

Successful marketing strategies for martial arts schools

Hyunmin CHOI^{1*} , & Jin Sam YONG² ¹ Department of Taekwondo, Youngsan University (Republic of Korea)² Department of Taekwondo, Youngsan University (Republic of Korea)

Received: 21/11/2024; Accepted: 11/09/2025; Published: 27/09/2025



ORIGINAL PAPER

Abstract

This article delves into effective marketing strategies for martial arts schools, with a focus on insights from three successful taekwondo academies in the United States. The information was gathered through interviews with the founders of these schools, followed by an analysis of their strategies using the key marketing principles of STP (Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning). In this context, successful taekwondo academies are often strategically situated in urban and suburban areas with high foot traffic, fostering strong community engagement and attracting children from middle- and upper-class families who seek discipline as well as family-oriented programs. To enhance enrollment and retention, these schools implement targeted marketing strategies, including premium brand image, social media outreach, and specialized programs that emphasize personal growth, skill development, with a strong emphasis on Asian cultural elements and tradition. By examining these real-world examples, martial arts schools of any style or location may gain practical lessons for attracting and retaining students.

Keywords: Martial arts; combat sports; taekwondo; martial arts schools; marketing strategy; STP; effective marketing.

Estrategias de marketing exitosas para escuelas de artes marciales

Resumen

Este artículo profundiza en las estrategias de marketing eficaces para las escuelas de artes marciales, sobre la base de las ideas de tres academias de taekwondo exitosas en los Estados Unidos. La información se recopiló a través de entrevistas con los fundadores de estas escuelas, seguidas de un análisis de sus estrategias utilizando los principios clave de marketing de STP (segmentación, orientación y posicionamiento). En este contexto, las academias de taekwondo exitosas suelen situarse estratégicamente en zonas urbanas y suburbanas con mucho tránsito peatonal, lo que fomenta una fuerte implicación de la comunidad, y atraen a niños de familias de clase media y alta que buscan disciplina y programas orientados a la familia. Para mejorar la matriculación y la retención, estas escuelas implementan estrategias de marketing específicas, que incluyen una imagen de marca premium, la difusión en las redes sociales y en programas especializados, que hacen hincapié en el crecimiento personal y en el desarrollo de habilidades, con un fuerte énfasis en los elementos culturales y en la tradición asiática. Al examinar estos ejemplos del mundo real, las escuelas de artes marciales de cualquier estilo o ubicación pueden aprender lecciones prácticas para atraer y retener a los estudiantes.

Estratégias de marketing bem-sucedidas para escolas de artes marciais

Resumo

Este artigo aprofunda-se em estratégias de marketing eficazes para escolas de artes marciais, com foco nas ideias de três academias de taekwondo bem-sucedidas nos Estados Unidos. As informações foram recolhidas através de entrevistas com os fundadores dessas escolas, seguidas de uma análise das suas estratégias usando os princípios-chave de marketing de STP (Segmentação, Segmentação e Posicionamento). Nesse contexto, as academias de taekwondo de sucesso geralmente estão estrategicamente localizadas em áreas urbanas e suburbanas com alto tráfego de pedestres, promovendo um forte envolvimento da comunidade e atraindo crianças de famílias de classe média e alta que buscam disciplina, bem como programas voltados para a família. Para aumentar as matrículas e a retenção, essas escolas implementam estratégias de marketing direcionadas, incluindo imagem de marca premium, divulgação nas redes sociais e programas especializados que enfatizam o crescimento pessoal e o desenvolvimento de habilidades, com forte ênfase nos elementos culturais e na tradição asiáticos. Ao examinar esses exemplos do mundo real, escolas de artes marciais de qualquer estilo ou localização podem obter lições práticas para atrair e reter alunos.

* Corresponding author: Hyunmin Choi (sbvfef@hanmail.net)

Contributions: Hyunmin Choi (ABCDEFGHIJKLMN), Jin Sam Yong (ABCDEFGHIJKLMN). Codes according to CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy): (A) Conceptualization. (B) Data curation. (C) Formal Analysis. (D) Funding acquisition. (E) Investigation. (F) Methodology. (G) Project administration. (H) Resources. (I) Software. (J) Supervision. (K) Validation. (L) Visualization. (M) Writing – original draft. (N) Writing – review & editing.

Funding: This study was supported by the Youngsan University Research Fund 2025.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; deportes de combate; escuelas de artes marciales; estrategia de marketing; STP; marketing eficaz.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; desportos de combate; escolas de artes marciais; estratégia de marketing; STP; marketing eficaz.

1. Introduction

This article explores effective marketing strategies for martial arts schools, drawing insights from three successful taekwondo academies in the United States. These examples may provide valuable lessons for martial arts schools of any style or location in attracting and retaining students.

Taekwondo, originally derived from Japanese karate and officially named in 1955, began its globalization after the Korean War (1950-1953) through Korean martial arts instructors immigrating abroad. The South Korean government's active promotion of taekwondo as a tool of cultural diplomacy started in 1971, when it was declared a nominal 'national sport,' marking South Korea's first major international cultural export—preceding the modern 'Korean Wave' (Moenig & Kim, 2017). Since its inclusion as an official Olympic sport at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, taekwondo has continued to grow globally; it is now practiced in 213 countries and territories (World Taekwondo, 2024). Some sources claim that approximately 80 million people practice taekwondo worldwide (for example, Kang, 2019, p. 3). An older publication estimates that around 7 million people practice taekwondo in the United States (Kim, 2014). However, these figures may not be entirely reliable and could be exaggerated, as there are no dependable statistics or counting methods.

