



The Future of ITF Taekwon-Do

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“I am passionate about Taekwon-Do and loyal to my organisation and teachers. I have watched and wondered, can we be sure that our organisation and its people will thrive in this new age that lies ahead? This thesis explores this topic in search of answers...”

Why do some organisations grow and others decline? Why do some sports thrive while others remain marginalised? How do we ensure Taekwon-Do thrives in the modern world... Technological change is accelerating. Many technologies are converging and intersecting, resulting in innovations that seem like magic. Electric cars are on their way to mainstream status. Artificial intelligence is everywhere, in our pockets and driving our cars. Yet amongst all this growth, the world wrestles with a significant global health pandemic and the economic and societal aftershock. It's not business as usual. How will Taekwon-Do and its organisations change to survive and thrive in this new world?

Are **Traditional Martial Arts** still relevant in a modern world?

There are no shortage of naysayers out there who will troll traditional martial arts online. Equally there are an abundance of videos proclaiming phoney martial arts experts. Social Media has become the key gateway to the minds and spirit of the modern youth. Much of the trolling involves a video clip of a fighting fit, professional full contact fighter destroying a smaller, ill prepared, no contact martial arts instructor in a few strikes. What is the intended message here do you think? We can probably guess its something to do with traditional martial arts lacking power and practical relevance. The point being made here is that digital media now plays an important role in defining what a population believes.

Taekwon-Do is a powerful martial art and impressive competitive sport. It's pioneers have worked hard to spread the art throughout the world and it is common to find a Taekwon-Do gym in most well known cities throughout the world.

Students turn up to learn Taekwon-Do because they want fly through the air and do things that are seemingly impossible. They want to discover a new sense of self discipline. To master their bodies and personal fitness. In a world that makes no sense, they want to find a new sense of personal power and confidence. After a few years of participation many people specialise as a competitor or form important social bonds. Others become fanatical participants where Taekwon-Do is their dominant interest recreationally and/or their job. Ultimately some consider it to be a "way of life."

Ultimately, as a martial art, every participant is somewhere different according to their own timeline of involvement. This time involved factor can be somewhat related to rank hierarchy or belt rank but not always. In addition these factors most likely correlate with increasing ability but there are variations between individuals and locality to name a few.

Taekwon-Do has developed an uncanny ability to produce passionate and obsessive proponents of the art. These people are drawn to the intellectual complexity and detail of the movements and patterns. They thrive on the hierarchy and militant system. They have incredible memories, self discipline and pursue perfection and quality. These people have high personal standards and expect others to do the same.

ITF Taekwon-Do is relevant and even more important in today's society, in terms of the benefits it bestows on its practitioners minds and bodies. To remain relevant and attract new members, it must continue to adapt to new communication and media channels.

Relevant Yes! But in a world full of noise, **how do you get noticed?**

What do you think of when you think of martial arts? Most people on the street today might say Bruce Lee or MMA. Even the legend of Bruce Lee is waning and its been a long time since the Bruce Lee movies, amazed fans around the world. Even the legend of Chuck Norris still exists thanks to amusing social media memes that keep the memory alive.

Many martial arts have had their time in the spotlight. Kung Fu inspired many with IP Man and Karate via the Karate Kid. Jan Claude showed us Kick Boxing and the list goes on.

Televised MMA competitions stream live to millions of people on broadcast media. The matches are full contact and exciting. The athletes are fit and powerful. There is no doubt that this exposure drives beginners into Ju Jitsu and Kickboxing gyms around the world.

While Chuck Norris was an accomplished ITF Taekwon-Do practitioner, it would be WTF style Taekwon-Do that achieved more mainstream media status through Olympic competition. Not that it matters to an uninformed public. Most parents and beginners would never begin to know the difference between ITF and WTF until fully engrossed in participation.

What could we learn from all of this? To be an mainstream recreational activity or “way of life” Taekwon-Do may need to have a regular, professional, broadcast level competition. Karate for example, has responded to MMA with “Karate Combat,” and this has gone some way to restoring Karate as a relevant fighting art and sport.

The professional televised competitions attract money which comes from advertising and sponsorship. Soon all of your promotion and awareness of Taekwon-Do is paid for by others. Carefully managed branding drives people to start at the grass roots of the art.

I’m sure you are about to say we have competitions already. Why not just televise the competitions we already have? Some work is required here because TV competitions are “made for TV,” or at least well suited. They are pure entertainment events, dramatised, and designed for consumption. Like professional boxing, MMA is especially brutal. People around the world, pay to view two fighters severally striking each other out of consciousness. This may not be the way we want to present our “sport” and its appeal to people of all ages.

A second but temporary accelerator is story telling and the movie industry. Movies create fanciful characters and story’s that inspire young men and woman. Who wouldn’t want to overcome adversity and defeat evil villains with the incredible abilities bestowed by martial arts. Movies spark awareness and imaginations. They challenge people to consider, “I could do that, how do I give that a go?”

