

Enhancing Wellness through Martial Arts: Restoring Body-Mind Connection - A Qualitative Analysis

Charles Spring¹

Christian Michael Veasey¹

¹Derby Business School, University of Derby, Derby, United Kingdom;

Charles Spring (Corresponding author)

Christian Michael Veasey c.veasey@derby.ac.uk (email) ORCID ID 0000-0001-5842-7320

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Author's bio

Dr Charles Spring is an experienced academic Senior Lecturer in applied management programmes at the University of Derby in the [Centre for Contemporary Hospitality and Tourism](#). His research in the area of Martial Arts and professionalism and the use of Martial Arts as a wellness intervention includes a book published in that area - Martial Arts: Applications in Higher Education. Winner of several awards in both academic and Martial Arts arenas he also has several world titles competitively in Martial Arts.

Dr Christian Michael Veasey is an accomplished academic, blending extensive commercial experience with a passion for education. With over 20 years in senior sales and marketing roles, coupled with seven years in Global Director positions, he provides students with practical and academic insights. Recognized for his

outstanding contributions, Christian was honoured with the Students Union Lecturer of the Year awards in both 2021 and 2023. Beyond academia, he is an avid martial artist, proficient in Judo, kickboxing, and Karate, holding a black belt in Wado Ryu Karate.

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the impact of Martial Arts practice on leisure, healing, and wellness by examining the experiences of 12 practitioners recruited through the researchers' network. Participants were asked questions focusing on how Martial Arts contributed to their mental wellbeing. Three themes emerged, indicating that Martial Arts training acts as a coping mechanism for stress (T1), while Kata and fighting facilitate self-reflection towards achieving self-mastery (T2) and overall wellbeing (T3). These findings underscore the evident correlation between enhancing leisure, healing, and wellness through Martial Arts. Martial Arts integrate the body and mind, offering a comprehensive route to wellbeing that surpasses mere combat training.

1. Introduction to the Martial Arts

Martial Arts is a term predominantly recognized in Western societies, encompassing a variety of combat disciplines focused on fighting, competition, and personal challenge. These practices, often perceived as aggressive and aimed at overcoming opponents, involve techniques employing hands, feet, and a range of weapons. Examples include Japanese Aikido, Karate, Judo, Kendo, Chinese Kung Fu, Filipino Escrima (stick fighting), and Korean Taekwondo (Best, 2014).

Traditional Martial Arts encompass a spectrum of physical and mental practices derived from ancient combat techniques (Yukawa, 2014), historically employed by the military (Cihounkova & Kordik, 2015). In modern times, Martial Arts have expanded beyond mere combat training to encompass self-regulation and skill enhancement, with a focus on instilling values like respect, self-esteem, assertiveness, and determination (Kostorz et al., 2017). However, it's noteworthy that the term 'Martial Arts' can spark debate among both practitioners and scholars in the field (Donohue, 1994; Best, 2014; Harrison, 2015; Buckler, 2016). The correctness of a term often hinges on the context in which these disciplines or styles are being evaluated. Additionally, as Best (2014) suggests, it may also be influenced by one's cultural background and heritage.

In Western society, the term 'Martial' is often associated with self-defence, whether in military or civilian contexts, while 'Art' connotes skill and practice akin to creating a work of art. Combining the two suggests a broader understanding beyond mere combat, as noted by Best (2014) and Buckler (2016). Martial Arts training has seamlessly integrated into sports and physical activity culture (Ko & Yang, 2009),

offering benefits such as enhanced physical, physiological, and social-psychological wellbeing (Cox, 1993; Szaboles et al., 2019).

The elements of discipline and perseverance inherent in Martial Arts contribute significantly to the physical and psychological benefits experienced by practitioners. Research indicates that training leads to increased positive affect and decreased negative affect post-training (Richman & Rehberg, 1986; Szaboles et al., 2019). While Martial Arts training schools and practices can vary widely (Sandford & Gill, 2019), they typically involve small group sessions and may incorporate techniques such as body movement, breathing exercises, and visualization. These varied training methods offer accessible, enriching, and secure learning environments suitable for a diverse range of individuals (Fuller, 2019).