Nevertheless, the comparatively elevated participation rate of taekwondo in the United States offers a potentially fruitful avenue for research. Moreover, considering its potential as the most competitive market globally, an assessment of the current taekwondo school marketing strategies within this environment could offer valuable insights for other martial arts institutions. Previous studies on taekwondo schools in South Korea and other martial arts in various countries have primarily utilized quantitative research methods such as surveys, focusing on management models, marketing strategies, activation methods for academies, image positioning, program development, social media, and satisfaction with facilities (Moon & Kim, 2023; Xie, Chang & Cai, 2022; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Ban & Ahn, 2017; Thomas, 2017; Kim, 2008; Seo, 2007; Lee, 2006). Some publications on general martial arts marketing highlight key trends, such as the globalization of Asian martial arts through sportification, cultural adaptation, and strategic branding (Ko & Yang, 2012), as well as the use of integrated digital and traditional marketing by U.S. academies to shape consumer behavior, strengthen brand loyalty, and increase membership across various disciplines (Kim & Greenwell, 2024). In contrast, the field of sports marketing has been explored far more extensively than martial arts, offering valuable examples that could be applied to marketing within the martial arts domain (Rein, Kotler & Shields, 2006; Shank & Lyberger, 2021; Celiker & Gul, 2024; Vidhya, 2024; Manoli, 2025). This field is well-documented, with dedicated academic journals.¹

This study aims to identify effective Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning strategies for taekwondo academies in the United States, with the potential for adaptation to various regions, countries, and even other martial arts disciplines.

Initially, this study will briefly explain the research methodology and its reliability. Following that, this article will discuss strategies for recruiting and retaining martial arts students based on market segmentation, target marketing, and positioning strategies, drawing insights from three successful taekwondo academies in the United States.

2. Research design, data collection, and reliability

In contrast to quantitative research, this study emphasizes phenomenological research through in-depth interviews, which will help uncover aspects of successful taekwondo schools in terms of student recruitment and loyalty (Kim, 2008; Seo, 2007). As a marketing strategy, this study employs the STP model, a series of activities that identify patterns in consumer behavior, segment

¹ For example, the *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*.
<https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/issn/1464-6668>



the market (Segmentation), select target markets accordingly (Targeting), and appropriately position the target market (Positioning). Philip Kotler (2024) popularized the STP marketing model in 1969, which has since been widely applied by large companies, most notably Coca-Cola. In this study, based on the analysis of the interviews in relation to the STP model, the data and findings may be directly applicable to a variety of martial arts schools. More specifically, the STP technique enables martial arts schools to segment their market, target key customer groups, and establish a strong, differentiated brand, maximizing efficiency and competitiveness. The methodology ensures that the study and its results can be reliably replicated by different martial arts styles regardless of regions.

In-depth interviews enable detailed insights into personal experiences and varied perspectives (Padgett, 1998), making this method suitable for gathering firsthand knowledge about effective student recruitment practices. Research participants were martial arts school owners, who resided in the USA.

The individuals included in this study were selected through random sampling to ensure a representative and unbiased sample, thereby strengthening the reliability and generalizability of the findings. Additionally, participant willingness was considered as a criterion during the selection process.

Three participants were interviewed (all of them gave their consent for appearing in this study):

- Won-seok Lee, who has owned the Sunrise TaeKwonDo school in Portland, Oregon, since 2014. Jaden Lee, who has owned the Korean Tiger Martial Arts school in Fort Worth, Texas, since 2016. And Regina Jiyeon Im, who is the founder and co-owner of Korea Taekwondo-KTKD in Flushing, NY, established in 2009. For Won-seok Lee, who visited Korea for an official engagement, eight interview sessions were conducted from May 15 to 18, 2023, lasting 30 to 60 minutes each. The original plan for five sessions was extended to eight due to the participant's availability. The interviews employed oral and semi-structured questions to minimize interviewer influence.
- For Jaden Lee, interviews were conducted via video chat between June 15 and July 20, 2023, due to scheduling constraints, with 20 sessions held at 10 a.m. Korea time. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, with verification by colleagues to ensure accuracy.
- Lastly, Regina Jiyeon Im, a female participant, presented a comprehensive written response, thoroughly addressing our inquiries with detailed analysis in April 2025. Considering that martial arts school owners are predominantly male, her perspective may have offered a unique and insightful viewpoint.

Table 1. Participant details (see the homepage addresses in footnote number 2)

| | Sunrise TaeKwonDo | Korean Tiger Martial Arts | Korea Taekwondo-KTKD |
|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Owner or co-owner | Won-seok Lee | Jaden Lee | Regina Jiyeon Im |
| Location | Oregon | Fort Worth, Texas | Flushing, NY |
| Founding year | 2014 | 2016 | 2009 |

Interview topics included demographics (age, education, student count, and instructor count), school location and regional characteristics, recruitment methods, management strategies, and differentiation strategies (see the basic interview questionnaire in the Appendix). Participants provided consent for recording and for their material to be used in this study. The transcripts were confirmed for accuracy by the participants via email and/or direct review. However, due to the length of some of the interviews, only the most relevant parts are cited in this study.

² Sunrise TaeKwonDo (Portland, Oregon): <https://www.yelp.com/biz/sunrise-taekwondo-portland>; Korean Tiger Martial Arts: <https://mykoreantiger.com/> (Fort Worth, Texas); Korea Taekwondo-KTKD: <https://ktkd.nyc/> (New York City, New York).



