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Marketing Martial Arts: Competitive Sport versus Self-defence, Combat Sport versus Eastern Philosophy?

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Martial arts such as karate from Japan, taekwondo from Korea, and kung fu from China, refer to codified systems of traditional fighting, and tend to be associated with underlying belief systems and codes of honour relating to the specific culture or society from region of origin (Choi, 1988, 2004; Henning, 1981). While the eastern martial arts of karate, taekwondo and kung fu are relatively well-known in the west, many other cultures have their own traditional systems of fighting, including western cultures. In fact, the Eastern martial arts themselves are thought to have their roots in the ancient Greek martial art of pankration (Gardiner, 1906), a form of 'total combat' within a moral culture glorifying valour and honour, thought to have been brought to Asia by the armies of Alexander the Great, and then spread throughout East Asia by Buddhist monks (Buse, 2006; Tausk, 2001).

The common feature of the traditional martial arts, as considered in this paper, is that the primary objective of the system of fighting is protection of oneself and one's associates from physical violation. Framed in this way, the key feature of a martial art is self-defence and force is only applied in order to negate a threat and to negotiate a peace. If there is no threat, or a dispute can be resolved without fighting, there is no need to engage in forceful combat. Martial arts such traditional taekwondo and traditional karate have a philosophy that one well-executed attacking technique should take out one opponent (Choi, 1988, 2004; Pawlett, 2008). A well-trained martial artist should have the mental discipline and physical skill to apply exactly the degree of force that is warranted by the context in which they find themselves, no more, but equally, no less.

Sport forms of Martial Arts

When the techniques of a martial art form the basis of a competitive sport and participants train primarily to win competitions, the sport can no longer claim status as a true martial art. Pranin (2006) illustrates this point using the sport of judo as an example. Judo was developed by Jigoro Kuno from the two extant systems of jujutsu surviving in Japan at the end of the 19th century. The development of jujutsu into a sport, along with its incorporation into the Japanese education system ensured its popularity, and facilitated its dissemination within Japan and in the rest of the world. However the downside of becoming a competitive sport (and ultimately an Olympic sport) was that many strategies employed to achieve victory in competition make no sense at all from the standpoint of fighting in self-defence (Pranin, 2006). Self-defence, the original rationale of the martial art, has no fixed parameters, and martial artists must adapt to whatever situation they face. Operating only within the parameters of the sporting domain irretrievably damages the credibility of the martial art itself.

The Korean martial art of taekwondo has followed a similar path to judo. Competitive sparring based on the foot techniques of the martial art was accepted into the Olympics in 2000 and this truncated sports form, Olympic taekwondo, has moved a long way from the traditional martial art on which it was based, even to the extent of changing the series of patterns used in training. In contrast to Olympic taekwondo, the traditional martial art of taekwondo is a complete system of self-defence, comprising preparation and maintenance of the mind and body ('dallyon'), fundamental movements (attacking and defensive tools and techniques), patterns (set sequences of movements associated with each belt level and incorporating many layers of meaning in terms of application and meaning), sparring (including step-sparring, model sparring and free-sparring), and self-defence (Choi, 1988, 2004). The competitive sparring in Olympic taekwondo does not allow hand techniques to the head, a situation that is strategically deficient in terms of self-defence. Sparring is the only event in Olympic taekwondo, so there is no incentive for competitors to train in other aspects of the martial art such as patterns, power, agility and self-defence, which help to complete the circle of the martial art. While the traditional martial art form of taekwondo includes tournament competition as an opportunity for martial artists to test their skills under pressure, participants can compete in four individual events testing a broad range of skills (patterns, sparring, special techniques and power) as well as in team events.

The development of sports based on martial arts techniques can play a strong role in promoting the sport brand by using the cachet associated with being a martial art, such that taekwondo, judo and

karate are better recognised as martial arts than aikido, which has no sports-variety. However recognition as a sport comes at a significant cost, not only in terms of trivialising the moral culture of the traditional art form (Back and Kim, 1984), but also by de-contextualising techniques and strategy so that they no longer make sense in terms of their ultimate application, that of self-defence (Pranin, 2006). When the training focus is on competition, techniques that are not part of the competitive sport are practised infrequently if at all, and the sport as a martial art becomes a mere parody.

