

Management and Promotion of Martial Arts, across Disciplines and Styles

Wojciech J. Cynarski

University of Rzeszow, Poland

*Corresponding Author: Wojciehcynarski@gmail.com

Received Oct 11, 2025; Revised Dec 20, 2025; Accepted Dec 25, 2025

Copyright ©2025 by the authors, all rights reserved. The authors agree that this article will remain openly accessible in perpetuity under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Abstract

Perspective: Among the many martial arts, disciplines, and styles, only a few have achieved global renown. Managing a company or other martial arts organization requires promotional activities. The broader concept of marketing and the General Theory of Fighting Arts provide the theoretical foundation for this discussion. Problem: Are there any relationships between the type of promotional activities and fame, popularity, and measurable organizational success? How does presence in popular culture (films, books, celebrities) contribute to the international popularity of a given martial art style?. Method: A multiple case study was conducted for five relatively popular martial arts styles. Promotion of the style in films, books, through celebrities, international organizations, and the history of the master was considered. Included: 1) Kyokushin karate; 2) Wing Tsun kung fu; 3) American kenpo karate; 4) Jeet Kune Do kung fu; 5) Chuck Norris System. Results: International popularity is achieved only through a combination of the following promotional activities: film appearances, books, celebrity students, and organizational development. Conclusions: In the absence of such activities, the distinguished master-teacher and his school remain largely unknown or little known. Particularly in martial arts that reject competitive sports.

Keywords: *fighting arts, martial arts, style, promotion, popular culture*

1. Introduction

There is a vast wealth of martial arts and systems, disciplines and styles, schools, and organizations. In the multifaceted phenomenon of fighting arts, many are lesser-known, yet outstanding master-teachers, while only a few have achieved global fame [cf. Cynarski 2021b]. Managing a company or other martial arts organization requires promotional activities.

In 1992, the author, already an advanced budoka, jujutsu, karate, and aikibudo instructor, was looking for a master who could further guide him on the path of budo. He came across an advertisement in a German specialized periodical – information about a jujutsu and karate school. This is how he found a master-teacher for the next 30 years. It was largely a matter of chance. The school was not internationally renowned.

The commercialization of martial arts is a fact, but also a necessity. A master imparts his valuable, sometimes unique, knowledge and collects a fee for it. If this is his only source of income, then this is entirely appropriate. Worse still, extreme commercialization occurs, with fees charged for poor-quality instruction. This practice spawns legions of instructors and black belts with low competence.

The most frequently conducted research is on the functioning of schools/commercial companies offering

services/teaching a given type of martial art or combat sport. Their strategies use the key marketing principles of STP (Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning) [Choi, Yong 2025]. It examines how modern marketing has influenced the martial arts industry's economic activity and martial arts culture. "Marketing has generated sufficient commercial interest in the field, transforming martial arts into a thriving business" [McNamara 2007].

We omit here considerations of the connections between martial arts and mass/popular culture, which are the subject of many publications, such as *The Invention of Martial Arts: Popular Culture Between Asia and America* [Bowman 2021: 12-76]. We also do not focus on describing individual varieties of martial arts [cf. Cynarski 2024]. The research problem addressed here is the search for the relationship between promotional activities and fame, popularity, and measurable organizational success. We will attempt to determine how presence in mass culture.

The broader concept of marketing provides the theoretical framework for these reflections and research [Kotler, Levy 1969; Chrzęścik 2012], which applies not only to profit-driven activities. Sometimes it is a non-commercial activity, promoting cultural and historical achievements, shaping a positive image of an individual

or organization and promoting positive patterns of conduct. The second pillar of the scientific base is the General Theory of Fighting Arts [Cynarski 2017], which provides an understanding of basic concepts such as martial arts, combat sport, and the more general concept of fighting arts.