Indeed, terms like "Wu Shu," encompassing Chinese Martial Arts, and "Budo," denoting the martial way in Japanese culture, inherently embody both the sporting and traditional aspects of their respective cultural styles. The term "Budo" emerged in the mid to late 1800s, supplanting "Bujutsu," which translates to martial science or martial craft. The shift to "Budo" signaled a move towards modernization and education, crucial for the survival of traditional Japanese Martial Arts (Donohue, 1994; Hoare, 2009; Alexander, 2014). By aligning "Wu Shu" and "Budo" with a broader definition of Martial Arts, as discussed previously, one can encompass approximately forty different Martial Arts activities.

Alternatively, Harrison (2015) posits that various pedagogical approaches are necessary to impart knowledge in different Martial Arts disciplines. He criticizes the tendency to lump these disciplines together, considering it narrow-minded and even

lazy. Harrison's research delves into the diverse ways of teaching Martial Arts, categorizing them into three distinct approaches: martial education, combat for killing, and combat sport. While Cynarski and Lee-Barron (2014) acknowledge this distinction, they argue that it's still essential for Martial Arts as a whole to adopt pedagogical methods that don't overly restrict the teaching of what should still be considered Martial Arts.

At this juncture, it's pertinent to provide a definition of the term 'Martial Arts' and explore why they can be considered leisure-based activities. Additionally, delineating the range of activities encompassed within the term 'Martial Arts' can broaden understanding across various fields of activity, as advocated by Yang et al. (2021). Martial arts involve combat skill development, incorporating diverse hand-to-hand styles and weapons systems from various cultures (Spring, 2005). Moreover, 'the Martial Arts are about skills that are developed for fighting, that include the recognised oriental and Western hand to hand styles but also encompass weapons systems from around the world. These are not necessarily military-based arts and include 'hard' and 'soft' styles' (Spring, 2005, p.5).

Research conducted in 2005, utilizing focus groups comprising Martial Arts students from a degree program, played a pivotal role in evolving a common definition for Martial Arts among undergraduate students (Spring 2015). The focus groups included participants from ten different Martial Arts styles, spanning both genders and ages ranging from eighteen to fifty. This research laid the groundwork for discussions, as detailed by Best (2014), aimed at reclaiming the term 'Martial Arts' to encompass all the aspects outlined in the 2005 definition. Traditional terms for Martial Arts were found to limit the scope of inclusion.

2. Martial Arts: Enhancing Leisure, Healing, and Wellness

This section will delve into how Martial Arts aligns with leisure activities. A key point emerging from the discussion on definition is the modernization focus observed in Japan and China, which involved rationalizing Martial Arts for the contemporary era. This aligns with Weber's (1920) emphasis on the standardization of activities (Roberts, 2015). The transformation of Thai Boxing into a sport with regulated rules in the ring, along with the evolution of fencing and boxing, also contributes to this discourse. Understanding how and why rationalization occurs and evolves is crucial for the study, as it can pave the way for incorporating Martial Arts as a viable method for enhancing children's wellness within an educational context.

The concept of rationalization, as proposed by German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), posits that modernization and industrialization lead to the emergence of large bureaucracies. These bureaucracies operate systematically and aim to select the most efficient means of accomplishing tasks. As part of this process, commercial opportunities are standardized, and goods and services are provided in the most efficient manner possible (Roberts, 2015).

Ritzer's (2007) concept of McDonaldization builds upon Weber's principle of rationalization, suggesting that the traditional notion of large bureaucracies is challenged within the McDonald's model, which emphasizes flatter structures of control. However, this perspective might oversimplify the concept, as the terms "rationalize," "rationalistic," and "rationalism" can have various meanings. While in a

metaphysical sense, they may relate to Kant and metaphysics, in a sociological context, they often refer to individuals behaving rationally. It's generally assumed, based on findings from other researchers, that the majority tend to act in the best interest of the greater good, which may involve behaving in a professional manner (Scruton, 1982).

From a Martial Arts perspective, it's evident that many different Martial Arts disciplines have adopted a rationalistic approach. These arts have endured by establishing standardized patterns of action for teaching, methods for addressing physical confrontations, and efficient ways of mass instruction. For instance, Gichen Funakoshi formalized the approach to Karate for the Japanese (Nagamine, 1976), while a similar process occurred with the old Jujitsu systems, which were transformed into Judo by Jigoro Kano (Hoare, 2009).

