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## The Effect of Modern Marketing on Martial Arts and Traditional Martial Arts Culture

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### Abstract

This paper examines the effect of modern marketing strategies upon martial arts activity in the United States. The concentration of the inquiry is twofold. How has marketing effected the economic activity of the martial arts business industry? How has marketing effect the martial arts culture? This paper begins with a historical analysis of the evolution of martial arts as a business practice involving the use of marketing to gain customers. Martial arts marketing practices have proven most effective when they are personal due to the geographic location of specific schools or the instructor-client relationship. Internet marketing is a synthesis of personal and mass marketing, providing readily available information in a client's home while offering to the martial school the potential audience of a large mass marketing campaign. Marketing has generated sufficient commercial interest in the field, transforming martial arts into a thriving business.

### Section I: Introduction

As a professional martial artist and instructor, I have a sincere interest in understanding how modern marketing initiatives have affected both the martial arts culture and the business industry. In order to appropriately evaluate modern marketing practice's effect upon the martial arts field, this paper begins with an examination of the historical development of martial arts in the United States, as well as the application of marketing in popularizing the field. This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- How has modern marketing affected the perception of martial artists among non-practitioners?
- Has marketing redefined the term "martial arts"?
- Has marketing raised or lowered the standard of quality among practitioners and schools?
- What effect does commercialized marketing have on traditional martial arts culture?

This information is useful for a variety of reasons. First, for those practitioners interested in developing their own martial arts business, this paper contains valuable information on what works to attract and retain customers. Secondly, this information is important to those seeking to gain a greater knowledge and appreciation of the practice of martial arts. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the information is useful for scholars ascertaining the effect that commercializing a traditional recreational activity has on the culture, practice, and development of the field.

### Section II: Literature Review

#### Overview of the Available Literature

This review includes literature from a variety of sources, including scholarly journal articles, books, and Internet websites. Little has been written concerning the specific involvement and effect of marketing practices upon the field of martial arts. However, extensive literature is available concerning marketing general sporting events, including the ways that business enterprises effect the culture of entertainment and recreational activities. In addition, extensive online sources document the involvement

and history of martial arts in American culture. The combination of these two primary source categories offers insightful data concerning the evolution of martial arts marketing in the United States in the past century.

#### Definition of a Martial Art

The term “martial art” is difficult to define because of the cultural significance of the term. Understood in its traditional form, martial arts are the practices and methods of the military (Musashi and Wilson, 2002, p. 39). However, this is hardly the definition used by most of today’s practitioners (Zhang, 2006). The specific practices of a particular martial art will vary according to centuries of tradition and the country of origin.

Modern definitions of martial arts have attempted to distinguish contemporary practices from those practiced in previous systems of combat. Some critics contend that modern practices are merely a trickled down version of their predecessors. This criticism has reached a new level of furor over the past few years with “Modern Wushu,”<sup>1</sup> a combination of dance, martial arts, and gymnastics set to replace Taekwondo at the 2008 Olympic Games (Niu, 2006). In the U.S., most modern martial arts schools focus upon cognition and recreation, as opposed to self-discipline. Donohue (1994) noted that modern martial arts systems such as judo and karate tend to associate “nominally physical techniques with well defined philosophical and spiritual ideas” (p. 36). The sport and entertainment focus of today’s martial arts education is also one clearly distinguishing characteristic from the more traditional definition (Draeger, 1990).

#### History of Martial Arts

The recitation of folk history has played a major role in the perpetuation of the world’s martial arts (Green and Svinth, 2003). Students learn the methods, traditions, and stories associated with their particular discipline from their masters or teachers. While these histories are not always accurate, they succeed in transmitting the culture and value to successive generations (Shengli and Yun, 2006). In many early societies, martial arts developed within a period of centuries as an integral component of culture. In China, for example, schools were not generally commercial ventures but family endeavors in which successive generations preserved the knowledge of their ancestors (Kennedy and Guo, 2005, p. 15).