In qualitative research, issues surrounding reliability and validity have long faced critique (Patton, 1990; Park, 2005; Choi, 2016). Researchers bear the responsibility of accurately interpreting and objectively analyzing findings while ensuring that their conclusions are free from subjective bias. Equally essential is the accurate representation of research participants' perspectives. This study strengthened its validity and reliability through a Trustworthiness Criteria analysis, incorporating methods such as reflexive subjectivity and peer review. The study's reliability and validity were ensured using Guba and Lincoln's criteria: triangulation and member checking for credibility, rich descriptions for transferability, an audit trail for dependability, and reflexivity for confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Since this study is qualitative in nature, it did not employ thematic analysis, coding procedures, or analytical software. Although a sample of three cases may be insufficient for comprehensive analysis, a degree of theoretical saturation was observed, as numerous overlapping themes emerged across participants. Reflexivity: Accordingly, to ensure the results of this study were free from bias and assumptions, the interpretation and findings of the interviews were thoroughly peer-reviewed and deliberated among the researchers to avoid possible biases. In addition, the interview content was analyzed alongside the academies' homepages and the various programs they promote. Lastly, the transcripts have been carefully reviewed to verify their accuracy.

This limited case study aims to serve as a practical approach and method to identifying marketing strategies for taekwondo academies, which may also be tailored for use in other martial arts schools. Moreover, another objective is to encourage further research on this subject in the future.

3. The market segmentation process for opening a martial arts school

Market segmentation is an essential tool for entrepreneurs, allowing them to divide a target market into smaller, more approachable groups or segments based on demographics and behaviors. It is fundamentally a means of identifying your market or target audience (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008; Kotler, 2024). When opening a martial arts school in South Korea, some of the most important factors to consider are the local characteristics of the area. These characteristics provide a wealth of information and should be considered when setting training fees and developing training programs. However, not all taekwondo schools consider these local factors; many are opened based purely on economic capabilities, which are crucial, along with population and residential density, when deciding on a location (Choi, 2006; Lee, 2001; Kim, 2018).

3.1. The case of Won-seok Lee

For Lee, who established a taekwondo school in Portland, this process was shaped by his personal experiences. In many cases, knowledge acquired through experience can refine and validate theoretical frameworks, creating a solid foundation for practical, experience-based market segmentation.

I first came to the U.S. as an instructor. Most instructors who come here for the first time typically follow this path. As a result, I was able to learn the accumulated know-how of existing schools while being paid for it. When I decided to open my own school, I thought it would be best to establish it in a densely populated area. I also believed that setting up in a shopping center would be beneficial. As I prepared to open my school, I traveled across four or five states looking for a suitable location. Ultimately, I identified a well-populated area near a shopping center and situated between schools and residential neighborhoods. This location benefits from substantial exposure due to high foot traffic and offers promising opportunities to attract nearby residents. Given the affluence of the area, I anticipated that my school would perform well once opened. (Won-seok Lee, personal interview, 2023).

Lee concentrated on high-density locations with consistent visitor flow, ensuring his school's presence remained visible to a broad audience. This choice was informed by geographic segmentation principles, which divide markets based on location characteristics like country, city, or neighborhood (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). Portland emerged as the ideal target area due to its high population density and significant mobility. Population density is particularly valuable for schools in terms of visibility, as areas with greater foot traffic—such as shopping centers—offer ongoing promotional opportunities. However, without comprehensive preliminary research, navigating these market dynamics can be challenging, especially for newcomers (Ko & Lim, 2011; Kim & Ahn, 2022).



3.2. *The case of Jaden Lee*

In Jaden Lee's case, market segmentation was strategically based on income levels— a common approach utilized by sellers of products such as cars, clothing, cosmetics, financial services, and travel. By targeting wealthier customers, businesses can focus on groups with both the desire and the financial capability to purchase their offerings. Similarly, Jaden Lee selected his school's location by segmenting the market to attract the affluent middle class.

Reflecting on my own experience, I began my career as an instructor in Fort Worth, Texas, an affluent neighborhood known for its stability and prosperity. This prosperous setting likely influenced my decision to establish my school in the same city as well, since higher income levels provide the flexibility to set competitive training fees. Additionally, even if I wish to offer certain expensive programs, parents in this area typically have the means to invest in their children's activities (Jaden Lee, personal interview, 2023).

This strategic decision mirrors Lee's previous experience running a taekwondo studio, where operating in high-income areas ensured robust enrollment and active engagement. By leveraging market segmentation based on experience, both Jaden Lee and Won-seok Lee were able to effectively target and serve their desired customer base. This approach offers a nuanced alternative to traditional market segmentation methods, as discussed by Kotler and Armstrong (2008).

3.3. *The case of Regina Jiyeon Im*

According to Im:

We aim for middle- to upper-middle-income neighborhoods, where families are more likely to invest in meaningful programs for their children. These areas also tend to have higher retention rates, which helps us build a sustainable, long-term business. Most of the families we work with are earning \$75,000 to \$150,000 a year.

We look for family-friendly, high-density neighborhoods with good schools and growing populations. We first opened in New York City, where there's high demand for extracurricular activities. Now, we're expanding to suburban areas like Columbus, Ohio—places where young families are settling for better education and quality of life. New York gives us diversity and visibility. Columbus suburbs give us stability, less competition, and stronger long-term relationships with families.

Im also strategically positioned her academies in middle- and high-income neighborhoods, where the population is both financially stable and highly educated, fostering an environment of ambition and academic excellence.

4. **Market targeting for opening a martial arts school**

Market targeting requires close attention to local conditions and tailored strategies for specific groups of consumers, as these factors can differ significantly across various regions and countries (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008; Kumar & Steenkamp, 2013).

I invested considerable effort in creating programs designed to appeal to middle-class families. I also adapted elements of Korean etiquette to resonate with American culture, believing that this cultural blend would be well-received (Won-seok Lee, personal interview, 2023).

In this particular area, where residents are relatively affluent, it is common to see parents training alongside their children, making taekwondo practice a family activity. This trend is largely possible due to the area's economic stability (Jaden Lee, personal interview, 2023).

Attracting whole families provides greater stability for the operation of a studio. Such stability enables investments in quality facilities, skilled instructors, and diverse programs, resulting in a lower student dropout rate—a trend not only hypothesized but supported by practical experiences from Jaden Lee's previous studio. Family programs, however, require careful consideration of time and space constraints, necessitating separate time slots and exclusive programming tailored to families. At Jaden Lee's present studio, financial stability allows the entire family to participate, and this economic flexibility has made it possible to invest in and launch new programs with confidence (Jaden Lee, personal interview, 2023).