Professional Combat Sports

Combat sports generally refer to professional full-contact fighting, such as boxing and kick-boxing. Professional combat sports, in contrast to amateur competition point sparring, focus on the development of effective fighting skill as an end in itself (Sheard, 1997; Spencer, 2009). Framed in this way, combat sports have a primary aim of inflicting maximum violence on an opponent within the rules of engagement (Garcia and Malcolm, 2010). Competitions generally require extended endurance of physical punishment with most professional fights extending from four to fifteen 3-minute rounds (Boxing History, 2011; Muay Thai Fighting, 2008). Professional bouts in sports such as boxing and Muay Thai often have very high stakes and can be used as an opportunity for people from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds to escape from poverty (Pattanotai, 2009; Wacquant, 1995).

While boxing uses only the gloved fist as an offensive weapon, Muay Thai is known as the 'Art of Eight Limbs' as it incorporates hands, elbows, knees and feet (Turner, 2009). Extreme forms of fighting, epitomised by the No Holds Barred (NHB) style of cage-fighting, also use hands, feet, elbows, knees and shins on any bodily target. Unlike Muay Thai, which has a long history as a traditional fighting culture, this brutal style of NHB fighting has been proudly advertised as having "no rules" (van Bottenburg and Heilbron, 2006). More recently, due to greater exposure and its associated public scrutiny, NHB has undergone a 'sportisation' process to evolve into a more controlled form of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) under the auspices of Ultimate Fighting Championship brand (van Bottenburg and Heilbron, 2006).

Although there have always been campaigns on medical and moral grounds to ban combat sports as uncivilised forms of brutality (Buse, 2006; Pearn, 1998), the level of brutality has been disputed by participants themselves (Spencer, 2009; Wacquant, 1995). Paradoxically, there is still strong audience demand from middle and

upper classes (MacIntosh and Crow, 2010; Pattanotai, 2009; Sugden, 1997), and participation in amateur forms of these professional combat sports is higher among the middle and upper classes (Sugden, 1997).

Just as competitive sports such as judo and Olympic taekwondo are no longer true martial arts, combat sports have also moved a long way from the traditional martial arts philosophy. Whereas judo and Olympic taekwondo have lost their connection with the underlying logic of self-defence inherent in the martial arts from which they were derived, professional combat sports have lost their moral code. Combat sports retain the forceful effectiveness of martial arts techniques, but have lost any connection with the respect and honour implicit in the traditional martial arts, which share the basic tenet of building a more peaceful world in which the martial artist shows humility for the sake of humanity, such that the human prevails over the 'animal' as civilisations advance.

Participation in the Martial Arts

Eastern martial arts such as traditional karate and traditional taekwon-do became known in the west in the 1960s both as recreational and competitive physical pursuits (McCoy, 1997; Cashman, 2009). Martial arts movies such as those of Bruce Lee emerged as part of popular western culture, and inspired generations of martial arts enthusiasts (Morris, 2007). However, as described above, there has been a subtle shift in the standing of martial arts as they become more aligned on one hand, with competitive sports and their associated funding and popularity, and on the other hand, with extreme combat sports and their brand power and marketing strategies. As articulated by Pranin, "the conversion of martial arts into sports cuts two ways: it can be a means to achieve the popularization and survival of an art; however, it also carries with it the risk of transforming the discipline into something that runs contrary to the art's core principles, judo and kendo being good examples. Mixed martial arts, UFC, K1, Vale Tudo, and other knockdown-drag out fighting exhibitions are the rage today and are other examples of how elements of several traditional martial arts can be stitched together, converted into sports, and end up practically unrecognizable from the original martial forms." (2006)

Martial Arts Participation in Australia

Since the late nineties, there appears to have been an ongoing decline in participation in the martial arts in Australia. For example, from 2001 to 2009, there was a decrease of 51 per cent in active participation of adults (15 years old and above) in martial arts in

Australia at a time when participation in team sports such as football, cricket and basketball each increased by at least 25 per cent (ASC, 2009). From the fourth most popular club based activity in 2001 behind golf, tennis and netball in terms of participants, martial arts fell to tenth in 2009 (ASC, 2009). Over a similar time period to that in which adult participation in martial arts declined, participation of children in martial arts increased from 6.2 per cent in 2003 to 7.5 per cent in 2009 (ABS, 2010a). In 2009, martial arts were the sixth most popular organised sports for 5-8 year olds, the eighth most popular organised sports from 9-11 but dropped out of the top ten for the 12 – 14 year old category (ABS, 2010b). The drop in participation rates of 12 – 24 year old males is particularly troubling as this group would be expected to be the primary demographic for martial arts training.