The earliest recorded instances of Asian martial arts interest in the United States can be traced back to the turn of the Twentieth Century. This history begins with President Grant’s 1879 observation of a judo evaluation during a trip to Japan (“Complete Martial Arts.com,” 2006, p. 1). President Theodore Roosevelt was also a known enthusiast. During the 1920’s, the Japanese art of judo was introduced to the U.S. by young Japanese immigrants (Rosenberg, 1995, p. 19).

Martial arts popularity surged following World War II (Friman, 1998). During the late 1940’s, martial arts became a popular recreational activity among members of the military stationed in Asia. Within a decade, prominent U.S. military officers, including General Thomas E. Power of the Strategic Air command, were “encouraging the training of their personnel by inviting Japanese instructors to conduct classes at military bases in Japan and the United States” (Friman, 1998, p. 19).

During the 1960’s, these formally trained ex-military joined traditional foreign instructors in bolstering interest and activity in martial arts in the U.S. Interest was not limited to Japanese martial arts. American contact with Vietnam and Korea spurred interest in these nation’s martial arts forms (“Complete Martial Arts.com,” 2006). In the 1970’s, interest intensified with the star power of Bruce Lee and a movie industry capitalizing upon public interest by offering a variety of martial arts inspired movies.

#### Justifications for Practicing Martial Arts

When understood as military practices, martial arts are justified by conquest and military victory (Musashi and Wilson, 2002). Soldiers are trained in combat techniques that will assure them of victory in battle.

However, martial arts have traditionally included more than physical prowess. The basis of many martial arts specialties have been upon training the whole individual, so that they are mentally, physically, and spiritually prepared to meet the challenges of everyday life (Musashi and Wilson, 2002; Tsunetomo and Wilson, 2002).

For example, during the Golden Age of Korean history, a select number of Korean noblemen were indoctrinated into the military order known as the Hwarang ("Flowering Knights") (Haines, 1995, p. 106).

These martial arts practitioners subscribed to a particular code of conduct based upon five fundamental tenets.

1. Loyalty to the king
2. Faithfulness to one's friends
3. Devotion to one's parents
4. Bravery and absolute obedience on the battlefield
5. A prohibition against wanton killing of any form of life (Haines, 1995, p. 106).

This focus on the whole individual is also present in many Japanese and Chinese martial arts. In the 1950's, Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of the popular Japanese martial art "Aikido," stated:

The martial arts must be a path that brings our hearts into oneness with the spirit of heaven and earth... Aikido is not the art of fighting using brute strength or deadly weapons, or the use of physical power or deadly weapons to destroy one's enemies, but a way of harmonizing the world and unifying [all people] (Sunadomari, 2004, p. 1, 29).

#### Marketing of Martial Arts

Basic marketing focuses upon the four "P"s: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion (Kim, 2002, p. 217). For a martial arts school, the important products include the offered classes and the associated items sold through business, such as videos, books, gear, uniforms, and clothing (Peterson, 2002).

Marketing strategies can be divided into two basic categories. Direct marketing, which includes one on one contact with potential customers, may also include paid and unpaid advertisement ventures. Mass marketing is the more familiar form of advertising, such as commercials on television and radio. Martial arts schools have succeeded largely through the use of direct marketing.

For martial arts schools, direct marketing works better than mass marketing for two reasons: First, teaching martial arts is a personal business. You win students and keep students by letting them know you can meet their personal needs. You win and keep students by being the kind of person they want to study with. Second, people typically choose fitness facilities close to their home or work. Mass marketing can rarely target that specifically. Direct advertising can (Peterson and Vactor, 2002, p. 103).

Zhang Sheng Yi, the founder of the Beiyu Wushu Association in Beijing, China, agreed with this point. In his interview he stated, "I do not use commercials or signs. I think I should meet people face-to-face. When they see my "gongfu<sup>2</sup>" they will want to learn it" (Zhang, 2006).