2. Materials and Methods

The analysis was conducted using a multiple case study approach, focusing on five relatively popular (in the US or more widely internationally) martial arts styles [Skinner, Edwards, Corbett 2015]. Promotion of each style in films, books, through celebrities, international organizations, and the history of the master and his school/style was taken into account. Included were: 1) Kyokushin karate; 2) Wing Tsun kung fu; 3) American kenpo karate; 4) Jeet Kune Do kung fu; and 5) Chuck Norris System.

New media activities were omitted because these styles were promoted in the 20th century, when the internet and social media were not yet widely known and used.

3. Results and Discussion

Results

The analysis shows that martial arts practice in the 2. 1.1. Kyokushin karate

Masutatsu Oyama (1923-1994, 10th dan) created Kyokushin karate, the fifth major style of Japanese karate. In 1964, he founded the IKO (International Karate Organization). Oyama promoted his style by traveling, giving numerous demonstrations, including bullfighting, and training cadres. He wrote nine books, and numerous books by other authors about Oyama and Kyokushin karate were published.

In 1976, a documentary film was released entitled "The Strongest Karate." A film based on Oyama's biography, "Fighter in the Wind," was also made (2004). Important figures, such as King Juan Carlos of Spain, received honorary degrees (in the case of the king, it was 2nd dan).

In many countries around the world, including Poland, this was the most popular karate style in the 1980s. It was only after the death of M. Oyama that the IKO split into numerous competing organizations – more than 10. However, despite the organizational fragmentation, it is still a very popular karate style on a global scale.

2. 1.2. American kenpo karate

Senior Grand Master Eduard K. Parker (1931-1990) created American kenpo/kenpo karate. He had a famous student, Elvis Presley (1935-1977), whom he awarded the high rank of 9th dan. He was succeeded by Ed Parker Jr., the founder's son, but it was Jeff Speakmann (10th dan) who most popularized the style with the film "Perfect Weapon" (1991).

The International Kenpo Karate Association (IKKA) originated in 1956 as the Kenpo Karate

Association of America. The name was changed in 1960. In 1961, E.K. Parker published the book "Kenpo Karate."

Among his students was David German, the founder of US Tai Karate/US Tai Martial Arts, one of the most interesting eclectic systems. Both American kenpo karate and Tai karate influenced the technical form, and especially the special techniques, of the Zendo karate Tai-te-tao / Idokan karate style.

2. 1.3. Jeet Kune Do kung-fu

Bruce Lee (1940-1973) revolutionized the world of traditional martial arts with the concept of Jeet Kune Do. He captivated global audiences with his martial art in several films ("The Big Boss," "Enter the Dragon," "Way of the Dragon," "Fist of Fury," "Garbage Game"). His book describing Jeet Kune Do [Lee 1975] was published after his death.

His untimely death prevented the school from solidifying its organizational structure and creating a larger organization for the style. M. Uehara's four-volume "Bruce Lee's Fighting Method" was an attempt to describe the Jeet Kune Do style. There were also subsequent books devoted to Bruce Lee, his philosophy, and his martial art [cf. Inosanto 1976; Little 2020].

Bruce Lee's popularity as a martial arts movie star sparked interest in Master Yip Man, B. Lee's teacher, and his starting/base style – Ving Tsun / Wing Chun / Wing Tsun.

2. 1.4. Wing Tsun kung-fu

Great Grand Master Yip Man (1893-1972) was a Ving Tsun teacher in Hong Kong. Thanks to his student, Bruce Lee, he and his school/style became a center of attention in the martial arts world. This was reinforced by the Yip Man film series ("Ip Man," 2008, plus sequels).

Another famous student of Yip Man is GGM Leung Ting (born 1947, 11th toan / master degree), founder of the international Wing Tsun organization and author of 25 books published in English and 12 in Chinese. Leung Ting's student, GM Keith Kernspecht (1945-2024, 12th toan), founded and led the EWTO / European Wing Tsun Organization, arguably the largest commercial martial arts organization. It had over 50,000 members (1976) [cf. Körner, Staller, Judkins 2018]. This same Dr. Kernspecht was the author of approximately 30 books and the editor and publisher of the monthly magazine "WingTsun Welt."