Getting above the noise, connecting with a market and having a point of difference, is key to getting noticed in todays world.

We have awareness, **now what?**

If we can understand our potential participants, we can have a better chance of meeting their needs. Individuals begin participation in Taekwon-Do for Self Defence 19%, an introduction by friends or family 31% or for fitness 15%. We can attempt to segment our user base into the following groups, Children, Teen/School, Young Workers/University, Family/Parents and Instructors. Forgetting about the one size fits all approach to marketing, will help us reach and welcome more people to Taekwon-Do.

One trap Taekwon-Do organisations can fall into is recruiting children at a faster rate than adults. This can become a problem because the ratio between coaches and students gets out of balance. A sustainable recruitment strategy is to ensure that target segments balance children vs adults for this reason.

One solution to this problem is to “consider targeting marketing efforts towards the family focused 30+ age bracket. These people have more stability in their jobs. They have a socially supporting family team in terms of participation. They have the potential to become black belts and instructors who can teach others and/or take over clubs.”

The referral aspect of Taekwon-Do is a significant initiation principle. Offering time segments that accommodate families to train will encourage new members. Offering incentives for families such as discounts etc would also assist participation.

When marketing to adults, advertising should focus on Self Defence or Fitness or both. When marketing for children, remember to focus advertising on outcomes desired by parents, such as discipline, leadership development, coordination etc.

Separating an initiation beginners class from the mainstream classes is key to avoiding intimidation and the self defence competency trap.

Martial arts also show people performing almost magical feats of power. These can also be used in advertising to draw attention and initiate involvement especially among younger teenage participants.

Who is the customer? Is it the student or the Instructor? Both! Like a franchise business, instructors choose your model and system and then utilise that to sell to customers. The organisation would cease to exist without instructors and clubs. Therefore, we can speculate that the instructors are your primary customers. Students are also your customers, in terms of product development. The syllabus, user experience, includes courses, competitions and price.

What about our organisations, how can we be **better organised**?

Challenging environmental conditions require humans and organisations to adapt. Those adept at adaptation survive and thrive. Those who refuse to adjust to new environments and implement the required change decline and disappear.

Organisations go through cycles just like human beings. They are born in a particular time and are influenced according to that generation by societal values and beliefs, technologies and how things are done. People and organisations form ways of doing things and ways of making decisions. Like humans, organisations also go through various cycles of birth, growth, maturity and decline. Thankfully organisations are not biological entities and have the potential for immortality, although many never achieve this. Organisations that mature, decline and die, ultimately do so due to a failure to adapt the environment as it changes. In addition to this, they may die simply because they are less “fashionable” or are not as new as something else that has come along.

Groups of organisations evolve in a eco-system not unlike an evolutionary system. So while one organisation may grow and mature, it is likely to spawn another newer organisation that adopts the values, methods, and systems of the time. This new organisation as a child of the former, will also begin its own journey through a lifecycle.

If the existing organisation is to stand any change of survival, it must adapt to changing environment conditions. It must reinvent itself anew, so that it is able to be efficient and effective in this new environment. What does this mean exactly? Some organisations remove inefficient products and services. Others change their name. Smart organisations explore their product/market fit to ensure that they are effectively meeting the needs of stakeholders.

In a modern, technology based world, we need to consider how to simplify our systems and product for scale. International entrepreneur and growth expert, Peter Diamandis recommends 6 principles for growth and some of those are listed here where relevant...

High scale products and services are deflating in price thanks to technology breakthroughs. This enables more people to access the product due to lower prices.

We need to consider how to **de-monetise** and **de-mocratise** Taekwon-Do by delivering quality and standards as efficiently as possible. This would enable organisations to reduce costs and decentralise provision of services. For example, this may mean empowering more people to be examiners in a local area. This will empower and reduce administration. As the service will be delivered locally by qualified instructors and/or qualified examiners, significant margins could be made available for professional clubs to become profitable and volunteers clubs to fund themselves.

Taekwon-Do and participants are in a great position to benefit from self management of information and data. This would enable **de-materialisation** and **digitisation** utilising smartphones and tablets via an APP. For example, skill development tracking, administration and direct payments could be accomplished efficiently and directly. This will ultimately reduce administration and empower student motivation and progress.

Growth, scale and momentum

It's important to consider the individual and macro outcomes of training in Taekwon-Do. A club is a group of individuals who group together to practice the art of Taekwon-Do. Usually there is a head instructor, who is supported by other coaches or senior members to teach the group. Therefore, knowledge is passed on from experienced members to less experienced members as efficiently as possible. In terms of cognitive reasons for participation, we must consider that the students with less knowledge, want to learn the knowledge that is to be obtained. They consider the group to be made up "of people like them." In other words they feel like they belong to the group and they fit in with the cultural values and norms.