Regina Jiyeon Im describes her target customer base in detail:



- *Age*: Children are definitely the core of our student base, but we serve a wide range of ages:
- *Children (5–12)*: Learning discipline, confidence, and coordination through structured classes.
- *Teens & Adults (13+)*: Building leadership, fitness, and personal growth.
- *Income*: Families earning between \$75,000 and \$150,000 per year are financially stable and willing to invest in their children's growth.
- *Education*: Most of the parents are college-educated and care deeply about both academics and personal development. They are education focused and care about their children's growth—both academically and emotionally.
- *Lifestyle*: These families are busy but committed. Many are dual-income households looking for structured, high-quality programs that are well-run and dependable, and teach both physical and life skills.
- *Motivation*: These parents want their children to build confidence, respect, and focus. Children are motivated by fun and progress. Teens and adults come for fitness, leadership, and cultural connection. These parents are looking for more than activities—they want opportunities that help their children build leadership, character, and life skills.
- *Quality-driven*: These parents do their research and choose programs based on reviews, referrals, and overall value.
- *Families*: They are family-oriented and want to be involved and enjoy special events like Parent & Me and family workshops. Therefore, the academy seeks creating opportunities for families to grow together.

In contrast, in South Korea, it is uncommon for families to train together at a sports center or taekwondo studio. While this may not solely stem from economic challenges, the prevalence of dual-income households often limits opportunities for joint family activities. Moreover, taekwondo is typically regarded as an activity for children, with the exception of competitive athletes or individuals aspiring to become future instructors (Cho et al., 2017; Park, 2021, Dec. 17). Therefore, local considerations are essential when identifying and appealing to the right customer base.

5. The positioning strategy for opening a martial arts school: differentiating your brand

When examining the positioning strategy between a business and its customers, it is typically anchored on factors such as price and benefits to ensure that a product or brand stands out from its competitors in the minds of consumers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008; Manaswini & Aggarwal, 2023). In marketing, relational benefits—those that focus on cultivating strong customer relationships—are effective in fostering loyalty and commitment, particularly in a taekwondo school setting. However, the context of taekwondo academies in South Korea presents unique challenges to positioning based on pricing strategies. Training fees are often established according to regional norms, as associations within each region provide informal guidelines on pricing. Although these guidelines are not strictly enforced, they heavily influence the pricing landscape, making it difficult for academies to compete solely on price. Instead, academies must differentiate themselves through the benefits they offer. In contrast, taekwondo studios outside of Korea, including in the U.S., generally face fewer pricing constraints from associations, allowing them more freedom in setting prices (Won-seok Lee, personal interview, 2023). This flexibility enables studios to adapt their pricing strategies to regional characteristics, potentially improving customer satisfaction by aligning with local expectations and preferences.

5.1. The case of Won-seok Lee

The focus on 'tradition' in martial arts training:

Motivated by the distinct mindset toward martial arts in the U.S., I established my academy with a focus on 'traditional taekwondo.' There is a strong interest here in the traditional aspects of taekwondo, particularly its emphasis on values such as etiquette, mental discipline, and philosophical teachings. This



cultural fascination has guided my academy's positioning around these traditional values. I prioritize mental training, meditation, and spiritual discipline, aiming to offer my students a sense of inner peace and personal growth, which I believe are the most meaningful benefits of traditional taekwondo (Won-seok Lee, personal interview, 2023).

Lee's academy heavily emphasizes 'traditional taekwondo' programs and maintains a strong Korean cultural influence. By presenting traditional taekwondo training with an adjusted focus—emphasizing 'self-control' and 'restraint' rather than solely physical discipline—the program becomes accessible and inclusive for students of various backgrounds and skill levels. For example, incorporating respectful gestures like bowing or greeting the instructor when entering the academy helps students appreciate the cultural aspects of Eastern martial arts. Such behaviors, once adopted, may translate into everyday actions and potentially serve as organic word-of-mouth promotion, further aiding in student recruitment.

Moreover, Won-seok Lee differentiates his program by offering a blend of physical and mental training. For instance, introducing meditation as part of the training routine could strengthen both mind and body, offering a comprehensive training experience. Some studies highlight the positive effects of meditation from both neuroscientific and psychological perspectives (Lim & Choi, 2013). This mental focus adds a new dimension to the program, attracting students interested in holistic personal development.

Lee continues:

To reinforce these values outside of class, I provide students with meditation CDs and guides to continue their practice at home. Additionally, I translate Eastern philosophical principles and share them with students, which is particularly well-received by adult practitioners and parents. I also offer various benefits, such as free study sessions, coupon books, and other incentives, to enhance the experience for my students (Won-seok Lee, personal interview, 2023).

Won-seok Lee suggests that positioning in this context should incorporate both price and benefits, focusing on value propositions that resonate with customers' expectations. Relational benefits, especially relevant in the U.S., provide a competitive edge through relationship marketing by nurturing loyalty.

5.2. The case of Jaden Lee

Higher tuition fees often correspond with added benefits, following the logic that premium products or services justify higher costs with elevated quality and exclusivity (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008; Kotler, 2024). Consequently, many taekwondo academies make substantial investments in their facilities and interiors to boost consumer satisfaction (Kang & Ok, 2002). The idea is to provide value that matches the price, especially in academies targeting a middle- or upper-class clientele.

Our concept for the academy blends elements of a luxurious fitness club with traditional Eastern-style interior design. Unique features, such as fully equipped shower rooms and a café-like lounge area for parents, create an upscale environment not typically found in standard taekwondo academies. Although the initial investment was considerable, this 'premium taekwondo academy' concept aims to distinguish our brand in a competitive market and appeal to parents who value high-end facilities for their children's training (Jaden Lee, personal interview, 2023).