In China, it could be argued that Wu Shu was developed by the Maoist government to counteract the pretentiousness and elitist notions associated with different styles of Kung Fu, aiming to create a Martial Art that could be practiced by all (Zhouxiang, 2011). Rationalization within Martial Arts is exemplified through the establishment of governing bodies, instructor licensing, and grading systems. However, it's worth noting that complete rationalization of the sport is likely impossible (Roberts, 2015), as individuals and groups may operate outside of established controls. Nonetheless, the creation of organizations to oversee and regulate various Martial Arts disciplines aligns them more closely with acceptable leisure-time activities (Roberts, 2015).

Martial arts organisations involvement with Sport England Safeguarding in Martial

Arts exemplifies the rationalization approach taken by clubs to ensure acceptability in this context (Sport England, 2024).

The term "wellness" encompasses a range of definitions, reflecting its varied contexts of use (Cohen et al., 2017; National Wellness Institute, 2017; Agyekum & Newbold, 2016; McLeod & Wright, 2016; Stewart-Brown, 2015; Kelly, 2010; Smith & Kelly, 2006). From a religious standpoint, wellness may be achieved through adherence to spiritual principles or beliefs (Modise & Johannes, 2016), while in other contexts, such as among refugees, it may relate to a sense of community (Agyekum & Newbold, 2016). Dodge et al. (2012) and Morrow and Mayall (2009) highlight the challenge of defining and measuring wellness due to its diverse interpretations across different contexts and perspectives.

The enduring relevance of definitions like that of Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper (2009) highlights the continued importance of promoting a healthy lifestyle for achieving wellness. Despite the evolving perspectives on wellness, recent definitions by scholars such as Bezner (2015), Stanciulescu et al. (2015), and Kirkland (2014) further emphasize the connection between wellness and overall quality of life, reaffirming the significance of maintaining physical and mental health. Additionally, the insights provided by Koskinen et al. (2017) and McLeod and Wright (2016) highlight the multifaceted nature of wellness, acknowledging that it encompasses various positive attributes beyond just physical health, such as happiness and self-care. This holistic perspective underscores the complexity of wellness and the importance of considering its various dimensions, including physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing (Kemppainen et al., 2017).

The practice of both traditional and modern Martial Arts has been shown to lead to improvements in general mental health (Egan, 1992). Lakes and Hoyt (2004) found that Martial Arts training can result in increased self-care, self-awareness, and self-regulation. Similarly, Kostorz et al. (2017) noted that self-regulation skills developed through combat training can support practitioners' self-esteem. Other studies have indicated enhanced psychological wellbeing in younger participants (Kuramoto, 2006) and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Sharma & Haider, 2015; Wang et al., 2014). In Japanese Martial Arts practice, aspects such as self-mastery have been associated with increased resilience and self-efficacy in managing health and wellbeing issues (Fuller, 2019; Veasey et al., 2022). Self-mastery empowers individuals and fosters a sense of ownership in promoting health and wellbeing, leading to reductions in anxiety, stress, and overall enhancement of mental wellbeing (Fuller, 2019). Additionally, Spring (2022) observed that Martial Arts can assist individuals in maintaining focus, organization, and structure in their lives, particularly during challenging periods like the lockdown experienced in 2020. Veasey et al., (2022) highlighted that practicing Martial Arts at home during lockdown could notably enhance mental wellbeing, mitigating the adverse effects of the lockdown period.

3. Reconnecting Body and Mind Through Martial Arts

Japanese Martial Arts philosophy incorporates customs, norms, and rules, underpinned by moral codes emphasizing respect, self-regulation, and health promotion (Fuller, 1988; Fuller, 2019). Originating from historical combat techniques, Japanese Martial Arts integrate body movement to overcome opponents without weapons (Yukawa, 2014). This practice entails physical and mental exercises aimed at achieving mind-body unity and enhancing overall physical and mental wellbeing (Miyata et al., 2020).

