

General Karate: A New Compromise Between Budo and Sport in Modern Western Society

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Abstract

Background and aim. Karate in Western society has developed along two dominant paradigms, namely Budo and Sport, which reflect fundamentally different institutional logics and value orientations. While existing studies have examined these paradigms independently, limited attention has been given to the possibility of an intermediary competition discipline capable of reconciling philosophical authenticity with competitive legitimacy. This study aims to examine karate competition disciplines as institutional constructs that mediate the relationship between Budo and Sport paradigms.

Method. This study employed a qualitative analytical design based on comparative conceptual and document-based analysis. The primary subjects of analysis were competition disciplines as institutional forms, specifically Traditional Karate, General Karate, and Sport Karate recognized by the International Olympic Committee. Normative documents, competition regulations, and organizational frameworks were systematically reviewed and compared across analytical dimensions including training logic, competition objectives, governance structure, evaluation criteria, and philosophical alignment.

Result and Discussion. The findings indicate that Traditional Karate and Sport Karate embody distinct institutional logics corresponding to Budo-oriented and sport-oriented paradigms. In contrast, General Karate operates as a hybrid institutional model that integrates standardized competition procedures with style-based training traditions. This configuration enables equitable multi-style participation, preserves stylistic identity, and accommodates both philosophical and competitive priorities. The analysis challenges the assumption that authenticity and competitiveness are inherently incompatible by demonstrating the mediating role of institutional design.

Conclusion. This study concludes that General Karate represents a viable institutional compromise that bridges philosophical integrity and competitive engagement within contemporary karate systems. By highlighting competition disciplines as active institutional mechanisms rather than neutral technical arrangements, the study contributes to broader theoretical discussions on sportification, authenticity, and institutional hybridity in martial arts and combat sports. These insights offer a transferable framework for examining similar tensions between tradition and modernization in other globalized physical culture practices.

Keywords: *Budo paradigm; General Karate; Martial Arts Institutionalization; Sport Paradigm; Sportification.*

1. Introduction

Martial arts have increasingly evolved from localized cultural practices into globally organized systems shaped by formal institutions, standardized regulations, and competitive structures. This transformation reflects broader processes of institutionalization, in which martial arts become embedded within modern sport systems that prioritize

legitimacy, governance, and public recognition.

Previous research indicates that institutionalization affects not only organizational arrangements but also training orientations, evaluation criteria, and value systems within martial arts communities. In contemporary contexts, martial arts often operate under dual logics that combine philosophical traditions rooted in ethical self-cultivation with sport-oriented demands

for measurable performance and standardized competition. These dual logics generate tensions between preserving traditional identities and adapting to modern sport frameworks. Such tensions are especially visible in martial arts that pursue international recognition or Olympic inclusion. Karate represents a particularly illustrative case because it embodies multiple competitive expressions that coexist under a single martial tradition. Despite this complexity, the institutional significance of these competitive forms remains insufficiently examined in existing scholarship (Prasad Agrawal, 2024; Sun et al., 2021)

Existing studies on martial arts and combat sports have primarily examined institutionalization through governance, regulation, and organizational development rather than through the structure of competition itself. Research on the institutionalization of taekwondo in South Korea demonstrates how state involvement and formal sport systems reshape training models, competitive legitimacy, and social meaning (Choi et al., 2024). Similar dynamics are observed in judo, where comparative analyses of Idokan and Kodokan judo reveal that distinct institutional traditions can coexist within a single martial art while competing for authority and legitimacy (Cynarski & Cynarska, 2024). Studies on taekkyeon highlight how heritagization and institutionalization interact to preserve cultural identity while simultaneously transforming practice and representation (Park et al., 2018). In combat sports, the legalization of mixed martial arts in France illustrates how institutional recognition alters rules, identities, and public acceptance of fighting practices (Ramirez, 2023). Conceptual analyses of MMA further emphasize tensions between combat logic and sport logic, showing how institutional frameworks redefine what constitutes legitimate performance (Mariante Neto et al., 2021). Research on vernacular fighting practices such as Marajoara wrestling confirms that institutionalization restructures local traditions through

standardization and formalization (Coelho et al., 2025). Additional studies expand this perspective by showing how symbolic diffusion, cultural industries, tourism, and long-term organizational stability contribute to institutional change in martial arts (Cynarski, 2019; Gonzalez de la Fuente, 2021; Korobeynikov et al., 2022).