The academy's branding centers around a 'luxury' image, emphasizing premium facilities to enhance the experience and satisfaction of both students and parents. Its location in a middle-class residential neighborhood aligns well with market expectations, as parents anticipate that the facilities will justify the premium training fees. Therefore, the heavy focus on interior design and amenities ensures that students and parents alike feel the value of their investment in the academy (Kang & Ok, 2002; Kang, 2013).

5.3. The case of Regina Jiyeon Im

Im provided a thorough account of the distinctive qualities and positing strategies that set her academy apart:



As the first and only taekwondo vendor officially partnered with NYC schools, this academy offers a comprehensive martial arts education tailored to different age groups through detailed student manuals and curriculum videos for home practice. Emphasizing authentic Korean taekwondo culture, instruction is led by native Korean masters, all certified by Kukkiwon, the official World Taekwondo headquarters. To further support students' development, black belt practitioners are eligible for the prestigious Presidential Volunteer Service Awards, reinforcing their dedication beyond martial arts. Additionally, members benefit from an exclusive app and online academy, providing seamless access to schedules, instructional videos, and valuable resources for continuous learning and engagement.

According to Im: From day one, we built our academy by listening to what families actually want.

- *Customer attitudes:* Customers seeking taekwondo instruction prioritize more than just physical activity—they value respect, structure, and professionalism in their training environment. Authenticity is a key factor, as they appreciate genuine Korean taekwondo taught with cultural integrity, ensuring a deeper connection to tradition and discipline.
- *Customer aspirations:* Parents seek taekwondo programs that instill confidence, respect, and discipline in their children while fostering leadership development and cultural education. They value opportunities that go beyond individual training, preferring programs that engage the whole family and create a shared learning experience.

According to Im:

Because I really understand what our families care about—both what they need and what they hope for—we've built more than just a training center. We've built a place where values are lived, where families grow together, and where kids become life champions.

Hence, the academy designed their marketing to match what the families care about. Im continuous:

- *School & Community Partnerships:* The academy is the first taekwondo academy officially partnered with NYC schools. We run PE classes, enrichment programs, and family events that introduce us to new families in trusted school settings.
- *Google Reviews:* We make sure to earn and maintain top Google ratings. Parents trust reviews, and our centers have the most 5-star reviews in our area.
- *Events:* We host fun, family-focused events like Buddy Day, Parent & Me, Bully-Proof Workshops, and Open Houses—great ways for new families to experience what we do.
- *Referral & Loyalty Programs:* Our families love to refer friends, and we thank them with bonuses and perks.
- *Social Media:* We actively share moments on Instagram and Facebook—student progress, belt ceremonies, leadership activities, and parent testimonials—so others can see our community and values in action.

The academy emphasizes family inclusion and community engagement, integrating structured and comprehensive curricula to foster a well-rounded educational experience. Additionally, social media promotion enhances visibility and outreach. A key component of the academy's approach is its dedication to holistic education, ensuring students develop diverse skills and perspectives. Furthermore, the incorporation of Korean cultural elements plays a significant role in shaping the academy's educational framework.

5.4. Summary

Once the target market for a taekwondo academy has been identified, the next step is to embed the academy's brand value in the minds of students and parents through an effective positioning strategy. Service differentiation is a powerful way to establish brand value, as it sets the academy apart in a competitive market. Many taekwondo academies differentiate themselves



through tailored programs and specialized events. From a facilities perspective, creating a unique and well-designed space can significantly enhance brand value, helping to ensure successful academy operations. This includes creating aesthetically pleasing, modern interiors that stimulate a positive sensory experience. Moreover, in the context of local economic conditions, higher training fees can be established to reflect factors such as facility costs, rent, and program development (Kim, 2005; Wang & Jin, 2022). However, research on Korean taekwondo academies shows also that, beyond these aspects, factors like instructor communication, trustworthiness, and competence, along with high-quality facilities, are crucial in attracting students (Choi, 2009).

6. Discussion

Unlike conventional sports marketing research, which typically focuses on brand awareness, product sales, and fan engagement (Rein et al., 2006; Shank & Lyberger, 2021), this article is exclusively concerned with the promotion of taekwondo schools. The few existing general martial arts marketing studies often overlap with the results of this research (Xie et al., 2022; Niepytalska, 2024; Peacock, 2025). However, they tend to prioritize digital marketing, event-driven promotions, and traditional advertising, while overlooking the crucial influence of location and customer demographics on crafting an effective marketing strategy.

This research has shown that the strategic location of taekwondo schools plays a pivotal role in their success, influenced by factors such as accessibility and community engagement. Urban centers and suburban areas with high foot traffic and a family-oriented atmosphere are particularly advantageous, as they maximize visibility and convenience for prospective students. Furthermore, proximity to educational institutions and residential districts enhances accessibility, fostering higher enrollment rates. Given the socioeconomic dynamics of student recruitment, middle- and high-income neighborhoods offer the most favorable conditions, as they provide greater financial stability and a strong demand for structured extracurricular activities. However, these segmentation and targeting policies may have the social consequence of limiting access to quality taekwondo instruction for children from less affluent families. Overall, prioritizing population density and income levels are likely significant factors for any given martial art in attracting students and securing revenues.

Taekwondo schools primarily cater to children whose parents seek structured discipline and physical activity, fostering character development and coordination. Additionally, family-oriented programs serve as a strong appeal, offering shared experiences that reinforce values and encourage participation across generations. On the other hand, it is difficult to image muay Thai or the mixed martial arts schools as a family-oriented activity or to consider young children as their primary audience. Therefore, the target audience as identified in this study may not hold the same significance for other martial arts.