Martial Arts practice has demonstrated preventive effects against mental health problems (Moore et al., 2019), with practitioners showing lower susceptibility to depression compared to other sports participants (McGowan & Jordan, 1988).

Donohue (2006) emphasizes the mental wellbeing benefits of Martial Arts, noting its positive impact on focus, strength, and flexibility training. Additionally, Martial Arts can help cultivate the mind-body-spirit connection for some individuals (Donohue, 2006; Webster-Doyle, 2003).

Masciotra and Monzon (2003) further support this idea of focus, drawing from earlier work by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) on achieving a flow state. Flow allows individuals to immerse themselves fully in their actions, temporarily escaping from other concerns. Japanese Karate kata training is regarded as conducive to achieving this state, as the structured movements enable practitioners to engage with focus and determination, often reaching a trance-like state during practice. Japanese Martial Arts are good for physical and mental wellbeing for physical fitness, stress reduction, mental focus, self-confidence, emotional regulation, and social connection. The

practice integrates physical, mental, and spiritual elements, and contributes to maintaining good physical and mental wellbeing (Veasey et al., 2022).

Reconnecting body and mind through Martial Arts emphasizes integrating physical movement with mental focus and awareness. Martial Arts facilitates this reconnection (Fuller, 2019) by emphasizing the integration of:

1. **Mindfulness in Movement:** Integral to Martial Arts training, practitioners must fully focus on precise technique execution, fostering a deep mind-body connection that enhances coordination and concentration.
2. **Breath Awareness:** Many Martial Arts emphasize controlled breathing, syncing breath with movements to promote relaxation, focus, and energy flow, enhancing the mind-body connection for a sense of calmness and centeredness.
3. **Body Awareness:** Martial Arts training entails repetitive practice to enhance body awareness, enabling practitioners to move with greater efficiency, balance, and agility as they become attuned to subtle movements and sensations.
4. **Emotional Regulation:** Martial Arts offer a positive outlet for emotional management. Through disciplined training and controlled sparring, practitioners regulate emotions, channeling energy productively.
5. **Mental Discipline:** Martial Arts cultivate mental strength and resilience, extending beyond the dojo through perseverance, dedication, and the development of toughness, focus, and determination.

Martial Arts reinstates the bond between body and mind, prioritizing the fusion of physical movement with mental focus and awareness. Martial Arts offers a holistic physical, mental, and social wellbeing approach. Beyond combat training, they offer opportunities for self-improvement, stress relief, and personal growth (Fuller, 2019).

Engaging in Martial Arts fosters discipline, self-assurance, and resilience, while improving physical fitness and coordination. Additionally, the communal aspect of Martial Arts promotes social bonds, teamwork, and a sense of community, contributing to overall wellbeing and enjoyment (Veasey et al., 2022). Physical training, including kata and randori (sparring), targets various aspects of physicality such as strength, flexibility, stamina, and speed, essential elements in Martial Arts (Cynarski, 2008).

As noted by Spring (2022), Martial Arts encompass a diverse array of activities, ranging from different formats of Karate, including sport and traditional styles, to Tai Chi, Judo, and Kendo. Each discipline presents unique physical challenges suited to individuals with varying abilities, while also facilitating the connection between mind, body, and spirit in distinct ways. Engaging in practices such as kata and sparring encourages personal growth and development of the spirit through physical exertion.

Moreover, the spiritual aspect of Martial Arts aids individuals facing mental difficulties. Mokuso, practiced in Japanese Martial Arts classes before and after sessions, promotes focus, relaxation, and reflection, aiding mental preparation and post-training relaxation (Labbate, 2011). This practice's benefits, highlighted by Lowry (2006), Yang (2011), and Labbate (2011), help individuals manage diverse

mental health challenges, providing stress relief, enhanced concentration, and introspection.

4. Methodology

Thematic analysis was undertaken on a series of 12 in-depth interviews involving practitioners of Martial Arts (JMA), comprising 11 males and 1 female, primarily from the UK, with ages ranging from 21 to 62 years (mean = 41.33).