It is also important to understand that marketing has rarely been the focus of traditional martial arts instructors. In the past, martial arts schools were supported by the military or the state; teachers had little reason to worry about financial necessities (Kennedy and Guo, 2005). However, some business-minded individuals have demonstrated the effectiveness of careful marketing in the accumulation of personal wealth. For example, in the 1970s, Rorion Gracie emigrated from Brazil to teach the art of Gracie Jiu-Jitsu (Green and Svinth, 2003, p. 69). He believed that the timing was right to introduce the Brazilian wrestling technique to the United States, due to the success of martial arts film stars. He met with initial failure because the patient and slow discipline did not match the public's enthusiasm for acrobatics. However, he implemented an aggressive marketing campaign that included prominently advertised

matches and frequent media exposure. "That marketing, as distinct from martial art, was foremost in his mind is demonstrated by his copyrighting both the Gracie Jiu-Jitsu name and logo" (Green and Svinth, 2003, p. 70). Rorion Gracie was pivotal in influencing the treatment of modern martial arts in America. He would help develop the model used in the Ultimate Fighting Championships (Green and Svinth, 2003).

### Martial Arts Role in Society

How has marketing changed the role of martial arts in society? Historical evidence demonstrates that martial arts were primarily practiced in Asia for self-defense purposes (Friman, 1998). However, the modern world views martial arts differently. Individuals typically practice martial arts for one of three reasons. First, they engage in martial arts for personal enjoyment. Second, martial arts practice is an excellent form of exercise that can contribute to a healthful lifestyle. Third, many individuals decide to engage in martial arts for competitive reasons. The rise of interest in martial arts has coincided with a greater visibility of athletic competitions. Each of these three factors has contributed to national interest in martial arts ("Complete Martial Arts.com," 2006).

### Martial Arts for Fun

Much of the post World War II interest in martial arts resulted from communication and technological advances that revolutionized the entertainment business (Friman, 1996). Radio, television, and most notably movies began to feature characters engaging in martial arts to settle disputes. Many movie stars became associated with martial arts, such as Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris. Popular teen-oriented films such as *The Karate Kid* focused upon the accessibility of martial arts: anyone who trained hard enough could attain near superhero-like capability through martial arts prowess (Green and Svinth, 2003).

The potential for violence and injury through martial arts involvement has been largely ignored by regulators in the United States (Friman, 1998, p. 21). "The martial arts in the United States have a long tradition of being backed and promoted by state authorities" (Friman, 1998, p. 21).

### Martial Arts for Health

One dramatic effect upon the image of martial arts in the American conscious is the wave of interest in martial arts as a means of physical fitness. The women's movement has been especially active in incorporating martial arts into their own agenda for health. "Women are empowering themselves by appropriating male symbols of physical capital and shifting gender relations of power" (Green and Svinth, 2003, p. 219). Popularity in karate and boxing inspired fitness regimes has been broadened by marketing campaigns involving famous actress-turned advocates, such as Cindy Crawford, Jodie Foster, and Claudia Schiffer (Green and Svinth, 2003, p. 219). Linda Hamilton's physique in *Terminator II* made "the muscular and aggressive female image... an international phenomenon" (Green and Svinth, 2003, p. 219).

### Competitive Martial Arts Sports

Competitions such as the Ultimate Fighting Championships have further solidified martial arts practices within modern pop culture. Now, even non-participants may thrill to the victory and defeat of their favorite fighters. Such sports competitions have been the premise of many popular films.

### The Effects of Marketing on "Traditional Martial Arts Culture"

How have martial arts culture changed? The examination of historical texts written for practitioners of martial arts uncovers a wealth of knowledge about the foundations of martial art practices. For example, in the authoritative samurai text *Hagakure*, the author explains the role of the enlightened samurai warrior as one who is obedient to his master and academically trained. The authority of the master was unquestioned and second to none.

Every morning one should first do reverence to his master and parents and then to his patron deities and guardian buddhas. If he will only make his master first in importance, his parents will rejoice and the gods and the Buddhas will give their assent. For a warrior there is nothing other than thinking of his master (Tsunetonomo and Wilson, 2002, p. 23).

Marketing has redefined the role of the martial arts instructor. Martial arts instructors do not have a familial or cultural basis of training in the United States. This is a very different business environment from the ancient practices of generational instructors. As a result, marketing has sought to establish the expertise of potential instructors in the minds of students.