To attract and retain students, successful taekwondo schools implement multifaceted positioning strategies. Brand differentiation is an important factor in this regard. Successful promotional tactics often include community engagement initiatives and digital marketing efforts with an emphasis on Asian cultural elements and tradition. While some publications suggest that the notions of tradition and history in taekwondo are, to a significant extent, constructed or selectively shaped—amounting to a case of ‘invention of tradition’ (Moenig & Kim, 2016; see also Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983)—they remain central to taekwondo’s cultural identity and global appeal. In this context, the notion of Asian tradition and culture evokes Edward Said’s (1978) seminal concept of *Orientalism*—a critical framework that underscores the powerful influence behind the distorted cultural narratives shaping Western perceptions of the East. Conversely, the emphasis on Asian traditions might work to a lesser degree in martial arts such as Brazilian jiu-jitsu or the mixed martial arts. Therefore, the positioning strategies for other martial arts may also differ to some degree.

In summary, the success of martial arts schools of any style and region depends greatly on strategic location selection, precise demographic targeting, and effective marketing strategies. All these aspects contribute to sustained growth and expansion. In the case of taekwondo academies, at least in the U.S., and according to the results of this study, preferred STP strategies are those detailed in Table 2.



Table 2. Key STP strategies of the subjects for this study

| | Sunrise TaeKwonDo | Korean Tiger Martial Arts | Korea Taekwondo-KTKD |
|---------------------|---|---------------------------|--|
| Segmentation | -Population density | -High income levels | -Middle- to upper-income levels -High-density neighborhoods |
| Targeting | -Middle-class families | -Children and families | -Children and families |
| Positing | -Traditional Asian customs and values -Training as physical as well as mental discipline - Value propositions | -Premium luxury brand | - Genuine Korean cultural experience -Training as physical as well as mental discipline -Family and community oriented |

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the factors that contribute to the success of taekwondo academies in the United States, particularly in attracting and retaining students, by interviewing their founders and analyzing their statements. The key strategic insights derived from this study are as follows (see also Figure 1), and may offer practical insights for U.S. taekwondo academies and possibly provide adaptable frameworks for other martial arts schools in different regions and countries:

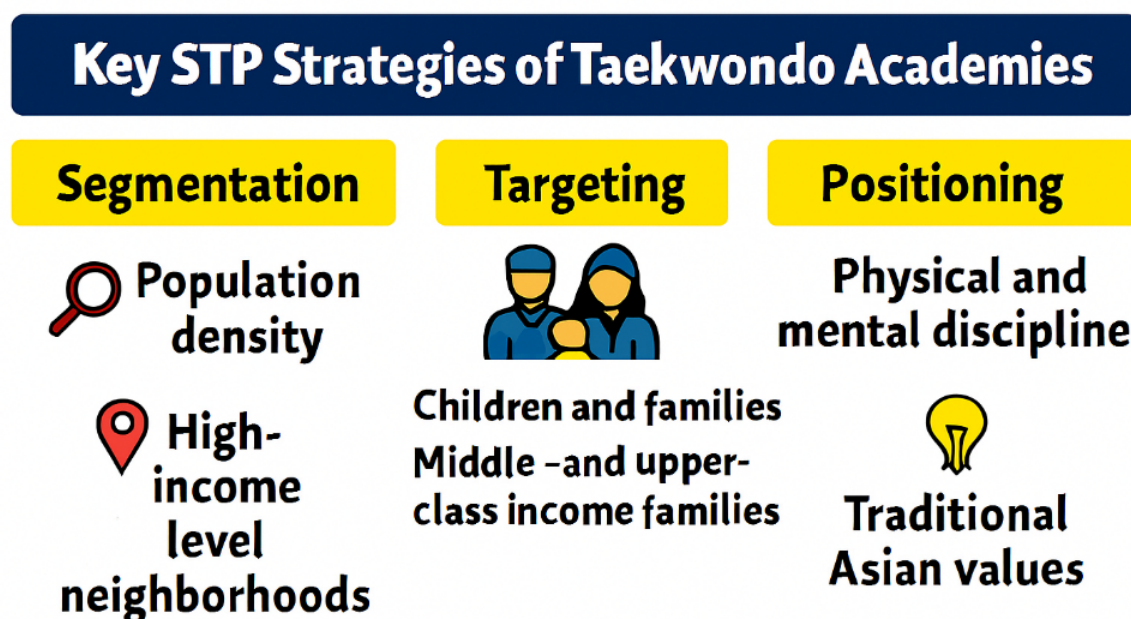
1. *Segmentation*: Population density is particularly advantageous for martial arts schools in terms of exposure. Locations in or near shopping centers present greater foot traffic and offer ongoing promotional opportunities. In addition, income level serves as an essential criterion for identifying affluent areas in which to establish a martial arts academy. However, opening a martial arts school in or near a shopping center in a high-income neighborhood requires considerable capital investment, as do some of the other strategies discussed. This financial requirement may limit the feasibility of this approach for individuals facing economic constraints.
2. *Targeting*: Martial arts academies can attract and retain more students by developing programs tailored for middle-class families, such as family-oriented activities. When parents train alongside their children, taekwondo practice transforms into a family activity. Thus, the recruitment target extends beyond the individual student to include the entire family enhancing loyalty. Moreover, actively participating in local community initiatives—such as partnerships with public schools—can significantly boost visibility and foster deeper engagement with the target audience. The framework discussed in this study can help identifying and connecting with an ideal target audience while standing out in the competitive martial arts market. Finally, maintaining an active and engaging social media presence enhances the visibility of martial arts schools, allowing them to reach a wider audience.
3. *Positing*: Adopting a luxury brand image can appeal to high-income customers seeking perceived value, potentially leading to greater success. By implementing a premium positioning strategy, a martial arts academy can distinguish itself through exceptional service offerings and premium facilities, thus building significant brand value and fostering strong connections with students. Moreover, incorporating traditional Asian cultural elements—such as etiquette, respect, spiritual discipline, philosophical teachings, and meditative practices—alongside practical martial arts instruction may enhance the appeal for potential students who are culturally fascinated by mystic and exotic Oriental traditions. This approach complements the physical training aspects and capitalizes on the well-received selling point of ‘tradition’ in Asian martial arts schools as a point of differentiation.