Kernspecht, in addition to Wing Tsun kung fu, also practiced other martial arts. He earned, among others, 9th dan in karate and 9th toan in Yi Lik Kuen. He is survived by his "Internal Wing Tsun," three high-ranking Wing Tsun instructors, 10th toan (G. Schembri, Dr. O. König, T. Schrön), and his daughter, Dr. Natalie von Rothenburg, 7th toan in Wing Tsun & Yi Lik Kuen.

Significantly, Peter K. Jahnke drew inspiration from both Jeet Kune Do and Wing Chun, which he also practiced. In the Zendo karate Tai-te-tao / Idokan karate

taught today, we find these technical and tactical solutions [Vide: Cynarski 2024: 71].

2. 1.5. Chuck Norris System

Carlos "Chuck" Norris (born 1940) excelled in karate competition, winning a series of tournaments between 1968 and 1974. He earned, among other things, 1st dan in judo, 3rd dan in BJJ/Brazilian jiu-jitsu, 10th dan in Tang Soo Do/tangsoodo, and the honorary degrees of 8th dan in taekwondo, 8th dan in Kyokushin karate, and 10th dan in Shito-ryu karate. In 1990, he founded his own style – Chun

Kuk Do ("Universal Path"), a martial art Norris developed from Tang Soo Do. He later renamed it the "Chuck Norris System" (2015).

He gained popularity by appearing in numerous martial arts films. He made his debut in "Way of the Dragon" (1972), in which he appeared as an opponent of Bruce Lee. As an action movie actor, he is the subject of a series of jokes in which he is portrayed as a hero with extraordinary abilities. He still runs his martial arts school and is respected in the martial arts community. He is also the author of several books on martial arts and the way of the warrior.

The United Fighting Arts Federation (UFAF) is a martial arts organization founded by Chuck Norris in 1979 for the Chuck Norris System. Indirectly, Chuck Norris's fame contributed to the promotion of American tangsoodo schools.

2. 1.6. Comparison

Tab. 1. Promotion of a given martial art style in popular cultur

No	Name of a style	Films	Famous actor	Books	International Org.
1	<i>Kyokushin karate</i>	yes	yes	yes	yes
2	<i>Wing Tsun kung-fu</i>	yes	yes	yes	yes
3	<i>American kenpo karate</i>	only one	yes	yes	yes
4	<i>Jeet Kune Do kung-fu</i>	no	yes	yes	?
5	<i>Chuck Norris System</i>	yes	yes	yes	yes

Japanese *Kyokushin karate/Kyokushinkai* has been promoted in films – documentaries and, for example, with Sonny Chiba (4th dan in the style). There are numerous books and a global reach, given the current division of the IKO into many competing organizations. Similarly, *Wing Tsun kung fu*, both in the teachings of L. Ting and K. Kernspecht, promotes the style in films about master Yip Man, although the main character is played by an actor (Donnie Yen, 6th dan *taekwondo*) who is not a master of the style.

American kenpo karate and the *Chuck Norris*

System have achieved organizational success in the USA, but are less well-known outside North America. The only film promoting American kenpo karate contributed to the popularity of the style, but clearly benefited the actor himself – J. Spekmann, who now operates outside the main lineage. There is also a series of subsequent books on (American) kenpo karate [cf. Will 1984; Wedlake 2015; Breen 2025].

Bruce Lee did not produce a film explicitly presenting *Jeet Kune Do*, nor did he describe it in detail in his book. Therefore, his films serve equally well to promote various martial arts. The books showcase his unique phenomenon rather than a structured system and curriculum. Therefore, no single large organization has emerged to unite enthusiasts of this style on a global scale. It can be assumed that success is only ensured by combining the indicated components/promotional activities [cf. Table 1].