A number of factors can be linked with the recent increase in popularity of traditional martial arts for children, along with the emergence of Mixed Martial Arts and combat sports as options for older age groups. There are different motivations for different demographics engaging in martial arts and combat sports (Cynarski, Sieber, Obodunski, Duricek, Krol and Rzepko, 2009; Ko, Kim, and Valacich, 2010), some of which will be explored below. The complex and changing social, cultural and economic environment of 2011 and the variety of reasons for participation in martial arts across different demographic groups, presents a significant challenge for martial arts marketing, particularly for those engaged in traditional martial arts practice.

Effects of Risk-taking, Uncertainty and the Perceived Threat of Violence

The risk management and safety culture operating in the developed western world has led to government regulation of many aspects of life previously left to personal choice (Dekker, 2007; Little, 2010). The false perception that it is possible to control and remove all risk (rather than learn to make better decisions) leads to a mindset of blame and litigation in the face of any misfortune, and an increasing inability to deal with uncertainty (Dekker, 2007).

Indeed, recent research has begun to question the long-term effects on development of attempting to remove all risk from the environment, and thereby removing the need to make good choices (Furedi, 2011; Little, 2010; Mitchell, Cavanagh and Eager, 2006). The popularity of 'extreme sports' that push competitors to their limits in terms of risk-taking (e.g., from sky diving, skateboarding and white water kayaking, through to ice climbing, base jumping and cliff diving) appears to have coincided with attempts to remove risk from most other aspects of life (Le Breton, 2000; Willig, 2008). At the other end of the scale from extreme sports are people

wishing to experience adventure and excitement without exposure to risk (Cater, 2005; Palmer, 2002). Exposure to the adrenalin rush of apparently high risk activities in situations where the actual risk has supposedly been eliminated – e.g., bungee jumping, flying foxes) has been promoted as way of building self-esteem and confidence by helping people face their fears (Hans, 2000; McKenzie, 2000).

The rise in perceived threat of terrorism in the west, exemplified by the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre, have challenged the sense of safety and comfort of people brought up in first world countries, many of whom feel more personally vulnerable to physical threat. Crime statistics suggest an increase in violent crime in many western countries (Aebi and Linde, 2010, ABS, 2005) and media portrayals of increased street violence in urban areas gives rise to a perceived need to develop self-defence skills in a more uncertain world. There has also been increasing social commentary on bullying in schools and workplaces and there have been a number of high profile shootings in schools around the world (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, O'Toole and Vernberg, 2002).

There has also been a subtle shift in the dominant social culture in the west in terms of child-rearing practices, with the tendency to eschew competition in favour of collaboration and eschew all forms of physical punishment while promoting positive messages to build self-esteem (e.g., Sanders, Markie-Dadds and Turner, 2003). However with limited avenues of socially-acceptable deterrent available to parents, educators and children themselves, although primary schools may provide safe-havens for young children, there has also been concerns raised over incidences of bullying and violence in the less controlled environment of high school. Many young people raised in relatively shielded primary school environments seem to lack the resilience to deal with any form of physical or emotional attack. Martial arts programs, with their emphasis on moral culture and respect may appeal to parents and educators looking for ways to empower victims and educate perpetrators (Theeboom *et al.*, 2008; Twemlow, Biggs, Nelson, Vernberg, Fonagy *et al.*, 2008). Martial arts programs may appeal to potential victims in terms of developing self defence skills, but may also appeal to young people seeking risk and adventure in dangerous pursuits.

Marketing the Traditional Martial Arts

Martial Arts for Young People

Martial arts have been marketed to young people as a healthy competitive sport that also promotes self-confidence, discipline, respect and the ability to defend oneself (Vertonghen and

