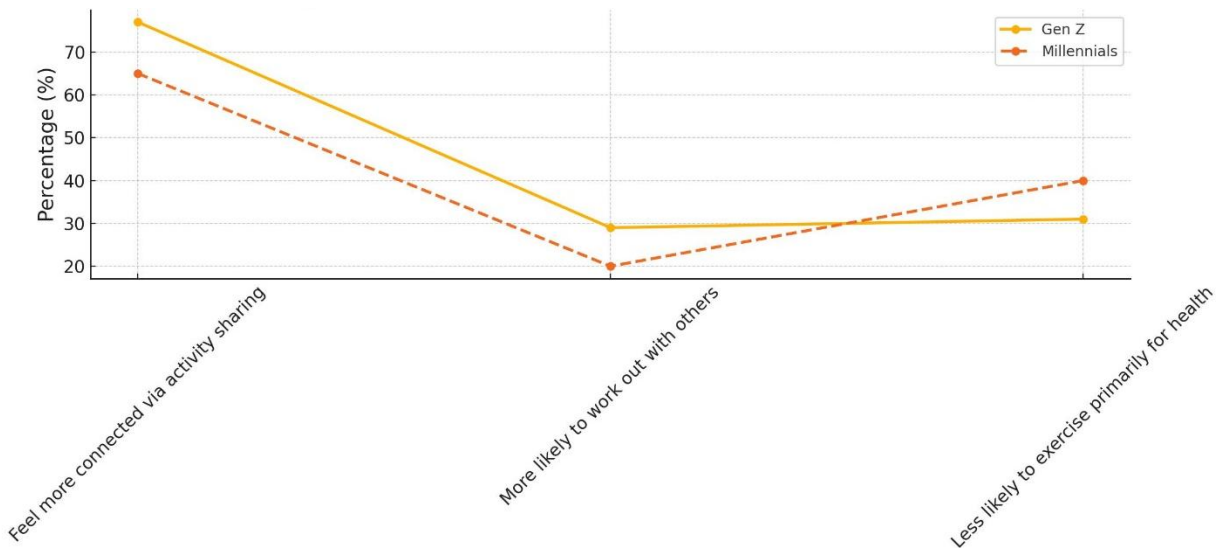
This article explores such a model: a multidisciplinary sports facility that is scalable, adaptable and deeply rooted in the needs of contemporary urban life. The model integrates insights from two highly successful concepts in the United States—Chicken N Pickle and Smash Park—and proposes a pilot implementation in a medium size city from Romania called Bistrița, as a replicable proof of concept. The analysis will cover the management structure, revenue streams, sustainability strategy and community impact of such a venture.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual foundation for this project is built on three interconnected disciplines: **urban sociology, sports entrepreneurship and community-based education.**

Firstly, from an urban sociology perspective, the facility falls within the concept of the “third place” as defined by Ray Oldenburg—neutral spaces outside of home and work that foster informal public life. These environments play a critical role in strengthening community ties, creating social capital and encouraging intergenerational interaction. In post-communist urban landscapes like Bistrița, where many neighborhoods lack identity or activation, third places are increasingly necessary for social cohesion.

Secondly, from a sports entrepreneurship point of view, the model is aligned with the “sportainment” movement—a convergence of sport, leisure and entertainment into a single, flexible experience. Globally, this model has proven effective in attracting diverse age groups, especially millennials and Gen Z, who value experience over pure competition. By providing non-intimidating, social forms of physical activity—such as pickleball, mini skate parks and interactive games—the model invites inclusion rather than performance.



Social exercising preferences for millennials and Gen Z

Finally, from the perspective of education and human development, the facility acts as an **afterschool catalyst**—a structured environment where children can engage in meaningful learning outside of formal education. Numerous studies confirm the link between physical activity and cognitive development, emotional regulation and social skills. By embedding educational programming within a recreational environment, the model offers not only value for youth but peace of mind for working families.

This integrated framework offers a compelling case for why such facilities are more than a luxury—they are a strategic tool for sustainable urban growth and resilient communities.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this paper is built on a **mixed qualitative design**, with a strong emphasis on **comparative case studies** and **local context adaptation**. The following components have been used to structure the analysis:

- **Case study research:** In-depth exploration of Chicken N Pickle and Smash Park, based on available financial data, business models, interviews and media coverage.
- **Literature review:** Academic sources in sports management, youth development, public-private partnerships and urban regeneration were reviewed to contextualize the proposed model.