Before you can establish yourself as an expert, you have to have the knowledge, experience, and credentials to back up your reputation. This may not be possible or even desirable for every instructor. The best plan of attack is to concentrate on the conventional media first and use the non-conventional media as reinforcement (Kim, 2002, p. 171).

This radically changes the teacher-student dynamic. Earlier, students were expected to display complete obedience to their masters. Now, it is the masters who must seek student approval or risk losing business.

But understand that not many people can relate to a teacher like that. People in our consumer culture are used to comparison shopping. They select products and services that suit them. If their doctor, dentist, hairdresser, or church isn't listening to them, isn't meeting their needs, they will find another. In the eyes of the average American consumer, you can be replaced. But if you continue to listen and meet your students needs, you will remain an important part of their lives" (Peterson and Vactor, 2002, p. 178).

This statement is also supported by the words of Taijiquan Master Niu Sheng Xian. While Master Niu lives and teaches in Beijing, China, he also believes that students come and go based on boredom and value.

I do not need to advertise. I have never made a commercial. I teach my students well and thus they bring more students. Many students leave because they get too tired or too bored. Some do not want to work. I don't worry about that. I just worry about making the students that I have as good as possible. If I treat them well and show them how to improve, other people will want to learn and more students will come (Niu, 2006).

In the United States, involvement in martial arts is primarily seen as a recreational activity. It is expected to be fun and this assumption is supported by most teaching practitioners. Kim (2002) cautions against monotony in drills, explaining that "boredom – your students' boredom and your own – is your biggest enemy as a martial arts instructor. Teaching classes every day, year after year, quickly become monotonous" (p. 11). As a result, the authority of a martial arts master in the modern day is open to constant questioning from students who may seek another master with relative ease.

This ability of audience members to witness such frequent fighting spectacles is a unique component of modern culture (Green and Svinth, 2003). Previously, non-practitioners were barred from witnessing practices and competitions were few and private. This publication of martial arts events through marketing is one of the most profound effects of commercialization upon martial arts practices.

Past generations of masters refrained from teaching their skills to the public at large because of a widely shared belief that such knowledge could be dangerous if given to ill-intentioned or irresponsible people. In such cases, it was fear that high-level martial arts skills might be used for destructive purposes. So, martial arts knowledge was carefully guarded and taught only to those deemed worthy of using it for beneficial

purposes... The resulting risk that skills might be lost was considered preferable to the risk that a malevolent person might learn martial arts skills and use them for evil intent (Shengli and Yun, 2006, p. xxiii).

Martial arts instructors no longer fear that their fighting techniques will be used against them; instead, many educators view themselves as business actors first. They gain financially by teaching their own brand of martial art to the largest audience possible. This, in turn, leads to greater publicity through practice, which may lead to more circles in a cycle that perpetuates the physical practice of the martial arts discipline, but largely sacrifices many of the philosophical foundations of the martial arts practice.

#### The Future of Martial Arts Marketing

Advocates of education argue against too much marketing. Public relations, publicity, and word of mouth are all important to the success of an educational establishment (Firman, 1996). After all, a school's reputation should precede its advertising budget. Kim (2002) notes that this is no different for a martial arts school:

An active, targeted and ongoing publicity campaign is essential to the survival of a professional martial arts school... Ongoing publicity makes your school name a household word... Make your school name so familiar that people in your community automatically think of you when they think "martial arts" (p. 167).

Such a marketing strategy has the additional bonus of saving money. A successful publicity campaign can reduce the need for a formal marketing budget (Kim, 2002).

The growth of the Internet has also had a direct effect of the marketing of martial arts. "The internet is a fast growing medium that provides easy access public relations" (Kim, 2002, p. 171). A martial arts instructor can use the Internet in a variety of ways. "There are two primary ways to use the internet to benefit your school: Promotion and Communication. A well designed website is the cornerstone in any internet strategy" (Kim, 2002, p. 197).

Many newsgroups, chat rooms, and public forums are available for the general discussion of martial arts. A business may also generate name recognition and respect by hosting a specially designed website. "When the internet first gained popularity, many businesses saw it as a selling tool. Martial arts schools quickly put up websites and registered with search engines only to be disappointed when no one signed up for lessons online" (Kim, 2002, p. 197). As a result of this failure to attract new students, websites evolved as primarily tools for reference.