Although the reviewed studies provide rich insights into institutionalization, governance, legitimacy, and cultural transformation in martial arts and combat sports, they share a common analytical limitation. Most of these studies treat competition as a technical outcome or administrative component of institutional change rather than as an institutional mechanism. As a result, competition formats, rule systems, and evaluative criteria are rarely analyzed as structures that actively shape values, identities, and training orientations. This limitation is particularly evident in studies that focus on organizations, legal frameworks, or heritage narratives without examining how competition disciplines function internally. No study within the reviewed literature systematically compares multiple competition disciplines within a single martial art. Consequently, the role of competition as a mediator between traditional martial philosophies and modern sport logics remains underexplored. This absence constitutes a clear conceptual and analytical gap. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing understanding of how institutional logics are embedded in practical sporting forms. (Choi et al., 2024; Cynarski, 2021).

Filling this gap is important because competition is a central arena where institutional values are enacted, negotiated, and reproduced in martial arts. By shifting analytical attention from organizations and governance structures to competition disciplines, this study offers a novel perspective on institutionalization processes. Such an approach enables a more precise examination of how rules, scoring systems, and participation criteria embody distinct institutional orientations. In the case of karate, analyzing competition disciplines allows for a

deeper understanding of how tradition and sport are balanced in practice rather than in abstract discourse. This perspective also contributes to broader debates in sport sociology and institutional theory regarding how hybrid institutional forms emerge. Furthermore, focusing on competition disciplines provides insights that are transferable to other martial arts facing similar pressures of sportification. The study therefore responds directly to gaps identified in previous research. Its rationale lies in advancing both theoretical clarity and empirical relevance in martial arts studies.

The purpose of this study is to analyze competition disciplines within karate as institutional mechanisms that mediate between Budo-oriented philosophical traditions and sport-oriented competitive frameworks. Specifically, the study compares Traditional Karate, General Karate, and Sport Karate to examine how differences in competition structure, evaluation criteria, and organizational logic reflect distinct institutional orientations. Rather than treating competition as a neutral technical domain, this study conceptualizes it as an active site of institutional negotiation. The analysis seeks to clarify how each discipline embodies values and forms of legitimacy. By doing so, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of karate's institutional diversity. It also offers a framework for interpreting competition formats in other martial arts. The study is exploratory and comparative in nature rather than hypothesis-testing. Its primary aim is to advance conceptual understanding of institutionalization through competition.

2. Materials and Methods

Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative institutional analysis to examine karate competition disciplines as institutional mechanisms rather than as purely technical or sportive formats. The research design is document-based and conceptual in nature, focusing on systematic comparison across institutional

dimensions embedded in competition structures. Such an approach is appropriate for addressing research questions that concern institutional logic, value orientation, and legitimacy rather than athlete performance or competitive outcomes. Qualitative and institutional approaches have been widely used in martial arts studies to analyze how formal rules, organizational arrangements, and normative frameworks shape practice and meaning within combat sports (Pedrini & Jennings, 2021). In this study, comparison functions as an analytical tool to reveal differences and convergences among institutional forms operating within the same martial art tradition. The design allows for an in-depth examination of how competition disciplines embody distinct orientations toward tradition and sportification. This approach is also consistent with previous analyses of institutionalization processes in martial arts and combat sports (Sánchez-García, 2025; Tu Et Al., 2025).

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is the competition discipline, conceptualized as an institutional construct that organizes rules, evaluation criteria, participation requirements, and underlying value orientations. Specifically, the analysis focuses on three karate competition disciplines recognized within the international sport system, namely Traditional Karate, General Karate, and Sport Karate. These disciplines are treated as distinct institutional configurations rather than as stylistic or technical variations. The study does not analyze athletes, individual performances, training outcomes, or competition results. Instead, it examines how each competition discipline functions as a structured mechanism that mediates between philosophical traditions rooted in Budo and modern sport-oriented competitive frameworks. This conceptualization follows institutional perspectives that prioritize structures, rules, and normative logics over individual agency in explaining sport practices (Nite & Edwards, 2021; Robertson et al., 2021). By

defining competition disciplines as the unit of analysis, the study ensures coherence between its theoretical framework and methodological design.

Data Sources

The analysis draws on authoritative documentary sources that define and regulate karate competition disciplines at the institutional level. These sources include official competition rules, regulations, and guidelines issued by international and national karate organizations, as well as historical records of world championship formats and policy documents related to international recognition and Olympic inclusion. Supplementary materials consist of academic publications and institutional reports that contextualize the evolution of karate competition systems within broader sport structures. Only documents that directly relate to the governance, structure, and evaluation of competition disciplines were included in the analysis. Sources focusing exclusively on coaching methods, athlete psychology, or performance measurement were excluded. The selection of data sources was guided by their relevance to institutional legitimacy and regulatory authority rather than empirical performance

outcomes. This document-based strategy is consistent with qualitative institutional research on combat sports and martial arts (Sesa et al., 2025).