The findings of this study are constrained by the relatively small sample size and its exclusive focus on taekwondo schools within the United States. These limitations should be considered when



interpreting the results. Therefore, some approaches discussed in this study may not be easily adaptable or relevant to certain neighborhoods, regions, countries, or specific other martial arts disciplines than taekwondo. Martial arts, such as Brazilian jiu-jitsu, karate, wushu, muay Thai, or the mixed martial arts, typically cater to distinct audience groups, while taekwondo schools often concentrate on teaching children. Consequently, some findings may not be directly transferable to other martial arts disciplines. Further research is necessary to evaluate their broader applicability, which remains speculative at this stage. Nevertheless, the fundamental strategies outlined in this study, namely the STP model, and some of its findings may be valuable for both existing and aspiring martial arts school owners across various styles and different global regions. At last, future research could consider examining various other marketing strategies, such as comparative quantitative or mixed-methods studies, across various martial arts disciplines or within diverse cultural settings to gain broader insights and enhance the applicability of the findings.

Figure 1. Core Insights from STP Strategy Analysis



References

- Ban, D. J., & An, G. A. (2017). A study on the problems and development strategies of nurturing Taekwondo sparring athletes in dojangs. *Journal of Korean Martial Arts*, 11(4), 107–124. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.riss.kr/link?id=A104656313>
- Celiker, A., & Gul, M. (2024). Sports marketing and its importance: A literature review. *Acta Scientiae et Intellectus*, 10(2), 53–63. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14556090>
- Cho, S. Y., Kim, Y. I., & Roh, H. T. (2017). Effects of Taekwondo intervention on cognitive function and academic self-efficacy in children. *Journal of Physical Therapy Science*, 29(4), 713–715. [In Korean]. <https://doi.org/10.1589/jpts.29.713>
- Choi, E. C. (2016). Qualitative research in the field of sports education: The half-life story of a qualitative researcher. *Journal of Korean Qualitative Research*, 2(2), 31–55. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artid=ART002275312>
- Choi, H. Y. (2006). A factor analysis on location selection for Taekwondo dojang opening [Master's thesis, Kyungwon University]. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1589/jpts.29.713>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic contradictions and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 191–215). Sage Publications.
- Hobsbawm, E. & Ranger T. (Eds.). (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.

- Kang, B. G., & Ok, H. A. (2002). An analysis of parental satisfaction regarding Taekwondo dojang facilities and management. *Journal of the Korean Society for Sport Management*, 7(2), 101–111. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.riss.kr/link?id=A106232591>
- Kang, H. M. (2013). The class structure of leisure sports consumption and Veblen's 'Theory of the Leisure Class.' *Journal of Korean Leisure Recreation*, 37(2), 45–58. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.riss.kr/link?id=A106100416>
- Kang, S. J. (2019). World Taekwondo. Retrieved from <https://sjkang.com.covtogether.coventry.domains/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/SJ-Kang-Digital-Marketing-Analysis-of-World-Taekwondo.pdf>
- Kim, C. M. (2008). Consumer behavior characteristics based on Taekwondo dojang management types [Doctoral dissertation, Dongshin University]. [In Korean]. Retrieved from https://dsu.dcollection.net/public_resource/pdf/000000311973_20250804124736.pdf
- Kim, D. E. (2005). A study on parents' preferences regarding Taekwondo dojang selection. *Korea Chemistry Research Institute*, 73, 73–85. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.riss.kr/link?id=T10645620>
- Kim, D. H. (2018). Exploring ways to utilize community safety networks for Taekwondo dojang business revitalization. *Journal of Korean Sports*, 16(3), 141–148. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.earticle.net/Article/A337776>
- Kim, H. K. (2014, May 28). The Korean martial art Taekwondo kicks the U.S.-South Korean relationship forward. *Korea Matters for America Matters for Korea*. Retrieved from <https://asiamattersforamerica.org/articles/the-korean-martial-art-taekwondo-kicks-the-us-south-korean-relationship-forward>
- Kim, M., & Zhang, J. (2019). Structural relationship between market demand and member commitment associated with the marketing of martial arts programs. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 20(3), 516–537. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMS-05-2016-0019>
- Kim, S. K., & An, G. A. (2022). A study predicting changes in Taekwondo dojang vehicle operations due to the mandatory escort of children on school buses. *Journal of Korean Sports*, 20(2), 233–240. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.earticle.net/Article/A414287>
- Kim, S., & Greenwell, T. C. (2024). Strategic marketing in martial arts: Exploring consumer behavior and brand loyalty in U.S. martial arts academies. *Journal of Sport Management*, 38(4), 245–257. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2023-0156>
- Ko, K. I., & Im, H. C. (2011). A study on overseas expansion strategies for Korean consulting firms. *Journal of International Business Management*, 15(1), 51–75. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.earticle.net/Article/A174612>
- Ko, Y. J., & Yang, J. B. (2012). The globalization of martial arts: The change of rules for new markets. *Revista de Artes Marciales Asiáticas*, 4(1), 8–19. <https://doi.org/10.18002/rama.v4i1.222>
- Kotler, P., & Armstrong, G. (2008). *Principles of marketing* (Ahn, G. H., Yoo, C. J., & Jeon, S. W., Trans.). Sigma Press. [Korean translation of the English text].
- Kotler, P. (2024). The past, present, and future of marketing [Philip Kotler's insights]. *Journal of Marketing*. American Marketing Association. Retrieved from <https://www.ama.org/2024/03/12/a-lifetime-in-marketing-lessons-learned-and-the-way-ahead-by-philip-kotler/>
- Kumar, V., & Steenkamp, J.-B. E. M. (2013). *Branding and marketing in emerging markets*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, E. J. (2001). *A study on image positioning strategies for the efficient management of Taekwondo dojangs* [Master's thesis, Kyung Hee University]. [In Korean].
- Lee, S. H. (2006). A case analysis of Taekwondo dojang management [Master's thesis, Kyungwon University Graduate School of Business]. [In Korean].
- Lim, Y. R., & Choi, G. B. (2013). The effects of a mindfulness meditation program on stress perception, depression, and self-efficacy in nursing students. *Journal of East-West Nursing Research*, 19(2), 104–113. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART001824753>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.