Many Internet enthusiasts develop sites aimed at creating more interest in martial arts, not necessarily registering new students. These enthusiasts often choose to report book excerpts or publications featuring the history or evolution of martial arts. For example, the website Complete Martial Arts.com markets itself as a "complete and comprehensive up to date information on all aspects of Martial Arts" ("Complete Martial Arts.com," 2006, p. 1). This website lives up to its claim by offering one of the most thorough discussions of the history of martial arts in the United States currently available on the Internet. The site's history is a reprint of *The Original Martial Arts Encyclopedia* by John Corcoran and Emil Farkas.

Martial arts instructors can also use the Internet as a tool for communication. Instructors post schedules, class information, and registration information online. These are all tools of convenience that aid in retention of current students. Professional associations created by martial arts business leaders offer support and provide advice to potential martial arts entrepreneurs. The Martial Arts Teachers Association presents a website that offers free advice on low cost marketing strategies for martial arts schools.

#### Section III: Summary and Conclusion

How has marketing effected the practice of martial arts in the United States? First, marketing has effected the number of people practicing. What began as the interest of a select group of culturally inclined or militarily trained individuals has evolved into a field that has attracted hundreds of thousands of practitioners.

Marketing has also effected the quality of martial arts and martial arts instruction. Martial arts have evolved from recreational activities with many volunteer coaches to a lucrative industry where interested parties may forge careers regarding the training of clients.

A more difficult consideration is marketing's effect on the culture of martial arts. Because marketing is a business practice, the involvement of marketing is one aspect of a wider commercialization of the activity. Potential students are prone to "shopping around" to see what style of instructor and discipline best fit their needs. The most obvious effect that marketing has had is on the role of instructor. While previous martial arts teachers might have enjoyed total obedience in a military-like training setting, the entertainment nature of martial arts in the United States, as well as the business aims of individual schools, force instructors to accommodate student desires. For example, the choice to only teach children may not generate sufficient financial interest in some areas. Teachers that fail to be flexible or to assess the needs of their local population risk business failure. Such a commercial concern is very different from traditional training or military settings.

Martial arts marketing tends to focus upon the physical aspects of the practice, reflecting society's sensationalization of violence. As a result, the philosophical components of early martial arts disciplines have been largely forgotten. As Zhang put it, "Everybody wants to learn to fight. Nobody wants to learn real gongfu<sup>3</sup>." (2006). This is especially true of the multitude of martial arts sites which focus upon drawing in as many students as possible to sustain a strong business model.

Very little is written in academic journals specific to the marketing of martial arts; the bulk of the academic literature involves either using sports figures to market particular products or concentration of marketing upon more popular recreational activity. As martial arts gains more supporters in the U.S., this is likely to change. There are many potential areas of study and research for the future. For example, researchers might seek to evaluate specific forms and combinations of different marketing strategies to demonstrate the most effective means of marketing in the martial arts field. As gender and racial stereotypes are a concern in both martial arts and in marketing, a researcher may explore the prevalence of stereotypes within particular marketing campaigns. The economic effect of marketing upon a specific school or area of the country may also be pursued.

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#### Appendix: Notes

<sup>1</sup>Translator's Note: "Wushu," is the classic Chinese term for martial arts. However, because of the recent morphing of traditional martial art forms into more aesthetically appealing gymnastic style performances, Chinese practitioners have separated "modern wushu" from traditional wushu. Modern wushu is now an accepted category of performance art that will be presented in the 2008 Olympic Games. However, it is hotly debated in China as to whether or not it should be considered a "martial art".

<sup>2</sup>Translator's Note: "Gongfu" is the Romanization of the Chinese characters  These



characters are more commonly known in the west as “kung fu.” However this is a misrepresentation of the original Chinese meaning. Gongfu, in the sense meant here, represents hard-work, diligence, and mastery of a skill. In Chinese, to say a person has real “gongfu” is a high compliment of the person’s skill, whether it is in martial arts or any other vocation.

<sup>3</sup>See footnote 2 above for an explanation of “gongfu”.

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