Participants, with diverse belt ranks and an average of 16 years of experience (see Table 1), were recruited online due to COVID-19 restrictions. The study followed qualitative research standards, using purposive sampling based on a minimum of 12 months of Martial Arts experience in Karate and Judo. Despite contacting 24 practitioners, only 12 volunteered. The lead author, a marketing lecturer at a UK university, had professional encounters with all participants within the past five years. Participants were unaware of the interviewer's religious or political affiliations to prevent response biases.

Table 1. List of participants (n=12).

Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality	JMA Style	Rank	Experience
P1	44	M	Iran	Judo	Black 1 st Dan	8-years

P2	62	M	UK	Judo	Black 5 th Dan	50-years
P3	25	M	UK	Judo	Orange	1-year
P4	31	M	UK	Judo	Black 3 rd Dan	12-years
P5	38	M	UK	Judo	Brown	10-years
P6	40	M	UK	Judo	Blue	5-years
P7	52	M	UK	Karate	Black 2 nd Dan	30-years
P8	45	M	UK	Karate	Brown	2-years
P9	21	M	UK	Karate	Black 3 rd Dan	17-years
P10	46	M	UK	Karate	Black 5 th Dan	39-years
P11	48	M	UK	Karate	Black 1 st Dan	7-years
P12	44	F	UK	Karate	Black 3 rd Dan	13-Years

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Derby research ethics committee. Qualitative interviews were conducted via audio calls, allowing participants to freely express their experiences. Data were transcribed and summarized for precision, with participants briefed on the option to withdraw. The study explored emotional states, interpersonal relationships, Martial Arts, and wellbeing.

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was utilized to explore Martial Arts experiences. Audio recordings upheld data accuracy, and themes were corroborated by a co-author. Interview data underwent iterative reviews to discern patterns, with themes crystallizing after approximately 8 interviews, mindful of data saturation considerations. Audio recordings were meticulously listened to for thematic identification, aligning seamlessly with Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology.

To initiate systematic data analysis, coding was employed to label the data, following Braun and Clarke's method (2012). We implemented a coding strategy guided by theory to correspond with our research inquiry regarding the coping strategies utilized by practitioners of Martial Arts, and the efficacy of Martial Arts for fostering mindfulness, breath, and body awareness, emotional regulation, and mental discipline. Codes were organized into potential themes (see Table 3) using Braun and Clarke's approach (2006).

Comparisons across all interview areas were conducted to identify similarities and extract main themes. Themes were assessed to ensure alignment with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Codes were compared with data extracts for

consistency (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The lead author coded and created themes for validation and the themes captured key elements relevant to the research questions, including Martial Arts as a coping mechanism for stress (T1), and Martial Arts' role in promoting self-awareness and self-mastery (T2, T3).

Table 2. Summary of findings

No	Themes	Example of Participant Excerpt
1	Training in Martial Arts serves as a means of stress relief, coping, and aids in emotional regulation.	'Judo is a stress coping mechanism, when I stop, I realise how important it is and how well it is working. When I stop going, I realise I start to struggle' (P3). 'Karate is great for coping with stress; you are focused which helps you mentally and helps focus your mind' p9).
2	Martial artists develop self-mastery through mental discipline and mindfulness.	'Judo will help change your life and body physically, it gives you mental strength and awareness' (p1). 'Training in Karate helps me to become the best version of myself, not focusing on other people but improving myself and being better than I was yesterday' (P9).
3	Martial Arts fosters self-reflection and wellbeing through mindfulness in movement and	'I feel like I am a big part of the team (the club), I reflect on Judo, I like Judo, it is good for the soul' (p4). 'I self-reflect, I keep a check on my own feelings, and I adjust accordingly. Using Kata in Karate as an

	breath and body awareness.	example, I use this as a physical meditation, it takes me away from the now and I use this, it switches my mind off and I focus on this kata for that moment in time' (P10).
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The three identified themes were evaluated to ensure their accuracy in reflecting the dataset and addressing our research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Codes were cross-referenced with relevant data extracts to maintain consistency across themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We verified that the themes encapsulated the essential elements and remained pertinent to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Martial Arts training serves as a coping mechanism for stress and promotes wellbeing (T1), while Kata and fighting facilitate self-reflection (T3) towards achieving self-mastery (T2).