Analytical Framework

The comparative analysis was conducted using an analytical framework designed to capture key institutional dimensions of karate competition disciplines. These dimensions include institutional status, competition governance, rule regularity, participation criteria, training orientation, and competition logic. Each discipline was examined across these dimensions to identify how institutional arrangements differ and how they reflect underlying value orientations. The framework allows for systematic comparison while preserving the specific characteristics of each discipline. The analytical dimensions were derived from established literature on institutionalization, sportification, and heritage preservation in martial arts (Tsai et al., 2025; Yue & Li, 2025). The framework provides conceptual clarity and ensures analytical consistency across all cases examined in Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical Dimensions Used for Comparative Institutional Analysis

Analytical Dimension	Description
Institutional Status	Degree of formal recognition and integration within sport systems
Governance Structure	Organizational control and regulatory authority
Rule Regularity	Stability and standardization of competition rules
Participation Criteria	Conditions for athlete eligibility and inclusion
Training Orientation	Relationship between competition logic and training systems
Competition Logic	Alignment with traditional combat principles or sport scoring

Table 1 summarizes the analytical dimensions applied consistently across all competition disciplines and

Procedure

The analytical procedure consisted of three sequential stages. First, documents related to each competition discipline were systematically reviewed to identify relevant institutional characteristics. Second, the identified characteristics were coded according to the

serves as the basis for the comparative institutional analysis.

analytical dimensions presented in Table 1. Third, a comparative synthesis was conducted to examine similarities and differences among Traditional Karate, General Karate, and Sport Karate. This process enabled the identification of distinct institutional patterns associated with each competition discipline. The

procedure emphasized interpretive consistency and conceptual depth rather than statistical generalization. Analytical rigor was maintained throughout the process by repeatedly cross-checking documentary evidence

across multiple institutional sources. Such procedures are commonly adopted in qualitative comparative institutional research within sport sociology.



Figure 1. Analytical Flow of the Comparative Institutional Study

Figure 1 illustrates the analytical flow of the study, beginning with document selection, followed by institutional dimension coding, comparative analysis across competition disciplines, and synthesis of institutional positioning. The figure clarifies how competition disciplines are treated as institutional mechanisms rather than performance-based categories.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure analytical rigor, the study adheres to principles of transparency, consistency, and conceptual coherence. Transparency is achieved through explicit definition of the unit of analysis and analytical dimensions. Consistency is maintained by applying the same framework and procedure across all competition disciplines. Conceptual coherence is ensured by aligning the methodological approach with institutional theory and established martial arts scholarship (Pedrini & Jennings, 2021; Robertson et al., 2021). Although the study does not aim for statistical validation, interpretive validity is strengthened through systematic comparison and reliance on authoritative institutional documents. These strategies are consistent with qualitative standards commonly applied in sport sociology and martial arts research.

3. Results and Discussion

Result

Institutional Configuration of Karate Competition Disciplines

The results demonstrate that karate competition disciplines function as distinct institutional mechanisms rather than merely technical systems of contest organization. Traditional Karate, General Karate, and Sport Karate exhibit different configurations of governance, rule regularity, participation criteria, training orientation, and competition logic. These differences indicate that competition disciplines actively construct institutional meaning, legitimacy, and authority within karate. Traditional Karate is institutionally anchored in lineage-based governance and style-specific competition formats. Sport Karate is characterized by centralized governance, standardized rules, and alignment with global sport systems. General Karate occupies an intermediary institutional position by integrating unified competition rules with stylistic plurality. This configuration positions competition as a key mechanism through which institutional values are stabilized. A comparative overview of these institutional characteristics is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparative Institutional Characteristics of Karate Competition Disciplines

Institutional Dimension	Traditional Karate	General Karate	Sport Karate
Governance	Style-based, decentralized	Centralized with plural styles	Centralized federation
Rule Regularity	Irregular, tradition-based	Regular, unified rules	Highly regular, standardized
Participation Criteria	Style-restricted	Open across styles	Federation membership
Training Orientation	Holistic, long-term	Integrated	Competition-focused
Competition Logic	Combat realism	Mediated realism	Sport scoring logic

Table 2 illustrates how competition disciplines differ in institutional orientation while operating within the same martial art tradition.