- **Stakeholder interviews:** Informal interviews with teachers, architects, urban planners and local business owners in Bistrița helped tailor the proposal to actual community needs.
- **Pilot site analysis:** A 2,000 sqm plot in the IPROEB area of Bistrița was selected for conceptual modeling, based on access, zoning and redevelopment potential.
- **Cost and revenue projection modeling:** Preliminary budgets and income scenarios were developed using benchmarks from similar facilities and adjusted for Romanian labor and construction costs.

The overall methodological aim is not to deliver a fixed blueprint but to outline a dynamic, replicable model that adapts to scale, geography and funding context.

4. CASE STUDIES

Chicken N Pickle (USA)

Founded in 2016, Chicken N Pickle is a hybrid facility combining indoor and outdoor pickleball courts, yard games, event spaces and a restaurant built around a rotisserie concept. It positions itself as a community hub offering family-friendly activities, league play, school partnerships and charitable events. With over 10 active locations and more planned, the company has raised over \$10 million in private investment and reports annual revenues exceeding \$120 million.

The success of Chicken N Pickle lies in its ability to blend structured physical activity with casual social interaction, turning what could be “just another sports center” into a lifestyle destination. Events like community cookouts, themed tournaments and intergenerational games contribute to its inclusive identity.



Chicken N Pickle aerial view

Smash Park (USA)

Smash Park was launched with a slightly different demographic in mind—young professionals and corporate teams. It includes pickleball, axe throwing, arcade games, karaoke rooms and a full-service bar with food. Their business model emphasizes flexibility: one space can host a team-building event in the morning, a school field trip in the afternoon and a singles' league in the evening. Though smaller in footprint than Chicken N Pickle, Smash Park's profitability hinges on high event turnover, dynamic programming and a focus on "play and party" culture.

Both case studies reveal that combining sports, socialization and food in a modular and responsive framework creates a magnet for diverse audiences. They serve as proof that such a model can be financially sustainable while maintaining deep community relevance—exactly the blend sought for the Bistrița pilot.



Smash Park Roseville pickleball court

5. LOCAL SITE ANALYSIS: BISTRIȚA

The city of Bistrița, situated in northern Romania, is a medium-sized urban center with a population of approximately 75,000 residents. Like many post-industrial Romanian cities, Bistrița contains underutilized infrastructure and large tracts of land formerly allocated to manufacturing or logistics. One such area is the **I PROEB zone**, a former industrial site located within accessible distance from residential neighborhoods, schools and public transport. The plot proposed for the pilot facility is approximately **2,000 square meters** in size.

The location offers several strategic advantages:

- **Zoning flexibility** - suitable for both commercial and educational use.
- **Good connectivity** - with multiple public transport lines and pedestrian access.
- **Proximity to target groups** - including schools, universities and residential zones.

- **Low acquisition and development cost** due to the post-industrial status.

The site's dimensions allow for a compact, modular development integrating both **indoor and outdoor functions**. By adopting a container or steel-frame construction system, the facility can be completed within 9–12 months. The programming of the site is based on dual-purpose spaces. For instance, the indoor pickleball courts can serve as event venues and the educational room can transform into a digital lab or community meeting space during evenings and weekends.

The inclusion of outdoor green areas and seating, a small skate park section and an open terrace enhances the attractiveness of the space beyond its core sports offer. More importantly, the site would operate year-round, offering heated indoor areas in the winter and shaded terraces in the summer.



Images from personal research on the container and steel-frame structure

6. FINANCIAL PLANNING

For the Bistrița pilot project, a **conservative investment estimate** has been developed, focusing on sustainability and phase-based deployment. The total development cost is expected to be around **1.87 million RON** (~372,000 EUR), making it an attractive proposition for private or public-private investment.