Theeboom, 2010). There are conflicting data on the psychosocial outcomes of martial arts training on young people (Vertonghen and Theeboom, 2010). While it is a normal developmental progression for children to exhibit aggressive behaviours as infants, those who do not learn to control aggression prior to school entry have poorer prognosis as adolescents and adults in terms of violence and crime (Tremblay, Nagin, Seguin, Zoccolillo, Zelazo *et al.*, 2004). Some studies showing that martial arts training leads to improvements in self-confidence, self-acceptance and self esteem over time (Kurian, Verdi, Caterino, and Kulhavy, 1994; Lakes and Hoyt, 2004; Strayhorn and Strayhorn, 2009; Steyn and Roux, 2009; Trulson, 1986; Twemlow *et al.*, 2008) and reduction in aggression (Skelton, Glynn and Berta, 1991; Edelman, 1994; Lamarre and Nosanchuk, 1999; Zivin, Hassan, De Paula, Monti, Harlan, Hossain *et al.*, 2001), whereas others have shown no effect (Reynes and Lorant, 2001; 2004; Wargo, Spirrison, Thorne, and Henley, 2007) or increased aggression (Endresen and Olweus, 2005). Trulson (1986) found that six months of training in traditional taekwondo 'cures' juvenile delinquency, whereas training with the same instructor in modern taekwondo that emphasised the sport aspects of training and omitted the philosophical aspects, resulted in increased aggression and personality attributes defining delinquency (Trulson, 1986). More research is required on the effect of different teaching styles on outcomes of training.

Martial Arts for Adults

Martial arts have been marketed to adults as a form of physical fitness and self-defence and a long-term lifestyle (Cynarski *et al.*, 2009; Draxler, Osterman and Honekamp, 2011; Ko, Kim, and Valacich, 2010; Zetaruk, Violan, Zurakowski and Micheli, 2005). Martial arts programs have been used as interventions for at-risk youth (Theeboom, De Knopp, and Wylleman, 2008) and to provide potential health benefits to the elderly (Brudnak, Dundero and Van Hecke, 2002; Groen, Smulders, de Kam, Duysens, and Weerdesteyn, 2010). Traditional martial arts practice has been found to decrease verbal and assaultive hostility (Daniels and Thornton, 1992) and to increase resiliency (Bell, 2008), although combat sports and competitive forms of martial arts reverse this trend (Vertonghen and Theeboom, 2010). Ko *et al.*, (2010) found that motives for participation in martial arts were different for people who had practiced the art for longer, with more emphasis placed on the aesthetic and self-development aspects of the arts the longer people had trained. The study of Ko *et al.* (2010) was cross-sectional in design, and further study is required to determine whether the different motivations are due to effect of training or due

to the characteristics of the students who persevere, or an interaction between the two.

Martial Arts as Competitive Sport

When martial arts are recognised as competitive sports (especially as Olympic sports), martial art athletes gain access to government funding and financial support for training and competition. The aim of advanced training is to gain an edge in competition rather than to develop a deeper understanding of the technical and spiritual foundations of the martial art and its moral culture. The role of the martial arts instructor correspondingly shifts towards that of a sports coach rather than a respected mentor and master, and this changed relationship seriously challenges the inherent hierarchical structure of the martial art. Unquestioning respect for Instructors does not always translate across cultures, but becomes particularly problematic in sporting cultures where 'respect' is based on objective performance metrics in competition. As noted above, competition-oriented martial arts training increases, rather than decreases, aggression in participants (Daniels and Thornton, 1992; Vertonghen and Theeboom, 2010). Despite the apparent attractiveness, it may be counter-productive for traditional martial arts schools to compete for sports-based funding as such funding and its attendant framework of regulatory compliance may serve to irreparably undermine the integrity of the martial art.

Martial Arts as a Way of Life

Trends in marketing, such as using the martial art 'brand' to promote competitive sport, a fitness activity, or professional combat sport, imparts a different meaning on the term martial art, by undermining the cultural significance and philosophical integrity of traditional martial arts. There is already a deep-seated challenge in transplanting a traditional martial art from one cultural setting to another and maintain its cultural authenticity (Joseph, 2008). This paper argues that, irrespective of the traditional martial art being studied, the fundamental purpose of martial arts training is to teach self-defence, which is in its most basic form, the art of how not to get hurt. The role of the martial arts Instructor is to teach correct execution of techniques, which should build skill and strength while avoiding physical injury. The development of humility, respect and mental discipline should protect against mental and emotional injury. An understanding of the application of the art form will build an inner strength and harmony and promote a more peaceful world. Martial arts Instructors are guardians of the 'Do' of a martial art (the 'way of' or Tao of Chinese philosophy), which in turn belongs to the society in which the martial art is embedded. Unfortunately, this can be a difficult message to market.

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