Discussion

Christophe Pank [2025] writes in his eBook about the worldwide popularity of *Kyokushin karate*. The author highlighted a crucial element in the promotion of this martial art: its founding myth. This myth was built on the figure of Masutatsu Oyama himself, as an undefeated champion, and later on, on the karatekas of this style, Oyama's students, who defeated, among others, Muay Thai boxers in world championship fights. *Kyokushin karate* is still promoted today as the most effective style.

While many schools and traditional styles emphasize their originality and sometimes centuries-old tradition, new styles emphasize effectiveness. Bruce Lee [1975] was a particularly influential martial arts revolutionary, advocating the rejection of old, ossified (formalized, ritualized) systems and the adoption of practical techniques. Moreover, numerous eclectic systems emphasize comprehensive training, transcending the limitations of individual styles, *budo* disciplines, or combat sports and their competitive formats.

Kyokushin karate, in addition to its creator, has been promoted in films and books. To this day, competitors representing this style continue to win contact competitions. Consequently, after M. Oyama's death and despite organizational fragmentation, it remains popular. It is a well-established brand in the world of fighting arts.

American kenpo karate is a respected brand in the United States, but it doesn't enjoy much recognition on other continents. The same is true of the "*Chuck Norris System*," despite C. Norris's own fame. *Wing Tsun*, on the other hand, is popular, but practiced in various lines of communication within numerous competing organizations.

Bruce Lee's great fame hasn't translated into the organizational development of his style. He himself didn't manage to establish a proper international organization. Several organizations were established after his death. Bruce Lee or *Jeet Kune Do* are therefore

more often an inspiration for those studying other martial arts than for those practicing them independently. But this is precisely the hallmark of B.

Lee's concept – its vagueness and lack of formalization. Marketing research analyzes various promotional strategies, for example, during sporting events [cf. Lee, Johnson 2020]. Many martial arts enter the competitive arena precisely to gain greater international popularity. Sponsors and sometimes state patronage can be obtained, but this requires advanced institutionalization, including legal resolutions [cf. Hassim et al. 2022]. This is an opportunity especially when a country's policy includes a given sport in its area of soft power.

The language of advertising and promotion is also analyzed. It has been concluded that "preferred communication styles and the language of advertising communication must vary depending on the influence of national culture and martial arts traditions" [Bickford 2023]. Currently, in the age of widespread internet use, promotional media are videos – recordings from martial arts shows, festivals, and galas. Sometimes, videos are specifically recorded to attract the attention of potentially interested people through accessibility via YouTube. Enthusiasts are looking for them because "Videos available free of charge on the internet platform YouTube are increasingly becoming a means of learning martial arts techniques" [Dyndał et al. 2026: 113].

In the case of *Kodokan judo*, the introduction of competitive sports to the arena, and particularly to the Olympic Games, contributed to its global popularity [Pawelec, Yu 2019; Cynarski 2021a]. Some other martial arts schools and organizations are attempting to emulate this approach. This has likely helped *Kyokushin karate* gain international popularity.

4. Conclusion

The analysis concluded that success is only achieved through a combination of the indicated promotional activities – film appearances, famous representatives of the style, popularizing books, and the widespread international promotion of the organization. It can be assumed that sporting competition also contributes to success, as it has helped promote judo globally.

In the case of the *Kyokushin* style, victories of its representatives in open tournaments, such as K-1, are beneficial. Promotion requires a team of trainers and officials, proper promotion (especially in the media), and well-organized events. These can be sports competitions or training seminars in martial arts where there is no competitive sport.

In the case of national martial arts, it is worth securing state patronage. Otherwise, it is worth seeking the cooperation of sponsors or famous and influential people. In the absence of this, many outstanding master teachers and their schools remain widely unknown or little-known.

5. Acknowledgment

We are very grateful to experts for their appropriate and constructive suggestions to improve this template.