Estimated Investment Breakdown

Category	Cost (RON)	Cost (EUR)
Modular Sports Hall	850,000	~170,000
Interior Finishing	250,000	~50,000

Skate Park Installation	100,000	~20,000
Bistro Kitchen & Setup	180,000	~36,000
Education & Workshop Room	120,000	~24,000
Landscaping & Terrace	90,000	~18,000
Solar Energy System	140,000	~28,000
Permits & Design	60,000	~12,000
Total	1,870,000	~372,000

Revenue Streams

- **Subscriptions and memberships** (kids, families, corporate)
- **Event hosting** (birthday parties, tournaments, workshops)
- **Afterschool program tuition**
- **Food & beverage sales**
- **Retail of sports and educational equipment**
- **Corporate partnerships and CSR sponsorships**
- **Public grants and EU funding (PNRR, Erasmus+)**

A detailed **break-even analysis** suggests that the project can become self-sustaining within the first **24–30 months** of operation, assuming a baseline enrollment of 100 active monthly users and two corporate sponsors.

7. MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The proposed management structure is lean but strategic, designed to scale as the facility grows. The organization will function with a **hybrid logic**—a mix between a startup and a community organization—with strong emphasis on transparency, flexibility and collaboration.

Proposed Roles

- **General Manager:** Oversees operations, finances, partnerships.
- **Sports & Events Coordinator:** Organizes programming, trainers and event scheduling.
- **Educational Coordinator:** Manages afterschool, workshops and school partnerships.
- **Marketing & Community Manager:** Runs social media, outreach, partnerships.

- **Bistro Supervisor:** Handles daily café operations and logistics.
- **Tech/CRM Officer:** Maintains booking system, analytics and loyalty platforms.
- **Support Staff:** Cleaning, maintenance, reception (rotational or part-time).

To ensure **long-term success**, the organization will follow a quarterly review system using KPIs such as:

- User growth and retention
- Revenue targets
- Program diversity
- Community satisfaction (surveys)
- Impact metrics (screen time reduction, participation rates)

Recruitment will prioritize young professionals from the local area, combining backgrounds in education, sports, hospitality and digital communication.

8. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND MARKETING

Marketing and engagement are central to this facility's success. Unlike traditional gyms or afterschool centers, this space must **feel like a community hub** from day one.

Marketing Phases

1. Pre-launch Awareness

- Social media storytelling campaign about the space being “made for the city”
- Street-level flyers and partnerships with local schools, cafés, libraries
- Pre-enrollment discounts and ambassador programs

2. Opening Launch

- Open house weekend with free classes, workshops and bistro tastings
- Local press coverage and partnerships with influencers from the region
- Founding Member membership package for early adopters

3. Sustained Digital Presence

- Weekly challenges, video stories, photo competitions
- Mobile app for bookings, loyalty points, feedback
- Integration of gamification (badges, team rankings)

Community Integration Tactics

- **Partner with schools** for curriculum-aligned afterschool hours
- **Co-design sessions** with parents, teens and teachers for programs
- **Local artist exhibits**, holiday events and charity tournaments
- **Monthly newsletters** with real community stories and success metrics

This approach positions the facility not just as a service provider, but as a **community builder**—a rare, needed identity in small and medium-sized Romanian cities.

9. IMPACT METRICS

Any community-based project must be measured not only by its profitability, but by its impact on the people it serves. The success of a multidisciplinary sports facility depends on its capacity to drive **behavioral change, increase access and create lasting social value**. To this end, a clear, data-informed framework for impact evaluation is essential from the first day of operation.

Key Impact Areas:

- **Physical Health Outcomes:** Tracking attendance in structured physical activities (pickleball, movement games, skateboarding) will help evaluate improvements in motor skills, cardiovascular health and reduction in sedentary behavior among children and adolescents. Baseline fitness assessments and voluntary follow-up check-ins can be designed with local schools and parents.
- **Educational Support:** Through afterschool programming, the facility aims to enhance concentration, discipline and academic performance. Success here can be measured by comparing school engagement before and after participation, as well as through teacher feedback and homework completion rates during supervised sessions.
- **Social Inclusion:** Offering subsidies or scholarships for children from disadvantaged backgrounds ensures equity in access. The number of vulnerable youth engaged in regular activities, the inclusion of neurodivergent participants and gender balance in sports teams are key inclusion metrics.
- **Community Engagement:** The number of local partnerships (schools, NGOs, clubs), community-led events hosted per year and volunteer hours contributed will reflect the project's depth of integration in the urban fabric.

- **Economic Contribution:** While profit is not the sole objective, the center's contribution to local employment (direct and indirect jobs), its collaboration with local vendors (food, cleaning, equipment) and its capacity to attract funding (grants, sponsorships) represent indicators of economic impact.
- **Digital Engagement:** Tracking mobile app usage, social media reach and participant feedback will reveal how engaged users are beyond the physical space.