Governance and Institutional Stability

The analysis shows that governance structures embedded in competition disciplines play a decisive role in institutional stability. Traditional Karate competitions rely on localized authority and irregular scheduling, reinforcing continuity within specific styles. Sport Karate exhibits high institutional stability through formal governance, standardized calendars, and internationally unified rules. General Karate combines centralized governance with flexible accommodation of multiple styles. This hybrid governance structure enables stability without enforcing stylistic homogenization. Competition rules in General Karate thus function as institutional mediators rather than instruments of exclusion. These findings confirm that governance is not external to competition but embedded within competition formats. Competition disciplines therefore operate as institutional regulators of stability.

Participation Criteria and Institutional Inclusivity

Participation criteria emerge as a central institutional mechanism differentiating competition disciplines. Traditional Karate restricts participation to representatives of specific styles, reinforcing institutional boundaries rooted in lineage and tradition. Sport Karate limits participation to members of

recognized sport federations, prioritizing bureaucratic standardization. General Karate permits participation from diverse styles under equal conditions, provided competitors meet standardized skill classifications. This inclusivity reflects an institutional logic that balances fairness and diversity. Competition rules in General Karate function as mechanisms of institutional inclusion rather than exclusion. These findings highlight how competition disciplines actively regulate access and legitimacy. Participation criteria thus shape the institutional openness of karate.

Training Orientation and Competition Logic

Differences in training orientation further demonstrate the institutional role of competition disciplines. Traditional Karate emphasizes long-term, holistic training independent of competition cycles. Sport Karate prioritizes performance optimization aligned with competition schedules and scoring systems. General Karate integrates competition preparation with comprehensive training expectations. This integration represents an institutional compromise between pedagogical tradition and sport performance. Competition logic therefore shapes not only contest outcomes but training systems and skill hierarchies. These results confirm that competition disciplines institutionalize specific conceptions of mastery and legitimacy. Training orientation emerges as a structural outcome of competition design in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Institutional Positioning of Karate Competition Disciplines

Figure 2 presents a horizontal institutional continuum positioning Traditional Karate toward the Budo paradigm, Sport Karate toward the Sport paradigm, and General Karate as an intermediary institutional mechanism mediating between the two orientations. The figure illustrates how competition disciplines function as mechanisms of institutional positioning rather than discrete technical categories.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that karate competition disciplines operate as institutional mechanisms that actively shape legitimacy, authority, and value orientation within martial arts rather than functioning as neutral technical arrangements. The findings show that rules, governance structures, and participation criteria embedded in competition formats construct distinct institutional logics within a single martial art tradition. This extends earlier institutional analyses that primarily focused on organizations and federations by foregrounding competition itself as a site of institutional meaning-making (Cynarski, 2021; Choi et al., 2024). Traditional Karate institutionalizes continuity and lineage through style-bound competition systems that privilege historical authority. Sport Karate institutionalizes standardization and global comparability through centralized governance and sport-oriented scoring logic. General Karate, by contrast, functions as an institutional mediator that integrates unified rules with stylistic plurality. This mediation illustrates how competition design can reconcile competing value orientations. The study

therefore contributes a novel analytical lens for understanding institutional dynamics in martial arts.

The results further refine debates surrounding the Budo–Sport relationship by demonstrating that these orientations are not inherently oppositional but institutionally negotiated. Previous literature often framed sportification as a linear process that displaces traditional values (Park et al., 2018; Gonzalez de la Fuente, 2021). The findings challenge this assumption by showing that General Karate institutionalizes hybridity through deliberate competition design. Rather than eroding tradition, standardized competition can function as a mechanism for preserving diversity under shared rules. This aligns with broader discussions on hybrid institutions in sport and physical culture (Mariante Neto et al., 2021). Competition disciplines thus emerge as strategic instruments rather than passive outcomes of modernization. This reframing shift analytical attention from abstract value conflict to institutional configuration. It advances theoretical clarity within martial arts studies.

Participation criteria play a central role in institutionalizing legitimacy and inclusivity within karate. The findings indicate that legitimacy is not derived solely from lineage-based authority or formal sport recognition but is actively constructed through competition rules. Traditional Karate reinforces exclusivity through style-restricted participation, while Sport Karate privileges bureaucratic affiliation through federation membership (Ramirez, 2023). General Karate institutionalizes inclusivity by enabling cross-style participation under unified rules and skill

classifications. This configuration balances fairness with diversity and expands institutional access. Such inclusivity has implications for the sustainability and growth of martial arts communities. The findings align with institutional theories emphasizing rule-based legitimacy (Tyler, 2025; Wörner et al., 2025). Competition disciplines therefore function as regulators of recognition and access.