Some students participate in Taekwon-Do because they are goal orientated. In this mindset, students enjoy learning new skills, capabilities and overcoming challenges. There is a sense of achievement and associated gains in confidence and self esteem. Students may take a longer term view that they would like to become a black belt. Equally some students want to win competitions locally, nationally and internationally. This competitive orientation shares similar motives to the self development mindset with test moments being tournaments instead of gradings.

Leaders need to recognise the dominant goal orientation of individual students and provide pathways to access more or less participation in the grading pathway and competitive pathway. There are some challenges in managing these diverging areas. Firstly, Taekwon-Do as a product has a broad offering. Students are expected to participate in the martial art and in the sport. The more elite or specialised the student becomes, the greater their need for specialised training in this area. There is slight tension therefore in the resource management of general service Taekwon-Do schools and the needs of the individual. For example, a school needs black belt students to teach and these students need to practice as athletes to perform at high levels.

Many growth orientated organisations acquire other martial arts organisations in order to grow quickly. This gives them an injection of coaches and new participants. The acquisition of already established clubs and instructors from outside the organisation is one way to accelerate growth. Having an environment for clubs and instructors that is welcoming and appealing is key in this regard to both acquisition and retention. When we consider ongoing affiliation we are not only considering the culture, network, event and training opportunities. We must factor in the product offering, training system, fees and charges. Taekwon-Do organisations have different levels of instructor empowerment in terms of requirements, responsibilities and freedoms. An organisation may be too restrictive, value sport vs art or vice versa, have high fees, or have no growth potential. A challenge exists for those organisations, where commercial orientated schools struggle to grow within a national system focused on funding via grading fees.

To remain competitive, organisations need to revisit what they offer and explore how they can meet the needs of their instructors.

Thriving and striving for **growth**

A static or declining membership is indicative of an organisation in trouble. This may be related to decisions that can be controlled by the organisation itself. Alternatively, it may be indicative of wider macro factors effecting the market as a whole.

Some variables effect others, especially when it comes to focus and positioning. An organisation positions itself in a market by focusing on fulfilling the needs of a particular group of users. For example, school demographics dominated by males may effect the ability to attract female participants. In addition, too many children may effect the ability to attract adults. In many of these examples, practicality is considered but perception is particularly important. Seth Godin phrases it well with the statement “people like us, do things like this.” Choosing to belong to a group and participate in the activities of the group is related to an individuals desire to relate to others in the group and to share similar values, behaviour and culture.

When broken down we can consider the metrics that interplay to create a thriving organisation. Let’s consider two important variables, firstly the number of members and the engagement of members. These two themes emerge at many levels when considering the success of small and large Taekwon-Do organisations. It is not the numbers themselves on any one day that tell a story but more the trending up and down of these numbers over a period of time.

Like the population in general. We must at least have the same number of babies born in a year than the number of deaths in a population, in order to maintain position. In the case of Taekwon-Do, the number of students beginning participation, needs to be greater than the number ceasing participation.

Some variables effect demand and continuity. For example, time commitment and/or an overly high standard can slow advancement and reduce the number of people willing to participate. Product complexity can create a “high involvement cost” which further trims the numbers back and reduces the scale of the funnel, as students progress towards a black belt.

In terms of brain development, research shows that it doesn’t matter when you learn to read, count, speak and write because most children have the same ability at the age of seven. This suggests that perseverance is more important than initial talent and/or skills at early stages. We could speculate and suggest that irregardless of your skill level at early Gup ranks, most students who make it as far as black belt tests, in the end will arrive at with similar abilities and standards.

Standards and quality is important, so successful organisations need to ensure that they get the right balance in order to maintain standards, while at the same time maximising volumes of ongoing participation, so that members progress their “time involved” to form lifetime habits.

Engagement relates to the degree of participation of the membership. The number of events, high attendance, willingness to help and coach others, all reflect levels of engagement in organisations. Its critical that students progress to become coaches as soon as possible. Senior students need to progress to become assistant instructors at their clubs, enabling more students to be taught. Senior students need to progress to become instructors of new clubs if this creates a win/win for everyone involved.

Understanding and measuring key metrics over time is important in order to track how the organisation is doing. The number of instructors is a key success metric. How many instructors are engaged and teaching? How many black belts are we producing? How many black belts convert to

become coaches, assistant instructors and instructors? Are we meeting their needs or are their clear attrition points where conversion is weak or not working?