Proposed Metrics Dashboard (Examples)

Indicator	Target (Year 1)	Target (Year 3)
Weekly youth participants	100	250
Afterschool program enrollment	50	120
Monthly event attendance	300	500
Female participation rate	>40%	>50%
Social media followers (FB/IG)	3,000	10,000
Corporate partnerships signed	2	6
Part-time/full-time staff	12	25
Community co-organized events	5/year	12/year

These indicators should be revisited quarterly and published in an annual impact report to increase transparency, attract funders and build long-term trust with the public.

10. REPLICATION AND SCALABILITY

The facility in Bistrița is envisioned as a **prototype**, not a standalone initiative. The model is designed from the outset with **scalability and adaptability** in mind. While the core functions (sports, education, community) remain consistent, the actual layout, programming and partnerships can be localized based on geography, population size and funding.

Scalability Principles:

- **Modular Architecture:** The use of prefabricated or modular construction enables fast replication, even in rural areas or temporary locations. This reduces initial investment and accelerates setup.

- **Franchise-Ready Operations Manual:** A detailed toolkit will be developed including: operational procedures, staffing templates, marketing packages, budgeting sheets, legal frameworks and monitoring tools.
- **Flexible Programming:** While Bistrița may prioritize afterschool support, another city might lean more into senior fitness, corporate wellness or tourism-based events.
- **Digital Integration:** The mobile booking system, CRM and loyalty platform are scalable at virtually no marginal cost, allowing seamless growth.

Target Cities for Replication (Romania):

- **Zalău** – similar demographics, underserved by leisure infrastructure
- **Mediaș** – proximity to Sibiu, but lacks dedicated family hubs
- **Satu Mare** – strong local industry could support CSR-based partnerships
- **Marghita** – a small city with growing interest in youth development and potential for cross-border collaboration in the north-west region

The long-term vision is to form a **national network of hybrid sports-education centers**, under a shared brand but managed locally with autonomy and accountability.

11. RISKS AND LIMITATIONS

While the model is solid in concept and grounded in data, it is not without challenges. Identifying these risks early allows for proactive strategies to minimize their impact.

11.1. Bureaucratic Resistance

Navigating local approvals, zoning and permits can be time-consuming. Public authorities may be skeptical of new typologies that do not fall clearly into “school,” “sports club,” or “entertainment venue.” Early stakeholder engagement, transparent planning and alignment with existing policy goals (e.g., National Recovery and Resilience Plan) will be crucial.

11.2. Staff Recruitment Challenges

In smaller cities, finding staff who are both qualified and flexible (i.e., capable of teaching, coordinating, marketing) may be difficult. A clear recruitment and training program, possibly tied to university partnerships, should be part of the initial launch plan.

11.3. Financial Instability in First 2 Years

Despite multiple revenue streams, the facility may not be fully self-sustaining immediately. A buffer fund or committed financing over 24 months is recommended to handle early-stage deficits.

11.4. Brand Confusion

Positioning the facility correctly—neither just a gym, nor just a school nor a restaurant—will require excellent branding, storytelling and educational outreach.

5. Oversaturation in Urban Markets

If the model expands too rapidly into already saturated urban areas (like Cluj-Napoca or Bucharest), competition may reduce its uniqueness. Careful market analysis is needed for every new location.

12. CONCLUSION

The world is changing—and so must our cities, our schools and the way we think about movement and connection. A multidisciplinary sports facility such as the one proposed in this article is not a vanity project or a private luxury. It is a **necessary evolution** of how communities can organize themselves for resilience, growth and well-being.

By combining physical activity, educational support and inclusive community programming in a single space, the model addresses urgent needs across public health, social equity and youth development. Inspired by proven international examples like Chicken N Pickle and Smash Park, but deeply adapted to the Romanian context, this proposal balances vision with feasibility.

Its scalability ensures that it can have national relevance, while its affordability and adaptability make it accessible for smaller municipalities as well. Through strategic partnerships, transparent impact measurement and strong community ownership, this facility can become not only a center of activity—but a **beacon of possibility**.

We are not simply building a business. We are building a culture. One where movement, learning and joy are no longer separate, but fused into a model for a better urban future.

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