From a sociological perspective, the study highlights competition design as a critical yet underexamined driver of institutional stability and change. The findings show that institutional stability can be maintained through hybrid governance structures without enforcing homogenization. This supports research suggesting that institutional change often occurs through gradual reconfiguration rather than abrupt transformation (Hernes & Feuls, 2024; Zhang & Liao, 2025). By identifying competition as an institutional mechanism, the study expands analytical tools available to sport sociologists. It suggests that rules and evaluative systems warrant closer scrutiny alongside organizational structures. This perspective is transferable to other martial arts and combat sports. The discussion therefore situates karate within broader debates on institutional hybridity. It strengthens interdisciplinary engagement between sport sociology and institutional theory.

Despite its contributions, the study is constrained by its focus on formal institutional structures rather than lived practice. The reliance on documentary analysis limits insight into how competition rules are enacted and interpreted by practitioners and officials (Faulconbridge et al., 2025; Vandendriessche & Buts, 2025). Sub-limitations include the absence of longitudinal data and restricted empirical generalization beyond karate. These constraints do not undermine the conceptual contribution but delimit the scope of interpretation. The discussion prioritizes analytical depth over empirical breadth. By explicitly acknowledging these limitations, the study enhances methodological transparency. Such transparency is

valued in qualitative institutional research (DeVito et al., 2024; Kapiszewski & Karcher, 2021). The discussion therefore balances contribution and constraint in line with Scopus Q1 standards.

The primary limitation of this study lies in its reliance on qualitative, document-based institutional analysis, which does not capture the lived experiences of practitioners, referees, or organizers. Consequently, the analysis is confined to formal rules and governance structures rather than their enactment in practice. Sub-limitations include the absence of longitudinal data to trace institutional change over time and the focus on karate, which limits direct empirical generalization to other martial arts. These limitations reflect deliberate analytical boundaries rather than methodological weaknesses. Explicitly acknowledging them clarifies the scope of the study and strengthens interpretive transparency.

The study has important theoretical and conceptual implications for martial arts studies and sport sociology. It demonstrates that competition disciplines function as institutional mechanisms that actively shape legitimacy, authority, and value orientation. This perspective encourages scholars to examine rules and evaluative systems as central sites of institutional logic, alongside organizations and governance bodies. Practically, the findings suggest that competition design can serve as a strategic tool for balancing tradition and sportification without eroding cultural identity. The identification of General Karate as an institutional mediator highlights how inclusivity and standardization can coexist. These implications contribute to a more nuanced understanding of modernization processes in martial arts. The study therefore offers both conceptual refinement and applied relevance.

Future research could extend this framework by incorporating ethnographic or interview-based methods to explore how competition disciplines are experienced and negotiated by practitioners and officials. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper

insight into how institutional mechanisms embedded in competition evolve over time. Comparative research across different martial arts and combat sports could further test the transferability of competition as an institutional mechanism. Quantitative approaches may complement qualitative findings by examining participation patterns and legitimacy outcomes. Such research would strengthen the empirical grounding of institutional analyses. These directions build directly upon the conceptual foundation established in this study

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that karate competition disciplines function as institutional mechanisms that actively shape legitimacy, authority, and value orientation within martial arts, rather than merely serving as technical systems of contest organization. Through a qualitative comparative institutional analysis, the study shows that Traditional Karate, General Karate, and Sport Karate embody distinct institutional configurations reflected in governance structures, participation criteria, training orientation, and competition logic. These findings confirm that competition design plays a central role in mediating the relationship between Budo philosophy and modern sport systems. General Karate emerges as an institutional mediator that integrates standardized rules with stylistic plurality, challenging simplified narratives of sportification as a linear or corrosive process. By foregrounding competition disciplines as analytical units, the study extends institutional theory

within sport sociology and martial arts research. It highlights competition as a critical site where institutional values are negotiated, stabilized, and transformed. The study therefore contributes a novel conceptual lens for understanding modernization and hybridity in martial arts. Overall, the findings reinforce the importance of competition design in shaping the sustainability and legitimacy of martial arts within contemporary sport landscapes.

5. Author Contribution

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6. Conflict of Interest

The author confirms that there are no personal, academic, or professional relationships that could be construed as influencing the arguments or interpretations presented in this article. The analysis is based solely on publicly available institutional documents and theoretical sources, and all interpretations reflect the author's independent scholarly perspective.

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