Taekwon-Do is particularly suited to people with a certain personality traits. Students of Taekwon-Do need to be disciplined, persistent, moral, and detailed. Some people might argue that students of Taekwon-Do can become overly structured, rigid, obsessive and perfectionist. Irregardless, a high level of passion and commitment is required to pursue the study of a topic that takes years to perfect. In order for Taekwon-Do to appeal to a wider percentage of the population, we could consider small adjustments to the learning programme. For example, reducing the complexity and detail for children is one approach. Secondly, exploring whether memory based exercises and testing can be replaced or reduced with more creative or in the moment practice would likely reduce the detail. Ultimately, what we are considering here is the balance between the intellectual or academic nature of Taekwon-Do vs the benefits derived from the physical practice.

Everything to everyone or nothing to anyone. Are we an **Art or Sport?**

As students progress in Taekwon-Do over long periods of time, they may become bored and or be attracted by other sporting commitments. This is a prevalent consideration for young people at this stage of life. This is also relevant given the two day a week time commitment and many years of commitment required.

One factor that is consistent, in both the results of what might make individuals cease participation in Taekwon-do and what might make them give up, is instructors and specifically, pressure from instructors. eg. Overemphasis on competition or time commitment, pressure to attend events etc. We must aim to introduce more flexibility and consideration of differences. Taekwon-Do is a very broad activity, which helps students to find interests and specialities within it over periods of time. The art vs sport dynamic creates a degree of tension for some students that we need to consider to maximise participation in our art.

A continued lack of interest in the competitive aspects of Taekwon-Do is not always based on a lack of confidence but an orientation towards task and mastery needs. Organisations must look to create flexibility in the learning system to accommodate task and ego orientations, in order to cater for the different needs of students.

Taekwon-Do creates role models and success pathways in both the art and sport and this is a good thing. But it can also spread national organisational resources and confuse success outcomes. Small organisations trying to run quality sports programmes and training programmes at the same time, may find their volunteers stretched and facing burn out. We must consider further where these divergent interests intersect and the effect this has on student motivation.

The art and sport are important so the answer is not to eliminate but too reduce to sustainable levels. Anything done to excess will stretch resources for participants and administrators alike. Placing constraints on the number of events sounds like an odd approach to encouraging participation and engagement. However, it is possible to have too much of a good thing. Especially when that good thing is a requirement of ongoing participation. We need to consider simplifying requirements, accommodating individual differences, including allowing task orientation mastery and customising training programmes based on orientation and specialisation.

The **Future** and what lies ahead...

It is likely that traditional maturing Taekwon-Do organisations will be challenged by new entrants in the market. It is up to them to disrupt themselves before they are disrupted by these new entrants. Many older organisations have evolved complex training systems, IT, hierarchies, and outdated pricing. These organisations are vulnerable to any agile new entrant with simple systems and affordable pricing. Instructors may be attracted by the ability to grade their own students, cheaper affiliation costs, lower grading costs, less requirements in order to grade etc. Competition challenges organisations to be more customer orientated and competitive with pricing and systems.

Pandemics and class disruption have become more common place over the last few years thanks to Covid-19. It has raised the question, is it possible to run a club virtually over the long term? Taekwon-Do does require others to practice seriously. It will be more practical to practice in isolation once new technologies emerge such as Augmented reality and haptic feedback to simulate contact. New technologies are coming and there are increasing pressures on continuity of supply due to disruption and availability of coaches.

One solution to consider, is adding the option of skill based learning. This means in addition to the option of attending classes every week, another solution could be a gamified skills based approach, whereby students practice techniques and syllabus items and when ready, test these to be qualified. Their practice and progress is recorded on an APP or web app for the student and instructor to see. An APP enables practice to be tracked, as it can be done, in a flexible non structured way. This works in a world where structure is challenged. Monitoring students in an internal assessment model may work well in this new world.

Voice Search, AI and Big Data is on its way..we will see within the next five years an ability to search and receive information discreetly via earpiece and voice search. Instructors and seniors play the role of gatekeepers of knowledge. In the near future the encyclopaedia of Taekwon-Do will be consumed by an artificial intelligent algorithm. This algorithm will be utilised via voice search in real time during class and return the information required by the student. Much like Siri and other voice search assistants work today. Instructors need to be prepared that students will have access to knowledge like never before. Their role as gatekeepers of knowledge will be challenged and the role of coaches will become more important.

Augmented Reality and VR may change the way we access Taekwon-Do knowledge. AR glasses will be released over the next two years by major players. Glasses worn by students during practice will enable them to view relevant knowledge such as videos, pictures and text and apply that to their practice. AR glasses may enable instructors to compare best practice to student practice in real time and/or record and rewatch student movements to offer feedback. This technology could enable us to practice in the metaverse or meet digitally from far away. Where and from whom we learn our content will become digitised. Organisations may need to compete internationally for students. Specialist expert coaches may operate virtual classes with students from throughout the world.

Our ability to thrive and even survive may rely critically on our willingness to adapt. We must first accept that change is constant and choose to welcome change at a pace that is appropriate for individuals, our art and organisations. In this way, Taekwon-Do will live on, to benefit generations to come.