Reference

- Bickford S.H. (2023), *Identifying advertising language for martial arts via the exploration of differences in communication based on culture and motivations*, "Ido Movement for Culture Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology", vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 28-40; doi: 10.14589/ido.23.2.5.
- Bowman P. (2021), *The invention of Martial Arts: Popular Culture Between Asia and America*, Oxford University Press.
- Breen M.J. (2025), *Kempo Karate*, Amazon Digital Services. Choi H., Yong J.S. (2025), *Successful marketing strategies for martial arts schools*, "Revistade Artes Marciales Asiáticas", vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 220–233; doi: 10.18002/rama.v20i2.2515.
- Chrzęścik M. (2012), *Teoretyczne ujęcie promocji w aspekcie koncepcji marketingu terytorialnego / The Theoretical Approach in Terms of Promotion of the Concept of Territorial Marketing*, "Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Przyrodniczo-Humanistycznego w Siedlcach. Administracja i Zarządzanie", no. 94, pp. 143-151.
- Cynarski W.J. (2017), *Towards a General Theory of Fighting Arts*, "Physical Activity Review", no. 5, pp. 83-90.
- Cynarski W.J. (2021a), *Idokan judo in relation to Kodokan judo (1947–2017): remarks on the institutionalisation of martial arts*, "Sport i Turystyka. Środkowoeuropejskie Czasopismo Naukowe", vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 81–96.
- Cynarski W.J. (2021b), *Leksykon sztuk walki. Mistrzowie i ich szkoły / Lexicon of fighting arts. Masters and their schools*, Rzeszow University Press, Rzeszów [in Polish and English].
- Cynarski W.J. (2024), *Karate w perspektywie antropologii / Karate in the Perspective of Anthropology*, Rzeszow University Press, Rzeszów [in Polish and English].
- Dyndał S., Kindzer B., Nikitenko S., Cynarski W.J. (2026), *The area of fighting arts studies A.D. 2025: organisational and scientific development*, "Ido Movement for Culture Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology", vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 103–118; doi: 10.14589/ido.26.1.12.

- Hassim J.Z., Shapie M.N.M., Abdul Razak S.N., Kassim R.M., Meng L.K. (2022), *The Legal Aspects of Formalizing the Sportization Development of Martial Arts Societies in Malaysia*, "Ido Movement for Culture Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology", vol. 22, no. 2S, pp. 1–12; doi: 10.14589/ido.22.2S.1.
- Inosanto D. (1976), *Jeet Kune Do. The Art and Philosophy of Bruce Lee*, Know Now Pub. Co., Los Angeles.
- Körner S., Staller M.S., Judkins B.N. (2018), *The Creation of Wing Tsun: A German Case Study*, "Martial Arts Studies", vol. 7, pp. 5-18; doi: 10.18573/mas.60.
- Kotler Ph., Levy S.J. (1969), *Broadening the Concept of Marketing*, "Journal of Marketing", vol. 33.
- Lee B. (1975), *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, Ohara Publications, Santa Clarita, CA.
- Lee K., Johnson J.A. (2020), *Ambush Marketing in Sport Taekwondo and How to Prevent It*, "Ido Movement for Culture Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology", vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 7–14; doi: 10.14589/ido.20.4.2.
- Little J. (2020), *Bruce Lee Jeet Kune Do. A Comprehensive Guide to Bruce Lee's Martial Way*, Tuttle Publishing.
- McNamara J.D. (2007), *The Effect of Modern Marketing on Martial Arts and Traditional Martial Arts Culture*, "The SportJournal",
- Pank C. (2025), *Le Kyokushin Karate: Comment la force et le marketing ont créé le plus grand style de Karate*, Kindle Edition (ebook) [in French].
- Pawelec P., Yu J.-H. (2019), "Judo Kodokan Review" as a Martial Arts Medium, "Ido Movement for Culture Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology", vol. 19, no. 1S, pp. 41-49; doi: 10.14589/ido.19.1S.7.
- Skinner J., Edwards A., Corbett B. (2015), *Research methods for sport management*, Routledge, London-New York.
- Wedlake L. (2015), *The Kenpo Karate Compendium*, North Atlantic Books, U.S.
- Will J.T. (1984), *Kenpo Karate: For Self Defense*, Action Pursuit Group.