- Manaswini, M., & Aggarwal, M. (2023). The buyer's outlook: Navigating the impact of product differentiation, innovation, customer focus, and price strategy upon business performance. *Academy of Strategic Management Journal*, 22(6), 1–16.
- Manoli, A. E. (Ed.). (2025). *Contemporary issues in sports marketing*. Routledge.
- Moenig, U., & Kim, M. (2016). The Invention of Taekwondo Tradition, 1945–1972: When Mythology becomes 'History' *Acta Koreana*, 19(2), 131–164. <https://www.doi.org/10.18399/acta.2016.19.2.006>
- Moenig, U., & Kim, M. (2017). A critical review of the historical formation of Olympic-style Taekwondo's institutions and the resulting present-day inconsistencies. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 34(12), 1323–1342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1385603>
- Moon, G. S., & Kim, D. H. (2023). The mediating effect of service value in the relationship between Taekwondo dojang selection quality and satisfaction. *Journal of Korean Sports*, 21(1), 121–132. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.earticle.net/Article/A427007>
- Niepytalska, A. (2024). 20 best martial arts marketing ideas in 2024 (The ultimate guide). *WODGURU*. Retrieved from <https://wod.guru/blog/martial-arts-marketing/>
- Padgett, D. (1998). *Qualitative data analysis expanded source book* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Park, H. (2021, December 17). Why so many taekwondo academies? *The Korea Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211217000505>
- Park, J. W. (2005). *The revolution of qualitative research data analysis*. Hyungseol Publishing. [In Korean]. Retrieved from <https://www.riss.kr/link?id=M10261760>
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Peacock, J. (2025, March 13). Martial arts – The ultimate guide to martial arts marketing. *GYMDESK*. Retrieved from <https://gymdesk.com/blog/martial-arts-marketing-the-ultimate-guide/>
- Rein, I., Kotler, P., & Shields, B. (2006). *The elusive fan: Reinventing sports in a crowded marketplace*. McGraw-Hill.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Random House.
- Seo, J. H. (2007). A study on Taekwondo instructors' perception levels regarding Taekwondo dojang management factors [Master's thesis, Yongin University]. [In Korean].
- Shank, M. D., & Lyberger, M. R. (2021). *Sports marketing*. Routledge.
- Thomas, J. (2017). Exploring buyer motivation to improve management, marketing, sales, and finance practices in the martial arts industry. *International Journal of Marketing Studies*, 9(2), 12–21. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijms.v9n2p12>
- Vidhya, R. (2024). Sports marketing: A critical analysis on its nature. *International Journal of Scientific Development and Research (IJS DR)*, 9(2), 723–727. Retrieved from <https://ijsdr.org/papers/IJS DR2402110.pdf>
- Wang, Y., & Jin, S. T. (2022). An analysis of problems with Taekwondo education programs in China: Focusing on Henan Province. *Journal of Korean Leisure Culture*, 20(2), 1–16. [In Korean].
- World Taekwondo. (2024). A new year message from World Taekwondo President for 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.worldtaekwondo.org/wtnews/view.html?nid=140879&sc=ne&w=A%20new%20year%20message%20from%20World%20Taekwondo%20President%20for%202024>
- Xie, M.-C., Chang, Y.-C., & Cai, C.-M. (2022, October 24). Understanding the effect of social media marketing activity for promoting intention to participate in martial arts. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.999153>

~

Authors' biographical data

Hyun Min Choi (PhD) (South Korea) is an assistant professor at Youngsan University. He researches in the fields of martial arts, taekwondo, and sports. He coached the Afghan taekwondo national team at the Beijing Olympics (2008) and the Thai taekwondo national team at the London Olympics (2012). He specializes in sports sociology and is a training expert. He previously worked at the Kukkiwon Research Institute and the World Taekwondo Federation. E-mail: sbvfef@hanmail.net

Jin Sam Yong (PhD) (South Korea) is an adjunct professor in the Department of Taekwondo at Youngsan University. He researches in the field of taekwondo studies. He worked as a director for the Busan Taekwondo



Association for five years and served as the vice-president of the Asia-Pacific Marina Society at Pukyong National University. E-mail: yong_032@hanmail.net

~

Appendix – Initial interview questions (follow-up, in-depth questions are not listed as they vary)

1. Why did you chose the U.S. over other countries for your academy?
2. What is the preferred business district for the location of your acdemy?
3. Did you consider local income levels when you looked for the location of your academy?
4. What is the detailed information on the customer base you have set for operating your academy (age, gender, income, education, lifestyle, motivation)?
5. What marketing strategies have you prepared to match the information (follow-up of question 4)?
6. Are children your primary customer demographic?
7. If children constitute your primary customer base, what are the economic categories of the parents in your operating area, and what defining characteristics do they possess?
8. What strategies have you implemented to differentiate your academy from others?
9. Did you consider the attitudes and aspirations of your customers in this process (follow-up of question 8)?