The research demonstrates a significant correlation between Martial Arts and the synergy between the body and mind during practice. This correlation underscores the importance of harmonizing physical movement with mental attentiveness, promoting a comprehensive approach to physical, mental, and social wellbeing that extends beyond combat training. Such practices provide avenues for self-enhancement, stress alleviation, and individual development (Fuller, 2019; Veasey et al, 2022).

5. Findings and Discussion

The connection between Martial Arts and the bond that reconnects the body and mind through Martial Arts practice has been extensively studied and highlighted by

scholars and practitioners alike. This connection highlights the fusion of physical movement with mental concentration and awareness, providing a comprehensive approach to overall physical, mental, and social wellbeing that transcends mere combat training.

Martial Arts training serves as a coping mechanism for stress and promotes wellbeing, while Kata and fighting facilitate self-reflection toward achieving self-mastery. Japanese Martial Arts, such as Karate, Judo, Aikido, and Kendo, have roots deeply embedded in philosophical principles like Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. These Martial Arts emphasize not only physical techniques but also mental discipline, self-control, and spiritual development (Fuller, 2019). Numerous Karate participants (p8, p9, p10, p11, and p12) in the research expressed that engaging in Kata facilitated self-reflection and enhanced their mental discipline. They likened Kata practice to walking meditation, enhancing focus and bodily awareness, including breathing awareness. Practitioners reported improved emotional regulation and mental discipline through mindfulness integration in Kata.

Another crucial aspect highlighted in managing stress was sparring, also known as Randori in Judo. All participants emphasized that engaging in Martial Arts fighting offered invaluable opportunities to develop and enhance their emotional regulation skills within a dynamic and demanding setting. They emphasized that by mastering effective emotional management, practitioners could not only enhance their Martial Arts performance but also translate these skills to other facets of their daily lives.

Each of the Judo practitioners (referred to as p1, p2, p3, p4, p5, and p6) emphasized the importance of maintaining intense concentration and focus during Randori (Judo fighting), which is a central component of Judo training. Randori involves practitioners engaging in live, dynamic exchanges where they apply techniques learned in practice against resisting opponents (Reis et al., 2022). The consensus among participants is that maintaining a complete presence in the moment is vital for anticipating opponents' actions and reacting efficiently. They argue that mindfulness enhances emotional regulation and observation, while Judo fighting is crucial for skill development (Reis et al., 2022).

One of the key aspects of Japanese Martial Arts is the emphasis on mindfulness and presence in the moment. Practitioners are encouraged to be fully aware of their body, breath, and surroundings during training, which helps cultivate a strong connection between the body and mind (Fuller, 2019). Furthermore, Japanese Martial Arts provide opportunities for self-improvement, stress relief, and personal growth beyond the context of combat (Moore et al., 2020). Through rigorous training, Martial Arts practitioners learn important life skills such as discipline, perseverance, humility, and respect for others. The dojo (training hall) becomes a space for personal development and community building, where individuals support each other in their journey toward mastery (Miyata et al., 2020).

Research, such as the study cited by Miyata et al, (2020), supports the notion that practicing Japanese Martial Arts can have positive effects on overall wellbeing. Regular training can lead to improvements in physical fitness, mental clarity,

emotional resilience, and social connections (Lipowski et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

In summary, Martial Arts provide a holistic approach to health and wellbeing by nurturing a profound connection between body and mind (Fuller, 2019). Through dedicated practice, individuals not only enhance physical prowess but also refine mental focus, achieve emotional equilibrium, and foster social bonds, fostering personal development and transformation (Fuller, 2019; Moore et al., 2020). This research underscores the evident link between enriching leisure, healing, and wellness through Martial Arts. Martial Arts reunite the body and mind, offering a comprehensive path to holistic wellbeing that goes beyond mere combat training.

2. Contribution and Future Research

This study illuminates the mental wellbeing benefits of Martial Arts, an area requiring further exploration. It identifies components like self-mastery and self-reflection, crucial for practitioners' mental wellbeing. The research investigates aspects such as mental discipline, emotional management, mindfulness, and the significance of

breath and body awareness. However, the study's limitations include a sample limited to experienced practitioners in the UK within 2 Japanese Martial Arts disciplines. Future research should diversify the sample, including various gender identities, for a more comprehensive understanding.

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